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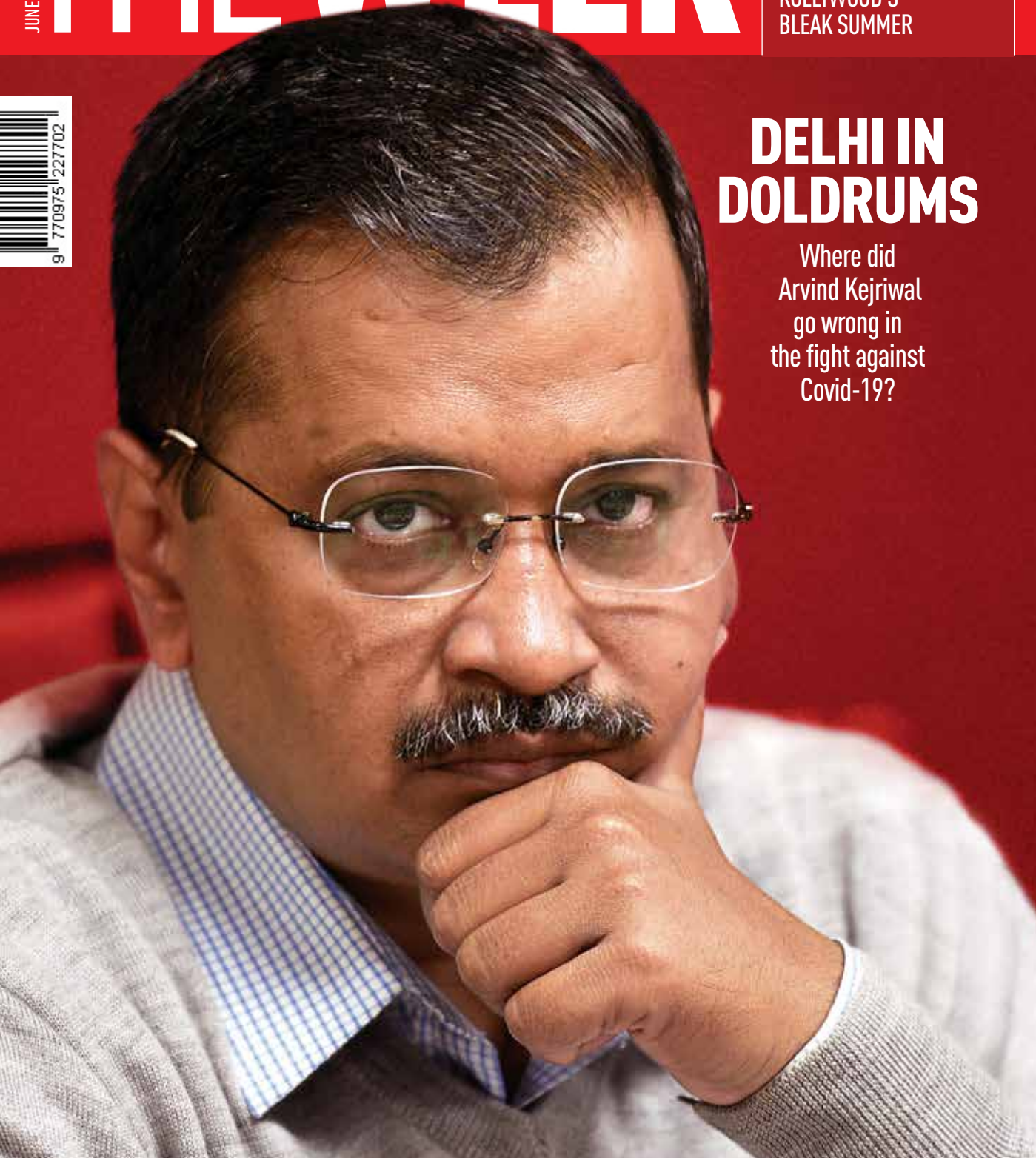
JUNE 21, 2020

THEWEEK



DELHI IN DOLDRUMS

Where did
Arvind Kejriwal
go wrong in
the fight against
Covid-19?



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DELHI IN DISTRESS

The national capital has seen rapid increase in the number of Covid-19 cases following the relaxation of lockdown. Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal, who announced that hospitals in Delhi would treat only its residents, himself had fallen ill and got tested for Covid-19. He tested negative for the coronavirus, but a much tougher test of steering Delhi through the pandemic remains.

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Keep vigil

China's aggressive posture, in the wake of worldwide condemnation of its mishandling the virus outbreak, is testimony to the fact that it believes in bullying other nations ('Unquiet heights', June 7). President Xi Jinping thinks that China's territorial aggrandisement may please the Chinese and they will believe that China is the world's most powerful nation. China's policy has always been to contain India's economic surge. That some countries were pitching India as an alternative to the Chinese supply chain was the root cause of China's border transgressions. So far, India has read between the lines and has not given in to the temptation of paying back China in its own coin. India is surrounded by Pakistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka who keep posing hurdles in its path to development. So, for India, a tight-rope walk is what looks right.

Ashok Goswami,
On email.

China should stop provoking India in the manner it is doing now. India should stick to its position and teach the Chinese a lesson, as they have started behaving like goons.

China should stop the bullying behaviour. Post Covid, they are the most hated nation in the world. It should know well that such a tag will do more harm than good.

Tapesh Nagpal,
On email.

Heart-rending images

Your photo-feature ('Mother of all journeys', June 7) has vividly portrayed the plight of thousands of migrants who, bereft of jobs, income and shelter, were left with no option but to trek hundreds and even thousands of miles to reach their villages from where they had migrated to the cities in search of jobs.

One is unable to fathom the extent of the naïveté of a government that, perhaps, in the first place, thought that millions of migrant labourers never existed. Or even if they did, they could weather

the storm and last the two-month-long lockdown without even a morsel of food to eat or a roof over their heads.

By the time the government came to grips with the problem, thousands of migrants undertook the journey on foot, some perishing on the way and some run over by trains.

C.V. Aravind,
On email.

A picture speaks a thousand words. Eight black-and-white photographs by Bhanu Prakash Chandra, depicting the 'mother of all journeys' of migrants, showed their determination and desperation to reach their native places, against all the odds.

It took me to scenes of partition, when lakhs of people crossed the border for survival. These pictures have left me in tears, with a lump in my throat. What cannot be cured must be endured.

Parthasarathy Mandadi,
On email.

Alliance won't last

The alliance in Maharashtra is not going

to last. The power tussle between the governor and the chief minister will continue till the day this government lasts ('Vanity fair', June 7). The Maharashtra government has failed miserably in containing the virus in Mumbai, Pune and other parts of the state.

The Maha Vikas Aghadi is sure to collapse in a year or two.

Vikas Asthana,
On email.

Good read

Swara Bhasker's narration of her meeting with the young impoverished migrant girl, caught in the vortex of the lockdown, made for a compelling read ('Put yourself in their shoes', June 7). It is depressing to read about the hand-to-mouth existence of the migrants; for them even a pair of slippers is a luxury.

I hope the girl would not be forced to abort her dreams, because the odds are that she will be burdened with the responsibility of running the household, and performing domestic chores, at the cost of her personal well-being and growth.

Varsha V. Shenoy,
On email.

fighting a grim battle against Covid-19, has to contend with the destructive aftermath of cyclone Amphan.

Mamata's appeal for a relief package, in the wake of the cyclone, has resulted in a generous and prompt response from Narendra Modi.

With state elections not too far away, all political parties in the state are treading carefully.

The state government has not covered itself in glory while tackling the pandemic, and the BJP is gleefully pointing at the lapses. Mamata, the street fighter that she is, will have to be at her fighting best to keep a resurgent BJP at bay.

Vipul Pande,
Nainital, Uttarakhand.

More to be revealed

It is a mystery that the recovery rate in Sweden has remained at such a low level for a long time when the public health system is not overwhelmed ('An unusual cult figure', March 31).

It is a question mark how Sweden has achieved higher immunity rate. In the absence of a vaccine, we can talk of herd immunity, which can be achieved when at least 60 per cent of the population gets infected. So far, only 0.35 per cent of the population has been infected.

Pankaj Kumar Chatterjee,
Kolkata.

HOW TO REACH US

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— APERITIF —
THE BIG PICTURE

ROW RESOLVE

Argentine canoeist Sebastian Rossi trains for the 2021 Tokyo Olympics in his girlfriend's pool in Buenos Aires on June 8. Covid-related restrictions forced Rossi to devise the method, which involves manoeuvring a canoe strapped to a pair of palm trees. "It's not optimal," he says, "but it is better than nothing."

PHOTO BY REUTERS

POINT BLANK



I don't think it is becoming irrelevant. Maybe the value of defensive batting is not the same as it was a generation ago. It can never become irrelevant, as you still need to defend to score runs.

Rahul Dravid,
former cricketer

For all the confidence and strength he exudes, the behaviour of the prime minister suggests that he is, within himself, a somewhat insecure man. This is evident not just in his reluctance to publicly praise his ministers or advisers when they do a good job, but also in the sort of people he relies on for advice.

Ramachandra Guha,
historian

I grew up without much access to technology. We did not get our first telephone till I was ten. I did not have regular access to computer until I came to America for graduate school. And, our television, when we finally got one, only had one channel.

Sundar Pichai,
Google CEO

If sex is not real, there is no same-sex attraction. If sex is not real, the lived reality of women globally is erased. I know and love transpeople, but erasing the concept of sex removes the ability of many to meaningfully discuss their lives. It is not hate to speak the truth.

J.K. Rowling,
author, defending her comments
on an article that referred to women as
"people who menstruate"



I would like to do a sizzling hot photoshoot with him. Have you seen him working out? The other day he posted a video in which he was pulling a bullock cart by himself. He is one good-looking, macho man, with an amazing physique. I would love to pose with him.

Esha Gupta,
actor, on actor
Vidyut Jammwal

WORD PLAY

Reports from across the world suggest that more and more couples are resorting to **zumping**, while stuck in separate houses during lockdown. Portmanteau of Zoom and dumping, zumping refers to break-ups over Zoom, or any video calling service. The break-up measures, that were considered heartless and tacky in the pre-Covid era, have become part of the new normal, it seems.

MILESTONES

AWARD FOR AKHTAR

Lyricist Javed Akhtar became the first Indian to win the Richard Dawkins Award presented by the Atheist Alliance of America. The award honours distinguished individuals from various fields who publicly proclaim secularism and rationalism.



SONG SPIRIT

Odisha accorded state anthem status to Bande Utkala Janani—a patriotic song written by poet Lakshmikanta Mohapatra in 1912. Eleven states in India have their own state anthem now.



DEEPEST FEAT

Former NASA astronaut Kathy Sullivan became the first woman to reach the Challenger Deep—the deepest known point in the Earth's oceans. She was also the first American woman to walk in space—on October 11, 1984.



POWER POINT

SACHIDANANDA MURTHY



Gowda returns

In Britain, when prime ministers resign, they also lose the leadership of their parties, and soon leave the House of Commons. They either get elevated to the House of Lords or, like many recent prime ministers, stay out of active politics. The last British leader to make a comeback to prime ministership was Harold Wilson in 1974.

But for former Indian prime ministers, Parliament is a magnet. Thus H.D. Deve Gowda is returning to Parliament after having lost the Lok Sabha elections last year. Gowda would be 93 when he completes the six-year term. He has contested every Lok Sabha elections since 1991, except in 1996.

When the 1996 elections produced a hung parliament, Gowda was Karnataka chief minister. The United Front chose Gowda as the leader of its government, which was a surprise. He wanted to join the Lok Sabha, but his colleagues persuaded him to take the easy route of a Rajya Sabha berth.

Gowda led the country for 11 months. Since then he has won the Lok Sabha elections five times and lost twice. Last year, he had hinted at electoral retirement after losing to a BJP stalwart in Karnataka. But now he has heeded to the appeal of Sonia Gandhi and other top leaders to come back to the Rajya Sabha. Gowda is an active participant in parliamentary debates and attends even committee meetings without worrying about protocol.

Indira Gandhi was the first prime minister to return to Parliament after losing power. In 1978, she won a byelection from Karnataka, but her bitter opponents in the Janata Party were determined to keep her out. She was arrested from the Lok Sabha on allegations of misleading Parliament in the Jeep Scandal, and was expelled from its membership. It was another matter that she rode back to power within a year, winning from two Lok Sabha constituencies. Morarji Desai, the first non-Congress prime minister retired from electoral politics after he was toppled in 1979. Rajiv Gandhi had a brief tenure as

leader of opposition after being prime minister, but was assassinated during the 1991 election campaign.

Charan Singh, V.P. Singh, Chandra Shekhar, P.V. Narasimha Rao, A.B. Vajpayee, Gowda, I.K. Gujral and Manmohan Singh—all returned to Parliament after losing power.

While Charan Singh, who resigned without attending Parliament as prime minister, did not take much interest in proceedings while in opposition, Vajpayee was troubled by ill health after losing the top job, and made rare appearances in the Lok Sabha.

In opposition, Narasimha Rao had the double



mortification of facing a party coup and corruption cases. Chandra Shekhar, however, played the role of a senior statesmen during the tenure of five prime ministers. Known as Adhyakshji, he would counsel treasury and opposition benches, as he had friends across the political spectrum. Manmohan Singh has been regularly attend-

ing the Rajya Sabha in the last six years; his rare but pointed interventions in debates have made the Narendra Modi government sit and take notice.

Gowda insisted on sitting in the last bench of the Lok Sabha when he lost the first seat of prime minister. He had a tough time with speaker Somnath Chatterjee who would just give a couple of minutes to him—because Gowda was the lone member of his party, and Chatterjee insisted on allotting speaking time based on numerical strength of political parties.

But United Progressive Alliance leaders would persuade Chatterjee to give more time to Gowda, and later he was granted a front row seat—a convention for former prime ministers and deputy prime ministers in Parliament. As he did in the last edition of the Lok Sabha, Gowda has to find ways to make a government with full majority hear his views.

PHOTO BHANU PRAKASH CHANDRA

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BACKGROUND MUSIC

These days, people spend a lot of time fixing up an ideal background for their video meetings; most have a shelf stacked with books, an impressive artwork or an indoor plant. Environment Minister Prakash Javadekar, however, got lucky. In his video message for an Environment Day event, one could hear a veritable symphony of birdsong, including the plaintive wail of the lapwing, from his lawns outside. The joys of living in Lutyens' Delhi.



BIRTHDAY, BLACK DAY

Partitions are usually messy affairs that leave emotional scars. On June 2, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Home Minister Amit Shah and BJP president J.P. Nadda used Twitter to wish the people of Telangana on the state's formation day. It was a good gesture amid the pandemic gloom. The trio, however, also wished the people of Andhra Pradesh, who did not respond in the same way. And, predictably so. Not only do people in the state not celebrate June 2, some even see it as a black day.

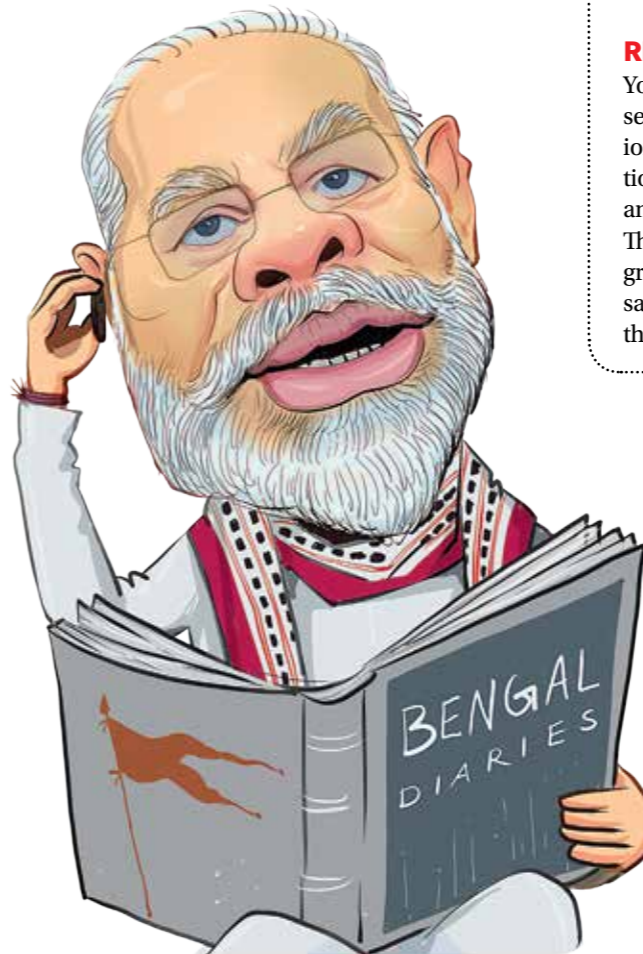
CONGRESS CULTURE IN BJP

That the BJP is in a minority government in Madhya Pradesh, for the first time, has started to show. To ensure that they are not ignored for ministerial berths and tickets for byelections, several senior MLAs and former ministers have started playing pressure politics, something that was considered a Congress culture in the state till now. Small groups of former ministers are holding closed-door meetings, while some others are making their displeasure known by subtly indicating that they could jump ship. Consequently, the cabinet expansion has been repeatedly deferred.

ILLUSTRATIONS JAIRAJ T.G.

CATCHING UP

People often revisit their past days during adversity. Recently, Prime Minister Modi did just that. He called up his old friends in Bengal; many of them are now veteran, but inactive, BJP leaders. He wanted to know how they were doing under the lockdown and how the state, in their view, was coping with it. Perhaps the aim was to get a different take on the situation, from what current leaders would provide. Said Anindya Gopal Mitra, who worked with Modi in the 1980s: "I was really surprised that, even while being so busy, he has not forgotten people like me."



RISING STAR

Youth Congress president Srinivas B.V. has been the find of the season for the party. The young leader has impressed his seniors with his pandemic-related work, be it arranging transportation for a woman who was walking home to Bihar or reeling in an oxygen cylinder for a Covid-19 patient in a Delhi hospital. The leader also personally monitors many of the Youth Congress initiatives, including the distribution of food, masks and sanitisers at the Delhi borders, and is known to reach out to those in need through social media.

READY FOR BATTLE

Forgotten leaders are often resurrected on election eve. With parties gearing up for the Bihar assembly elections in October, Chief Minister Nitish Kumar unveiled a statue of his mentor, former defence minister George Fernandes, on his 90th birth anniversary, in Muzaffarpur. A few days later, on June 6, the Centre appointed a new task force to look into issues of motherhood, like lack of nutrition and maternal mortality rate, in the state. The head of the task force? Fernandes's associate Jaya Jaitly, who has, in the past, been quite critical of Nitish's treatment of the late leader. Her appointment is sure to set tongues wagging in Bihar.



SHOWING THE WAY
Though the BJP state committee is led by party president Dilip Ghosh (right), most of the new appointees are the followers of former Trinamool veteran Mukul Roy (left)

SALIL BERA

Team of turncoats

The BJP is banking on former Trinamool and left leaders to oust Mamata Banerjee from power

BY RABI BANERJEE

AFTER HE WAS REAPPOINTED as president of the BJP's West Bengal unit in January this year, Dilip Ghosh had a closed-door meeting with Union Home Minister Amit Shah, who was the party's national president then. Ghosh told Shah that he needed to pick his own team to improve the party's prospects in the state before the assembly polls in 2021.

Shah sought a wish list. Ghosh sent one, but it was so startling that a party general secretary in Delhi called him and requested a meeting when he came to Delhi for the budget session of Parliament later that month.

Ghosh is the MP from Medinipur.

In the meeting, the secretary told Ghosh that the shake-up he proposed was so drastic that the national leadership would struggle to contain resentment in the party. Ghosh said if the BJP wanted to win Bengal, it should have leaders "who were connected to the ground" (*trinamool*, in Bengali).

The secretary said the list would have to wait, as Shah was preparing to pass the mantle of party president to working president J.P. Nadda. Once Nadda took charge, in late January, he began assessing Ghosh's

plan. Nadda spoke to Kailash Vijayvargiva, Shiv Prakash and Arvind Menon (all general secretaries in charge of Bengal) and Mukul Roy, who had quit the ruling Trinamool Congress to join the BJP in 2017.

Three months later, Ghosh was given the green light. He was asked to constitute a state committee that had Trinamool defectors in key positions and fewer RSS emissaries. Several leaders who had won the Lok Sabha elections last year were brought in, and "non-performers" shown the door.

Among the non-performers were party vice president and Subhas Chandra Bose's grandnephew Chandra Bose; Rajya Sabha members Roopa Ganguly and George Baker, who was also the BJP's Anglo-Indian face; RSS ideologue Shamik Bhattacharya; and firebrand leader Badsha Alam, who allegedly attacked Mamata Banerjee in the 1990s, when he was in the CPI(M).

Ghosh appointed former Trinamool MP Saumitra Khan as president of the BJP's Yuva Morcha, replacing RSS nominee Debjit Sarkar. Khan had quit the Trinamool two years ago. He was charged with murder and barred from entering Bishnupur after the BJP fielded him for the Lok Sabha seat.

Khan campaigned over the phone, while his wife, Sujata, and partymen hit the trail. He ended up scoring a surprise victory. As head of the Yuva Morcha, he is expected to replicate the key role the youth wing played in helping the BJP come to power in Tripura, Assam and Manipur.

The party's Scheduled Caste Morcha, too, is now headed by a former dalit leader of Trinamool—Dulal Bar, who represents Bagdah in the assembly. Khagen Murmu, a former left leader who represents Malda North in the Lok Sabha, has been named head of the BJP's Scheduled Tribe Morcha.

Fashion designer Agnimitra Paul,

who had joined the BJP last year, has been named chief of the party's women wing. She replaced Lockett Chatterjee, MP, former actor who has long been a vocal critic of Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee.

Chatterjee is now one of the five general secretaries of the BJP's state unit. The others include Jyotirmoy Mahato, who had won from Purulia last year; Sabyasachi Dutta, once a close confidant of Mamata; and Sayantan Basu, who had lost to Nusrat Jahan of the Trinamool last year but polarised the Muslim-majority Basirhat.

There are three new vice presidents: Arjun Singh, Barackpore MP and former Trinamool leader; Bharati Ghosh, who was key IPS officer under Mamata; and Mafuja Khatun, former CPI(M) leader who gave a tough fight to the victorious Trinamool candidate in Jangipur and polled more votes than Abhijit Mukherjee, incumbent MP and former president Pranab Mukherjee's son. Jangipur is a Muslim-dominated seat where the BJP had no hopes.

Ghosh said the new state committee was composed of active and capable leaders. "We all wanted performers who would act as an election team," he said. "Our central leadership told us not to include people who were not active."

Though the team is led by Ghosh, most new appointees are Mukul Roy's followers. By increasing Roy's clout, the BJP seems to be following its successful strategy in the northeast. It was Congress defector Himanta Biswa Sarma who helped the party's rise to power in Assam and other northeastern states.

Arvind Menon said the BJP would fight the assembly polls next year under the new team. "The party sat down and made the best choice," he told THE WEEK. "This is the best team available and it will click next year."

An RSS hand, Menon had helped

INTERVIEW



Chandra Bose
BJP leader and grand-nephew of Subhas Chandra Bose

Will meet the prime minister to know whether I am needed

BY RABI BANERJEE

Q/You were dropped as BJP vice president in West Bengal.

A/I am not at all sad about it. There was no job for me as a vice president. But what made me upset was no one from Delhi called me to inform about it. Today, I am thinking of 2016, when I used to get a series of calls from the central leadership for joining the party and fighting elections.

Q/Were you reluctant to join the BJP?

A/I was, in fact, not ready, and my family told me such ideology will not fit with the legacy of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose.

Q/But you went against the family guidance?

A/Yes, that is only because of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. He loves and respects our family.

Q/Did you expect a call from him before being ousted?

A/No. He is very busy. I expected a call from someone in the leadership. I am going to meet the prime minister, to know whether I am needed or not. If not, then I will have the liberty to decide my future course of action.

Q/Any plans to join the Trinamool Congress?

A/I am still with the BJP, and would

remain so as long as the prime minister wishes. If he does not, then I would support anybody who has Netaji's inclusive ideology.

Q/The state leadership says you did not perform well.

A/To perform, one needs to be tested. I was given the most difficult seats, which were either against [Chief Minister] Mamata Banerjee or to fight Lok Sabha election in her own constituency. I tried my best. You cannot win an election against Mamata Banerjee without organisation [machinery]. The BJP has no organisation in Kolkata.

Q/You were vocal against the Citizenship Amendment Act and mob lynching.

A/Yes, I was. Our family could not accept such a legislation. But I feel that was not the only reason [for the ousting].

Q/What else?

A/When then party president Amit Shah came and invited me to the BJP personally, I realised that BJP has a dearth of intellectuals in Kolkata. I proposed to him that I would like to open a morcha in the BJP named Azad Hind to propagate Netaji's ideology. He said he would consider. But after some months, when



PHOTOS: SAJIL BERA



ELEVATED ROLES

Fashion designer Agnimitra Paul has replaced former star Locket Chatterjee (left) as the chief of the BJP's women wing; Chatterjee has been made general secretary

I reminded him, he told me I should take charge of one of the existing morchas in the party.

Q/You then turned disillusioned.

A/Yes. My family said I committed a blunder by joining the BJP. They said I should have known that the BJP's way of winning elections is through polarisation.

Q/You also believed the same?

A/Not really, because I had full faith in prime minister. But somewhere down the line, I felt my family members have a point.

Q/State leaders say they cannot include any person just because he hails from a famous family.

A/I never played up my family background. I only played up my family ideology of nationalism, secularism and inclusiveness.

Q/Do you feel the current state committee can win the elections in 2021?

A/I cannot say. But I have lot of respect for some of the people who have been taken.

the BJP win seven of eight seats in north Bengal after he was put in charge of the region. He said Mamata's popularity was at an all-time low because of her inept handling of Covid-19 and cyclone crises. But he praised the efforts of the CPI(M)-led Left Democratic Front government in his home state, Kerala.

"We are politically very much against the communists, who are ruling Kerala," said Menon. "But we have no complaint against them as far as the Covid-19 handling is concerned. Rajasthan (which is ruled by the Congress) also did well by having a coordinated plan with the Union government. But in Bengal, the state government did not even think of poor people and played dirty politics."

He said the BJP would tell voters about the Trinamool government's "lackadaisical attitude" in tackling the pandemic in the state. "What is the point of hiding numbers? Why did she not welcome migrant labour-

ers [returning to the state]? Why did people die at home without getting treatment? Shouldn't we tell all this to the people?" asked Menon.

The BJP's major worry is its poor presence in parts of south Bengal. In Howrah, South 24 Parganas, East Midnapore and Kolkata districts, the BJP had drawn a blank in the Lok Sabha polls. "This region is a major headache for us," said vice president Biswapriya Roy Chowdhury. "But the situation has improved a lot. In one year, we will overcome the hurdles in this region."

Chandra Bose's removal from the state committee could cost the BJP dear. If Bose is forced to become a BJP rebel, Mamata could project it as a slight to his illustrious family. Trinamool has had two MPs from the family—Krishna Bose, wife of Subhas Bose's nephew Sisir Bose; and her son, historian Sugato Bose. A distant member of the family, Amit Mitra, is Mamata's finance minister.

Menon said Chandra Bose would

be "accommodated" elsewhere. "I have spoken to him," he said. "His advice and active participation would help the party. One must understand that not everyone can be made vice president or general secretary."

With Covid-19 having restricted political activities in the state, experts say the BJP is more affected than the ruling party. In the Lok Sabha elections last year, there was a 6 per cent difference in the vote shares of the Trinamool and the BJP. When the pandemic struck, the BJP had been taking measures to bridge the gap well before the assembly polls.

Menon, however, said Covid-19 had only made Mamata more unpopular. In April, she roped in poll strategist Prashant Kishor to help manage her image in the run-up to the polls. "Mark my words: The worst of this would be the advice she will get from Kishor," said Menon. "It will boomerang on her, as her own party-men would get angry and join us." ❏

Rocky road to polls

With an aggressive ally and a vocal opposition, Nitish Kumar faces a tough election year amid a raging pandemic and a mismanaged migrant crisis

BY PRATUL SHARMA



TOUGH TIMES
Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar

PTI

BRAND NITISH KUMAR is being put to test and how.

In his more than four-decade-old political career, the Bihar chief minister is facing his trickiest challenge ever—fighting the pandemic with a poor health infrastructure and managing the return of more than 30 lakh migrants, which will have a bearing on the assembly elections due in October-November. These apart, he has to tackle not only his opponents in the RJD-led Mahagatbandhan, but also his coalition partners in the BJP. He, however, seems unfazed.

Nitish enjoys the support of the BJP’s central leadership, which has declared him the chief ministerial candidate. But the opposition is a divided house. While the Rashtriya Janata Dal has picked Lalu Prasad’s son Tejashwi as the chief ministerial candidate, its allies—Jitan Ram Manjhi’s Hindustani Awam Morcha and Upendra Kushwaha’s Rashtriya Lok Samta Party are yet to voice their support.

But there has been criticism over Nitish’s handling of the Covid-19 crisis. Bihar ranks among the top ten states with the highest number of cases. The return of the migrants has stretched its inadequate health infrastructure. Migrants account for nearly two-third of the positive cases. The state has more than 12,000 block-level quarantine centres for migrants. Eight lakh of the 13.7 lakh migrants in these centres have been discharged. State Information and Public Relations Minister Neeraj Kumar told THE WEEK that a door-to-door screening of 1.87 crore households, covering 10.4 crore residents, was done. A similar screening would soon be carried out for migrants.

As of June 2, the state had tested 81,413 samples, of which 4,049 were positive. It is conducting only 62.4 tests per lakh of its population, while the recommendation is 200 tests per lakh. The positivity rate per 100 is 5—one in 20 samples test positive—

which is close to the national average of 4.9. It means only the severely ill are being tested. A low positivity rate determines the policy on opening up of the economy. Kerala’s rate stands at 1.9. What has worked in Bihar’s favour though is the low morbidity—30 deaths (as on June 8). This has eased pressure on the intensive care units in its three Covid-19 designated hospitals.

Nitish had repeatedly asked the Centre for more testing kits and monetary assistance. But he was seen as reluctant to welcome migrants home after the lockdown extension. Unlike his counterparts in other states, Nitish has been maintaining a low profile. Even the transfer of state health secretary Sanjay Kumar amid the crisis raised eyebrows. “We had never known this side of Nitish Kumar,” said Rajya Sabha MP Manoj Jha of the RJD. “He has been insensitive.”

Neeraj Kumar, however, said that the chief minister, like always, worked silently during a calamity. “It [fighting Covid-19] has been a challenge for a state with huge population and [poor] human index,” he said. “Had Bihar been like it was in 2005, would the migrants have returned? People trusted government facilities more than private ones. The state, which earlier had only three medical colleges, today has 15 in both government and private sector.

Nitish enjoys the support of the BJP’s central leadership, which has declared him the chief ministerial candidate. But the opposition is a divided house.

Our handling has been much better.”

But the three heart-wrenching faces of the migrant crisis belong to the state: Rampukar Pandit, who was found sobbing by the roadside in Delhi as he could not travel to Begusarai to see his baby boy before he died; Arvina Khatoun, whose dead body lay on the Muzaffarpur railway platform even as her child tried to wake her up; and 15-year-old Jyoti Kumari who cycled over 1,200km from Gurugram to Darbhanga with her ailing father. Most migrants are dalits or belong to the extremely backward castes, and had migrated to cities to escape caste oppression. They would send money back home. But that social and financial security is now gone.

“We have a big crisis at hand. The total number of migrants who could have returned could be in the range of 40 lakh,” said Dr Shefali Roy, head of political science department at Patna University. “The one positive thing about the state is that because of prohibition, there are fewer complaints of domestic violence during lockdown unlike other areas. But as these migrants are returning, they may be bringing other infections like HIV. Lack of livelihood is likely to lead to increase in crimes. We are in a fix.” A state campaign to distribute condoms to migrants has been started.

Also, the state government said that it paid ₹1,000 each to migrants stranded in other states. Of the more than 29 lakh migrants who registered, more than 20 lakh were paid ₹204.05 crore by May 31. In addition, the state decided to reimburse train ticket fare and other travel expenses up to ₹1,000. For ration card holders, it is offering ₹1,000 as ‘Corona Sahayata’, and has paid an advance instalment on scholarships for students and provided assistance to farmers. In all, through five initiatives, the state has transferred more than ₹6,464.26 crore through direct benefit schemes. The state is now fo-



BRUTAL FATE

Arvina Khatoon, a widowed mother of two, fell ill on a Shramik special train and died at Muzaffarpur railway station in Bihar. Her son is trying to wake her up without realising that she is dead; (right) Jyoti Kumari, 15, cycled over 1,200km with her injured father from Gurugram to reach her native place in Darbhanga



PHOTOS: PTI

cusing on employing migrants based on their skills.

It is a given that the government's handling of the crisis will have an impact on the poll results, but there is still uncertainty over when and how the elections will be held. "When we go to the polls, development and governance will be our main plank," said Neeraj Kumar. "The timing of the polls will be decided by the Election Commission in consultation with the state. It is only then that the chief minister will give his views."

There have been suggestions to hold the elections online, but the Election Commission has said that it will not be feasible to do so. Bihar's low mobile and internet penetration would be a challenge.

Nitish would prefer to hold the elections on schedule or continue as caretaker chief minister rather than have the state under Governor's rule, as it may give better manoeuvrability to the BJP. Though both the BJP and Nitish's Janata Dal (United) have been insisting that their alliance is intact, the saffron party's local unit has been needling Nitish. Its other ally, the Chirag Paswan-led Lok Janshakti Party, may also ask for more seats this time.

The BJP, meanwhile, has begun its

poll preparations. Its general secretary Bhupender Yadav, who is also in charge of the state, said, "Covid-19 will impact the campaign in a huge manner. But our party is present at the grassroots, which will engage with people."

The party has already appointed a team of seven workers in each booth, based on the local caste composition. When Prime Minister Narendra Modi presented his 'Mann Ki Baat', the BJP tested its virtual campaign strategy by asking all the teams to listen in. "The conversation was tuned in at over 60,000 booths," said BJP state chief Sanjay Jaiswal. "What this exercise also helped us in doing is to prepare programmes for the next three months at the booth level." People have already been put in charge of each of the 243 seats.

On June 7, Home Minister Amit Shah held a virtual rally, first of the 75 such meetings to be organised by the BJP. Though he clarified that this was not an election rally, he said that Nitish Kumar-led NDA would return to power with two-third majority.

On the other hand, the RJD-led Grand Alliance is yet to sort out its differences. Unlike the last elections, when he spearheaded the campaign against the BJP, Lalu Prasad, who

is jailed in a Ranchi prison, will be missing in action. And that will take the sting out of the opposition's campaign. A friendly government in neighbouring Jharkhand has ensured that Lalu gets visitors, but he will have to go all out to cajole allies like Manjhi and Kushwaha, who prefer Loktantrik Janata Dal's Sharad Yadav over Tejashwi for the chief minister's post.

Tejashwi is trying to project himself as a counter to Nitish, by raking up the issues of migrants and unemployment. "Lakhs of migrant workers are suffering. We have not talked politics," said Jha. "Even Tejashwi ji has said that only a brazenly insensitive party can think of organising a digital rally during such crisis."

But the ruling alliance has an advantage: it will rely on the sops announced by the Centre to create jobs for migrants in the state, improve infrastructure and provide relief—all of which will help win over the poor before the polls.

The biggest challenge, however, is before the Election Commission, which has to figure out a way to hold the polls during a pandemic. "The elections may get delayed," said Roy, "and currently it appears like it will be a hung house." ❏

■ INTERVIEW



Neeraj Kumar,
minister of information and
public relations, Bihar

We have a roadmap to provide jobs to migrants

BY PRATUL SHARMA

How are you dealing with the migrant crisis?

The migrants returned because they trusted Nitish Kumar. The infrastructure he has created since 2005 has given them confidence. It was on his insistence that trains were started and migrants were brought back. Till now, more than 19 lakh people have come back by trains. We have done everything for their social and economic security. Most migrants were dalits and from the most backward classes. They had left the state owing to the conditions in the past. As good governance changed Bihar, they decided to return. Nitish Kumar is the first chief minister in the country to speak to migrants housed in quarantine centres through videoconferencing. If you look at the state's panchayat raj system, which has been strengthened, we have given reservations to women from the most backward classes and dalits. This empowered them and has dented the social base of the Naxal movement since 2006. When migrants from these castes wanted to return, they trusted the system as they came with their families. The empowerment of panchayat raj also ensured that there was no community spread.

How will you create livelihood for migrants?

Our growth rate in construction sector has been high. Till May 31, 4.37 lakh

jobs have been created.... We did skill-mapping of migrants in quarantine centres. Unskilled labourers were given the option of working under MGNREGA. Those who can drive will get e-rickshaws under the existing scheme; similarly, for other trades. We are studying the economic package to see how it can be used to generate jobs. We have transferred Rs6,464 crore in cash to migrants, farmers, students and social scheme beneficiaries.... We have created a roadmap to provide jobs to all migrants.

There was criticism that the state was not doing enough testing.

What can be a bigger sign of efficiency than the fact that we mapped and screened 1,87,45,361 households, covering 10.4 crore residents. We have their details and signatures. So nearly 11 crore of the 12 crore population have been screened.... Earlier, we did not have many testing centres. We created 14, and now the chief minister has ordered that they be created in all districts. Our recovery rate is now 45 per cent.

Your opponents have accused Nitish Kumar of being insensitive to the crisis.

The entire country knows that he is a law-abiding individual. He followed the home ministry guidelines. You can call a person insensitive when he does not react or speak up, especially on the issue of disaster. Bihar did not have

a law for disaster management, but our government made one. The chief minister has a track record of working systematically.... The migrants trusted him and returned. And no migrant has complained to me about hunger in the state. The chief minister has said that people affected by disasters have the first right to the state's treasury. We don't need anyone's certificate. Those who are making such allegations have been absent since lockdown. The leader of opposition has been missing since then.

Is your alliance with the BJP intact? Will Nitish Kumar be the chief ministerial candidate?

There is no debate on the alliance. Any counter talk is by those who are jealous. What can be a bigger pointer [to Nitish's candidature] than the fact that in 2015 we got the mandate with the Grand Alliance, but when we left it on the issue of corruption and aligned with the BJP and the Lok Janshakti Party, there was no change in leadership.

What is the way forward?

It is also the responsibility of states where migrants go to work to take care of them. They should not be treated as expendables. As the chief minister said, the people of Bihar are not a burden on anyone, but they take the burden of others. They contribute a lot to the economy of other states.

DOUBLE TROUBLE

Brazil is being attacked by two dreadful enemies—Covid-19 is killing its society and life as we know, while President Bolsonaro is chipping away at the country's democracy

BY MILAN SIME MARTINIC/São Paulo



ROAD RAGE
Police clash with anti-government demonstrators in São Paulo

It is 6:49pm in São Paulo. The silence of the quarantine is broken by shouts unleashed from deep within desperate souls. “*Fora Bolsonaro* (Get out, Bolsonaro),” they say, “to save our lives.” The Covid-19 pandemic is only one half of the double-barrelled cannon of fear and dread pointed at the people of Brazil, the second most-populous country in the Americas and the

second most affected in the world by the virus. The other half is the inflexibility of its far right president Jair Messias Bolsonaro, who has been actively undermining quarantine and preventative measures adopted by its states in favour of a machismo that sells well with some 25 per cent of the population—the ones who join the president in his mask-less, gun-toting, flag-waving rallies,

calling for the opening of malls and schools. Under the smokescreen of political controversy and the fog of war against an invisible enemy, Brazilians are fighting for their lives. In São Paulo, the country's most populous city and the current epicentre of the pandemic in Latin America, frustration boils over whenever Bolsonaro appears on television. Residents stand at their

windows, banging pots and shouting “*Fora Bolsonaro*.” The state of São Paulo, the first to register a Covid-19 case in Brazil, has 1.23 lakh confirmed cases and 8,276 deaths as on June 6. Panic is palpable in the streets as masked people could be heard shouting at others to stay safely away, a man at an ATM breathing uneasy at people forming a queue, another one holding up

his open palms to stop others from entering the elevator when it opened at an intermediate floor. All of this happens in a setting of empty concrete canyons and closed businesses in the normally electric neighbourhood in the centre of the city. In the world's largest residential building, the iconic Edifício Copan, residents help each other stay in quarantine, they support businesses

in the building by buying from them and provide meals to the homeless in the neighbourhood. The economic stress has triggered a negative vibe in the city that is struggling to keep alive the classic Brazilian attitude to life. It used to be said of São Paulo that its bars were full of empty souls. It is now a city of empty bars, filled only with the souls of those who used to frequent

Convinced that his political future depends on it, Bolsonaro is out to get the economy going, no matter what it costs.

them. Thriving businesses and must-visit locations like the Galeria do Rock mall have closed their doors for good, shutting down 30 stores and costing hundreds of jobs. There have been thousands of such cases across the massive country, which is now staring at a serious economic recession.

In São Paulo, intensive care units now have an occupancy rate of 84.7 per cent, although the city is yet to hit the peak of infections. Among citizens, there is the nagging fear that Bolsonaro's macho drive will prevail as the way Brazil deals with the pandemic. "I am not afraid of a little virus. It is just a little cold," says Bolsonaro. "A knife didn't kill me (referring to being stabbed during his presidential campaign)." When the country neared 10,000 deaths, he planned a no-mask barbecue at the presidential palace. After political pressure forced him to cancel the cookout, Bolsonaro went jet skiing and showed up at a beach barbecue, shaking hands and disregarding preventative measures. He is pushing the idea that 70 per cent of the people would be infected and a small portion would die, "but that is better than starving to death," a reference to the economic woes of people who have no savings, no food and no way of finding any work in a quarantined country.

All of this is accompanied by a disinformation campaign that pushes a 'Make Brazil Great Again' ideology and provides just the right amount of false news to fuel his now-banned 'Brazil Cannot Stop' anti-quarantine campaign. Back in December, congresswoman Joice Hasselmann

told a parliamentary commission about a fake news scheme linked to Bolsonaro and his two sons, Carlos and Eduardo. The federal police later identified Carlos as one of the leaders of what it called "an illegal disinformation scheme."

Fake news has been at the centre of Bolsonaro's Covid-19 denial. A fake social media post that said that the hard-hit Amazonas state was falsifying its death toll by burying coffins full of rocks was shared more than two million times, despite the horrific scenes of death from its capital, Manaus. The health care system in Amazonas has collapsed, and so has its burial and cemetery systems. São Paulo, too, is facing a similar crisis. By late May, the city's cemeteries saw an average of 11.4 burials an hour.

But Bolsonaro keeps on repeating that it is all hysteria. Like US President Donald Trump, he, too, ignores the recommendations of top epidemiologists and wants "immediate return to normalcy." Quarantine, for Bolsonaro, is a "crime."

Convinced that his political future depends on it, Bolsonaro is out to get the economy going, no matter what it costs. "Some people are going to die. They will die. Sorry. That's life," Bolsonaro can be heard saying on camera. "They are trying to get Brazil into bankruptcy with that fear-mongering.... The best remedy for the disease is work. If someone can work, they have to go back to work. You cannot hide. It is not okay to be quarantined at home, who knows for how many days."

Bolsonaro's conscious downplaying of such a public health catastrophe is in conflict with the policy



IGNORANCE AT PLAY

President Jair Bolsonaro carries a boy on his back as he greets supporters gathered outside the presidential palace in Brasilia

adopted by most states in the country. The states have taken seriously the responsibility for the lives of their citizens and have implemented serious quarantine and prevention strategies. Bolsonaro himself sends contradictory messages, wearing a mask at times, appearing without one sometimes and taking it off when he comes near people.

Crucial to Bolsonaro's back-to-work drive has been the portrayal of hydroxychloroquine as a "potential cure," and pushing the population to take it as a prophylactic while getting back to work. "Right-wingers take chloroquine," he says proudly. "Left-wingers can drink a soda in-

stead, if they so desire." Twitter deleted Bolsonaro's tweets that touted the efficacy of hydroxychloroquine.

Clinical studies have shown that using hydroxychloroquine to treat Covid-19 can be fatal. The World Health Organization halted its use after clinical trials showed that Covid-19 patients who used the drug were at a higher risk of death and cardiac problems.

All of this adds to despair and it may be pushing Brazil to the brink of social unrest. The states are releasing some of the pressure by moving to a more dynamic quarantine in June, which is quickly deteriorating into social chaos. The São Paulo

administration is concerned about the prospect of looting in the city. The rapidly deteriorating situation is raising questions about Bolsonaro's competence to remain as president.

Bolsonaro, who was a young army captain during Brazil's darkest period of military dictatorship, is facing the threat of impeachment for his mishandling of the Covid-19 crisis, for blatant corruption and for electoral fraud, which could, under Brazilian laws, result in the voiding of the election and his removal from office. His response so far has been in feisty Trump-like fashion—warning the press, the state governors, the congress and the supreme court

judges of "their guilt" in "usurping the role of the executive". Praising the torturers in the military dictatorship, Bolsonaro openly advocates a military coup against the congress and the courts, while demanding dictatorial powers for himself.

And so, the world's fifth largest country is under the attack of two dreadful enemies: a deadly virus that threatens to change society and the life as we knew it, and a man who threatens to destroy Latin America's largest democracy with his dictatorial, pro-military and anti-democratic policies.

Martinic is a writer and researcher.

AFFONSO'S ARK

How the residents of Edifício Copan, the largest residential building in the world, are coping with Covid-19 and helping the poor in their neighbourhood

BY MILAN SIME MARTINIC

*The city flickers with a pale glow
And all the shadows that come and go
Sometimes I can hear them laugh and cry
In my lonely room with a view*

Shawn Colvin
Window to the World

The wavy accent mark over the 'ã' in São Paulo lords over the city of 21 million through a massive and emblematic building— Edifício Copan, which holds the Guinness record for having the largest floor area of any residential structure in the world. Home to 5,000 people, the building is the largest postal code in the city. It has a population which is larger than 547 Brazilian cities, and a survival spirit which is larger than life. It is the soul of São Paulo, views from the building are to die for and it is not a bad place to live out the Covid-19 pandemic.

From Copan, it seems as if the city was built around it. It helps that it is made in a shape that evokes the very name of the city. The building was designed by Brazil's superstar architect Oscar Niemeyer, the man who also designed Brazil's capital, Brasília. A measure of its impact on modern design can be seen in the cross-section

of Brazilian society that resides in Copan; a large number of them are architects and design professionals.

It is the north façade that has the more elaborate special architectural treatment with its fanciful brise soleil, a curving louver that deflects sunlight and shapes the building's imposing façade. The sections are wonky and the fire stairways artistically corkscrewed. The streets flow into the building through five gates, following the slope of the city itself. There are stores, restaurants and services along an inclined indoor street, though many are now closed—some forever—because of the pandemic. Residences are divided into six independent blocks serviced by some 20 elevators, giving residents the feel of living in a far smaller building, in a cosy, quiet neighbourhood. On its floors, the air is heady with the atmosphere of São Paulo.

Local gossips say it has inspired filmmakers, artists, photographers, writers and more. Indeed, like New York's landmark Plaza Hotel serves as the setting for the Eloise at the Plaza books, Copan is the star of the award-winning Portuguese-lan-



ANTONIO SALAVERRY

guage book *Arca sem Noé - Histórias do Edifício Copan* (Ark without Noah).

When danger was raining on São Paulo in the form of the pandemic, the building did have a Noah—Affonso Celso Prazerers de Oliveira, its 80-year-old general manager. He executes his job like an art, so much so that the building's residents refer to him reverently as "The Mayor". More than a month before the first case of Covid-19 was reported in Brazil, De Oliveira turned the building into an ark by laying down protective measures to save the lives of the residents and the 102 employees. He stopped the terrace tours that offered the most spectacular, panoramic views of São Paulo to hundreds of tourists from all over the world.

When Covid-19 hit, at de Oliveira's direction, crews began to sterilise the sidewalks outside the building and all hallway floors inside; they cleaned and sanitised the entire 20,000 square metres every 24 hours. Elevators were cleaned more frequently, and call-buttons on all floors were wiped down. Vulnerable Copan workers were paid to stay at home and those living far away were given a transportation stipend so they could avoid using public transport. "Solidarity," says de Oliveira, is the key to effective protection of citizens. "That is the spirit that prevails in Copan."

"Copan is at the intersection of the upper and the lower middle class of São Paulo," says Dr Eswar Chukaluri from Hyderabad, who stayed near Copan during the Carnival. "Walk 100m towards the upper middle-class side, and you will see expensive grocery shops and people dressed in bohemian clothes; walk 100m in the other direction, and you will see homeless people and addicts."

Chukaluri says, in Copan, you did not need to go to the Carnival—it came to your doorstep. Then came Covid-19 with a whimsical nickname called corona, making it sound per-

haps less lethal and more distant. The Carnival was the perfect petri dish for breeding a pandemic hotspot.

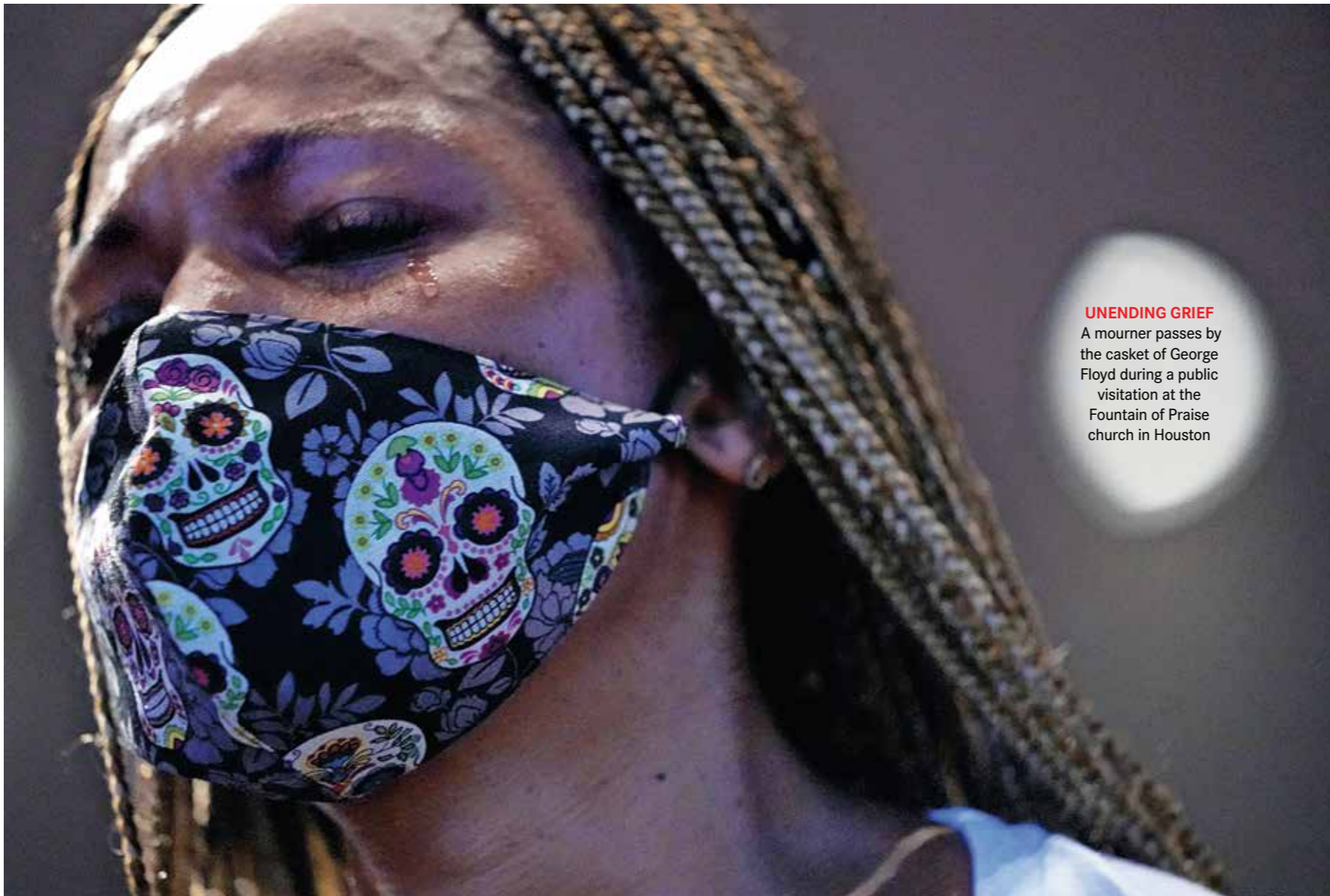
"The state imposed a hurried quarantine," says Chukaluri. "There was no 'indoors' for the homeless on the streets, living only a few metres from the folks in Copan. The streets became increasingly desolate and the homeless increasingly desperate as they depended on the food thrown in the bins. They picked this food during the nights, when the city was asleep; they slept during the day, when the city was awake. This balance, which ensured a peaceful life around Copan, was brutally disturbed within a week. One can imagine what hunger can do to people. Yes, violence! The more desperate the homeless and the drug addicts became, the more brazen the attacks became."

That was the beginning.

Moved by the plight of the homeless, Copan residents raised funds and cooked meals for them. Copan itself now contributes all income from its recyclables to the effort. Its residents took the risk of exposing themselves to the virus so that others could live.

Many of the 72 businesses in the building depended on tourists and foot traffic, which are now non-existent. These shops are now closing or reducing hours, renegotiating rents, cutting staff and trying hard to see a bright future, knowing that the only option may be to close doors forever.

As for those going into their third month of isolation in the building, and all of those who come home to Copan after running the gauntlet of the virus, their solace is in those big picture windows that let them see the city's shadows come and go, safely from any one of the thousands of lonely quarantine-rooms with a view. 📍



UNENDING GRIEF

A mourner passes by the casket of George Floyd during a public visitation at the Fountain of Praise church in Houston

Some have known this for a while. Some are just discovering this with protests over the on-camera police killing of George Floyd. And some have chosen to ignore the signs and continue eating avocados. Because they are what is causing our roots to rot, and if we do not get rid of the cause of this sickness called racism, the whole tree will die. This is 2020 in the United States of America.

The New World was only new to the Europeans who sailed into it accidentally in the late 1400s. In what we now call North and South America, there were already millions of people living in sustainable, thriving societies. These "Indians" were not Christian or "civilised" to European eyes, which claimed the lands for the Catholic church and the resources of the land for the nobles, merchants and royal venture capitalists who funded their travel. This is when the roots began to rot...

After the native inhabitants rebelled, attacked settlers, escaped into the hinterlands or were massacred by guns, swords and Old World diseases like smallpox, the invaders realised they needed another workforce that was inexpensive and virile. They turned to Africa.

The transatlantic slave trade began in 1502 and lasted until the 1860s, bringing 10 to 12 million African women, men and children to the Americas.

Slavery thrived in the southern US. If you had dark skin, you were a slave. No wage was owed for your labour. You could be bought and sold. You had a value, like a goat.

Though most whites in the American south were also poor, their colour provided them status and merit that their financial conditions did not. If poor whites felt their colour made them part of the same "tribe" as the wealthy, then it would be in their interest to defend the race and the ruling class by keeping the black population in check.

In 1861, the United States went to war against itself. In a nation already divided by cultural and political differences, slavery was the catalyst, but not because it was cruel and inhuman. To the rapidly industrialising north, slave labour gave the agricultural south an unfair economic advantage. The promise of emancipation for close to four million slaves could mobilise blacks to side with the north. When the north won the war 1865, (with the help of many free black and escaped slave troops) Abraham Lincoln honoured the promise to free (most of) the slaves.

From 1865 to 1877, the US's boldest experiment in socialism saw the redistribution of 4,000,000 acres across several southern states, the election of free black men and former slaves to congress and local political positions, and burgeoning black communities with business owners, professionals and the inauguration of black colleges and universities. This was a problem for many southern whites who, in addition to losing the Confederacy, continued to be as poor as or poorer than the former black slaves. Segregation, a system based on skin colour and bloodline, had been in place in the south since slavery, but after the Civil War, it became law. The establishment of the Ku Klux Klan brought an end to the Reconstruction and the best chance for blacks to level the playing field after slavery.

"They don't see us as human," wrote a friend last week in a WhatsApp group and I had to agree. When the American constitution was written, black slaves were counted as three-fifths of a human (for purposes of taxation and representation for their owners). We did not even become citizens until 1868. And while the law of the land has been updated, not everyone's consciousness has.

The killing of George Floyd is tragic, but not a surprise for black Americans. What made Floyd's

The rotten tree



Polarisation and police violence are as American as apple pie, but a collective veil has started to lift and white Americans are realising that their privilege makes them complicit by association

BY JENNIFER ALISA SANDERS

There is an avocado tree in my backyard that grows creamy, delicious fruit, but I suspect the roots are rotting. Some branches have hollowed out and when it storms, they crack and fall off. The leaves brown around the edges and sometimes the avocados are speckled and browning inside. Unless we can remove what is attacking its roots, it is just a matter of time before the whole tree dies.

My country's roots are rotten, too.

PUSHED TO THE BRINK

A girl lays on her stomach during a protest against the police brutality in Minneapolis



REUTERS

killing a flash point, in my opinion, is that white Americans finally saw this incident for what it is, perhaps for the very first time. They saw a white police officer kill a human being just because he was black. A collective veil has started to lift and white Americans are realising that their privilege, perhaps taken for granted as a right, makes them complicit by association.

Cities went up in flames around the US and the world has taken to the streets to protest for justice, in defiance of lockdowns, curfews and the very real threat of contamination from the coronavirus. Where I live in Brazil and throughout South America, where those who look more European also benefit from “white privilege”, black and indigenous people are standing in solidarity against police violence, too. Paradoxically, racial discrimination and polarisation at their apex are fuelling a global movement for unity, justice and equality, with more precision and fervour than any politician or religious leader could have whipped up.

“The global community must hold the USA accountable for its human rights abuses, much the same way that the US and her allies are quick

to sanction other nations for similar abuses. From police brutality to cruel, inhumane mistreatment of immigrants, especially young children, the US must fear the consequences of such actions otherwise change may never arrive. It's not just Donald Trump, it's the established institutions of cruelty that must be demolished...ASAP,” said Nigerian humanist and activist Fatai Adewusi.

Some white people are turning to black and brown friends and apologising. Some are asking what they can do to help. Honestly, that is a conversation that most black people do not want to have. Racism is not something we created so we cannot fix it. But I will take it upon myself to offer some tips because I want you to figure out how to fix this, white America(s). So...

Let us grieve and do not judge us. Fortunately, most of the protests of police violence, around the world, have been peaceful. I do not justify violence and looting, but I do understand why it is happening. It is an outlet for the overwhelming anger, fear, hopelessness and frustration we are feeling and have been feeling for centuries. These feelings are ugly and messy under the best of circumstances

and even more so when millions are feeling them together. It is like a cyclone. You do not blame it for the heavy rains and winds blowing through. You let it blow through. It will pass. And releasing the anger, which is also being done in positive and constructive ways, is part of the healing process.

Talk to other white people. Honestly, talking to brown and black people is not going to help us or you. We cannot relate to what you are feeling. Our pain is different. You also will not be honest about how you feel if you are talking with us and what we need to change things is some raw honesty, even when it is hard to hear (or say).

Take responsibility. The three police officers who did not have their knee on George Floyd's neck are also held accountable. They saw what was

happening and they did nothing to stop it. If you have benefited from white privilege or the privilege of being part of the ruling elite, you are complicit. Take responsibility for your actions or inaction and then educate yourself so that you can take action towards change.

Stop normalising whiteness. Being white is just one of many human experiences. How you see the world as a white person holds valid and true for you, but probably not for people of colour (most of the world).

Do not speak for people of colour. It is time to listen. We have been ignored and silenced for far too long.

Then, the systems and institutions that uphold and perpetuate racism in the US and around the world must be dismantled. According to a 2019 Oxfam report, 26 billionaires hold

60 per cent of the world's wealth. The great majority of this minuscule group are white men. Not only is this grossly unjust, it is unsustainable.

So, yes, black and brown people in the US and around the world are raging, are grieving and rightfully so. And when this cyclone has passed, we need to work together to rebuild our societies and institutions on foundations of equality where power is redefined and not used as a weapon to oppress and control. Housing, food and health care can no longer be commodities for profit and provided only to those who can pay for them. They must become basic human rights. We must redefine success by how we take care of each other and our environment, how we provide for our children and make sure we give them a better world

than we were given, and by how happy and fulfilled each individual feels inside.

This time, we must build a foundation from love, otherwise we are going to end up with a version of what we have now with just a change in the colour of the oppressors. I am not talking rainbows and lollipops, love. I am talking about the kind of love that Dr Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa, Nelson Mandela, Malala Yousafzai and Mahatma Gandhi spoke about, to peacefully bring deep societal transformation and longstanding change. The rest, we are going to have to figure out on our own because, well... we are making a new world from the ashes of the old.

The writer is an African American singer settled in Brazil.



IN SOLIDARITY
Senator Kamala Harris and her Democrat colleagues take a knee to honour George Floyd in the US Capitol Visitors Center

Stronger together

Many Indian Americans are standing in solidarity with the black community and doing their bit to confront racism in the country

BY LAVINA MELWANI

IT HAS BEEN called a pandemic within a pandemic. America has been hit by a double whammy—Covid-19, which has claimed over 1.10 lakh lives, and racism, the virus that has infected it for more than 400 years.

Racism in America goes back to the original sin of slavery, and in 2020, it has been perpetuated by the knee of a white police officer which was pressed against the neck of a fallen, unarmed, handcuffed black man. The knee stayed on the victim's neck, while three other officers watched—for eight minutes and forty-six seconds—until the life oozed out of George Floyd, whose last words were,

“I can't breathe.”

Racism is not new. The only difference now is that it is getting documented. This modern-day lynching was recorded by bystanders on their phone cameras, and the resultant horrific video became the proverbial match to a powder keg, shocking people of all colours and faiths.

George Floyd's last words—“I can't breathe”—have become the slogan of millions of protesters. For the past two weeks, people have come together to protest police brutality. The protests have spilled over to a 100 cities in all 50 states, even amid the pandemic. What has been noteworthy is the turnout across racial,

gender and age barriers, and the support that has been ignited in many countries across the world.

The question is, where do the Indian-Americans fit into this larger picture?

They themselves have been objects of racism, starting with discrimination against 'Hindoos' a hundred years ago to the immigration biases of the 1960s to the Dotbuster incidents in the 1980s to many other hate crimes even now. But all this fades in comparison with the systemic racism against black people for centuries. The country has failed them in social and economic equality, and criminal justice.

one cannot go back to normal. People are demanding more from their elected officials.

The Leadership Conference, which works on civil and human rights with over 220 organisations, has asked members of Congress for eight specific changes to address police violence.

Indian Americans like Senator Kamala Harris and Representative Ro Khanna are leading the charge in getting critical legislation passed in Congress. There are several Indian Americans who lead non-profit organisations, which are coming together to address issues of racism.

Some young Indian Americans also have individual reasons for marching in protest. For Gurpreet Kaur, a professor in health sciences at California State University, the current situation brought up terrible childhood memories of 1984, when Sikhs were persecuted in India. “Being a Sikh, I feel it is my moral obligation to stand up against systemic racism, abuse of power and the extrajudicial killing of civilians,” she said. “As Martin Luther King Jr. said, ‘In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies but the silence of our friends.’”

Said Rajeev Sigamoney, chair of film at the Pacific Union College in Napa, California: “We were not brought over to this country unwillingly and subjugated to lifetimes of slavery and systemic oppression. The difference this makes psychologically and to our starting points is immense. Just because you arrived with \$50 in your pocket, does not mean you did not arrive with plenty of privilege. We can never fully understand their struggle and life experience.”

He and his wife, Brittnee, who is white, marched in the protests and have contributed to black organisations. As parents of a mixed-race child, they realise that the conversations have to start in childhood.

Also, Indian-American activists

owe a debt to the black community, said Theresa Thanjan, who works with the New York Immigration Coalition. “As South Asian immigrants were often targeted after 9/11, we turned to black leaders and they came through in dramatic fashion,” she said. “I am moved to act because of the desire to show solidarity and also work with BLM (Black Lives Matter) to make important institutional changes.”

The race dialogue has continued on social media among Indian Americans: Instagram went dark for a day with posts of black tiles in solidarity; Indians on social media have posted and spoken about the inequities, and arranged virtual panels and gatherings.

But sometimes, it takes more than words. Rahul Dubey, a health care innovator in Washington DC, became an overnight hero when he opened up his home to 70-plus protesters who were being pursued by police in riot gear with tear gas, pepper spray and rubber bullets. He comforted and supported the protesters through the night, until the curfew ended in the wee hours of the morning. Yet, Dubey does not want to take credit. “I believe 95 per cent of the people I know would open that door,” he said. “The good has been set in motion. You will open the door now and you know that, and if you do not, you need to check yourself.”

Since the incident, Dubey has been inundated with calls, letters and offers of help. He tells anyone who will listen, “We have the brain trust of desis and we have the capital that we are sitting on, and we have inner-city problems. Let us find their teams, and let us lend out our star desi people. Let us make it a two-way street. If there is any subculture and any demographic that should be collaborating, it is ours.”

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



Reassert our nonalignment

The Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Hsien Loong, in an article in the highly reputed American journal *Foreign Affairs* (June 4), and Steve Bannon, Trump's ideological foghorn, in an interview to the island's most important English-language daily journal, *The Straits Times* (also June 4), have set out the parameters within which India, more than any other country in Asia and perhaps the world, needs to determine how it is to react to the cold war between the United States and China now being brought to a boil.

Bannon may have been relieved of his key office in August 2017, but no one else is as frank, brutal and faithful an exponent of Trump's ideology. Bannon argues—that China and the US are not in a cold war but a hot war: "It is a hot war right now and it is going to get a lot hotter." Underlining that the US is "in full-scale economic war with the Chinese Communist Party", he predicts with grim satisfaction that the two countries will be in "a kinetic war in a couple of years". And, he adds that, apart from the South China Sea, this war is going to happen "on the border of China, Pakistan and India". We cannot complain that we have not been warned.

Prime Minister Loong, more soberly but with deep conviction, draws attention to the geopolitical reality that Asia "live(s) at the intersection of various major powers", and, therefore, "must avoid being caught in the middle or forced to make 'invidious choices'". This, from a Singapore that, in sharp contrast to India in the 1960s and 1970s and way into the 1980s, did make the "invidious choice" of lining up with America in the thick of the Vietnam War and its Cambodian aftermath. Singapore was the most avid supporter of the horrendous Pol Pot regime.

Singapore prime minister now recognises that if either China or the US attempts to force a choice between them on other Asian countries, it will lead to a "course of confrontation" that "will last decades" and put the "long heralded Asian century in jeopardy". Recognising that the US in Asia is a "resident power" while China is "a reality at our doorstep", Loong also notes that "the strategic basis of Pax Americana has shifted fundamentally" making this "a painful adjustment" for the US. He warns that "if the US seeks to contain China's rise" (as Bannon, on Trump's behalf, so strongly advocates), "it will risk provoking a reaction that could set the two countries on a path of decades of confrontation".

We were able to sit out the US-Soviet Union Cold War on the side lines because had armed confrontation broken out, it would have been on the battlefields of west and east Europe. Now, the reassertion of nonalignment as a fundamental creed of our foreign policy is

urgent. Because Bannon has made explicit what has been an unstated or, at any rate, an understated goal of US foreign policy for the past two decades—co-opting India as a military partner of the US in a war to be fought on Indian soil to rein in the Chinese rise to global power status, even as the ability of the US to maintain its unipolar hegemony declines precipitately.

Bannon, emphasising that he is the chairman of something called the "Hindu Republican Coalition", concludes his interview proclaiming that as "Modi was Trump before Trump", it is India that is "the key that picks the lock". Only thieves "pick locks". Do we really want to be the American cat's paw in this looming "kinetic war", by becoming the field of battle of the Third World War?

Aiyar is a former Union minister and social commentator.



GUEST COLUMN • BHARAT KARNAD

NO CONTROL, ACTUALLY

India has no answer for China's creeping annexation

For China, the unarmed skirmishes on the disputed border with India do not merit notice. The May 26-28 meeting of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference ignored them. But the Ladakh confrontation is a muddled preoccupation of the Indian government with no clarity about what happened, how many People's Liberation Army (PLA) troops violated the 2005 Line of Actual Control (LAC), and the extent of territory illegally occupied by them.

According to former northern Army commander Lt Gen H.S. Panag, there is ingress by a brigade-sized PLA force in the Galwan River valley and in the Pangong Lake area, and occupation of some 60sqkm of Indian territory. If one adds the 640sqkm—which former foreign secretary Shyam Saran says India had lost up until 2013, and which may have doubled by now—the total territory ceded to China without a fight may exceed 1,300sqkm!

The astonishing thing is that these developments surprised the Indian government and the

Indian Army. Why this should be so is a mystery, considering there was satellite imagery and that Chinese President Xi Jinping objected to the Indian infrastructure construction—never mind that it is a matching but less dense build-up on the Indian side—in his discussions with Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the Mamallapuram Summit on October 11 and 12, 2019. Of particular concern to China is the all-weather road connecting Daulat Beg Oldi and Durbuk with Depsang, inclusive of the bridge over the Shyok river, to ease the strain of maintaining the Indian military's presence on the Siachen glacier. Delhi had six months to prepare for an adverse reaction and to pre-emptively establish forward Indian military posts in the areas the PLA has now advanced into before the summer patrolling season began in April. It should have moved some long-range artillery, even if with an inadequate supply of shells, to put down stakes and show intent. But beating China to the punch is not India's forte.

The passive-reactive Indian government banks on diplomacy to restore the status quo ante that the Army, lacking the offensive will, wherewithal and endurance, is unable to deliver. This condition is a boon to the Xi regime, which can withdraw the PLA or not in this or that instance as it suits Beijing's political purpose, while inexorably pushing the LAC India-wards. At each turn then, Delhi is presented with new territorial faits accomplis, reinforcing China's policy of creeping annexation of Indian territory. The prerequisite for such policy is an undefined border. To keep it so, but to make it easier for Delhi to swallow the incremental territorial losses, Beijing promises more productive talks—the next round will be the 22nd in the series—between the special representatives to exchange maps and resolve the dispute. The Indian government will again fall for it, hail it as a great diplomatic achievement. The excitement will abate until next summer when evidence of new encroachments will trigger armed face-offs along the LAC, and this unvirtuous cycle will repeat itself until China realises all its claims.

Karnad is emeritus professor at the Centre for Policy Research and author, most recently, of *Staggering Forward: Narendra Modi and India's Global Ambition*.

CAPITAL PAINS



Delhi appears to have entered the community transmission stage, and with the AAP government's own estimates putting the number of cases by the end of July at 5.5 lakh, there is an urgent need to put aside politics and fight the pandemic together

BY SONI MISHRA

LAST JOURNEY

Health workers take the body of a man who died of Covid-19 for cremation in Delhi



SANJAY AHLAWAT

A 700km trip, to die

When Aditya Kumar's father arrived in Bhopal at the crack of dawn on June 6, his oxygen saturation levels were less than 40 per cent. "People were appalled and shocked to learn how a man so ill and weak could make a train journey all the way from Delhi. Please trust me, my father followed all social distancing norms. We just had no choice," says Aditya Nekya, 18, who is preparing for NEET exams in Bhopal.

On May 30, his 42-year-old father applied for leave at his workplace—a small electronic media house in Noida—after he developed cold and fever. In the next few days, the Mayur Vihar resident tried to get a prescription for a Covid-19 test from local doctors. But they just gave him medicines for cold and fever. He finally got a prescription from an ESI hospital on June 4, and he set off in his car with his daughter for the hospitals listed in it: Guru Teg Bahadur Hospital, Rajiv Gandhi Super Speciality Hospital and Dr Ram Manohar Lohia Hospital. But the three hospitals said they were not conducting Covid-19 tests, said Aditya. His father was growing weaker with every passing hour.

"He never had any severe medical problems," says Aditya. "He was a staunch AAP supporter and was on good terms with the local councillor. Still, he was reduced to this state."

Out of sheer desperation, Aditya booked a night train for his father to come to Bhopal so that he and his uncle could get him tested there. On June 7, a day after his father had arrived in Bhopal and tested positive, Aditya cremated him wearing a PPE suit. After the last rites, he called his mother in Delhi. "My mother and sister were just returning after their own tests. I told my mother about father's death. She had a severe asthma attack right there and collapsed. That was my biggest mistake," says Aditya, breaking into sobs.

His 15-year-old sister took their mother to the Lal Bahadur Shastri Hospital to find a bed but to no avail. She finally managed to admit her in an isolation ward at Metro Hospital in Noida, said Aditya.

His mother tested negative for Covid-19, but is on oxygen support. His sister, however, tested positive and is quarantined at home.

—SNEHA BHURA



LONG JOURNEY
Aditya Nekya with family

LIVING ON THE EDGE
The slums in Delhi are particularly vulnerable to Covid spread

A few months ago, Arvind Kejriwal and his Aam Aadmi Party had carefully negotiated the communal minefield set by the BJP, against the backdrop of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, to record another spectacular victory in the Delhi elections. It was almost as dazzling a win as the 2015 victory, perhaps even more so, given the anti-incumbency.

However, Kejriwal did not have the luxury of easing into another term as chief minister. Communal riots shook the capital soon after he was sworn in and he was criticised for focusing more on optics and attempting a balancing act rather than dealing with the violence head-on. Then came the pandemic, which is proving to be an extreme test of Kejriwal's leadership.

In the initial days of the outbreak, the focus was on the government's

ability to help those left stranded by the lockdown. The BJP had alleged that the AAP had a role to play in the exodus of migrants from the capital. There were also complaints about the distribution of free ration and food to the poor. On balance, the Kejriwal government was seen as having made an effort to feed and shelter those affected by the pandemic restrictions.

It has been a testing time for Kejriwal personally, too. He fell ill and had to be tested for Covid-19; it was negative. A much bigger test, however,

lies ahead. In the past three months, Kejriwal has addressed the people of Delhi with great regularity. Through 'digital press conferences,' he has sought to convey his government's preparedness to deal with Covid-19 and appealed to residents to stay indoors. He even prescribed reading the Gita to beat lockdown blues.

He then got people ready for relaxation in the lockdown, saying the city could not be perpetually locked in, and that there was an urgent need to restart economic activity.

What is more worrying is that the city appears to have entered the community transmission stage, though this has not been officially declared.

Though there was a tinge of concern in his tone as he spoke of the recent rise in Covid-19 cases, he insisted that his government was two steps ahead of the virus.

As on June 9, Delhi had 31,309 cases and 905 deaths. It had registered more than a thousand cases daily for the past several days. According to the Delhi government's estimates, the capital could even see as many as 5.5 lakh cases by July 31.

What is more worrying is that the city appears to have entered the community transmission stage, though this has not been officially declared. The Delhi government, however, has admitted that the source of infection is not known in 50 per cent of the cases.

Critics said the AAP government did not utilise the lockdown well enough to create treatment facilities. This, they said, was evident in the numerous reports of commoners' ordeals. "On April 7, Arvind Kejri-

wal had said that 30,000 beds were being arranged and there was no need to panic," said Delhi BJP leader Vijender Gupta. "Instead of using the lockdown to make arrangements, he indulged in a blame game, and then on May 30, he said his government would arrange 9,500 beds by June 5. He has clearly failed to create new facilities."

Reportedly, when Kejriwal announced on May 30 that facilities would be ramped up, there were only around 2,800 beds (2,500 beds in Delhi government hospitals) available. This led to questions on why new facilities were not created during the lockdown.

Jasmine Shah, vice chairperson of the Dialogue and Development Commission of Delhi, said it was wrong to say that the government had not utilised the lockdown. "As the chief minister also said, the priority of the government during

the lockdown was on expanding capacity," he said. "When the lockdown began, 10 to 20 per cent of the beds had oxygen facility. Now, almost all the beds are equipped with oxygen. Health care staff was trained, PPE kits were arranged."

Shah also said that the Delhi government ensured that the capacity of its hospitals was 50 per cent more than the current requirement. "The government had asked private hospitals to keep 20 per cent of their beds for Covid-19 patients," he said. "But they took a lot of time doing that. And in the meantime, after the lockdown was relaxed, there was a surge in cases."

According to Delhi government figures, as on June 9, there were a total of (government plus private) 8,821 Covid-19 beds, 582 ICU beds, 468 ventilators and 3,590 beds with oxygen support.

"At this time, we have more than

8,500 beds in Delhi, of which around half are vacant," said Delhi Health Minister Satyendar Jain. "In some private hospitals, there are no beds available. But there are no complaints so far of people not finding beds in Delhi government hospitals. We have enough beds for now. But we have to prepare for the coming days. Our target is to have 15,000-16,000 beds by the middle of June."

If there were beds available, asked Congress leader Ajay Maken, why were so many patients being turned away by hospitals? "It is baffling that 33 of 38 Delhi government hospitals are not taking in Covid-19 patients," he said. "Why should only five Delhi government hospitals be put on Covid-19 duty?"

He also slammed the Centre and municipal corporations for providing only 1,500 of more than 16,000 beds in facilities that come under them.

Kejriwal has also been criticised

for his adversarial attitude towards private hospitals. He warned them against alleged black-marketing of beds, saying that he would not desist from taking action against them. The Delhi government then filed a complaint against Sir Ganga Ram Hospital, a leading private facility, for not using an app that is mandatory for Covid-19 facilities. The hospital was barred from conducting tests.

"It is important to ensure that patients get beds at private hospitals and they are not harassed," said Delhi government spokesperson Aswathi Muralidharan. "It was for this purpose that the Delhi Corona app was launched. We have a helpline where people can call if they are refused beds by private hospitals. We have also posted nursing officers at the private hospitals to ensure that no patient is turned away if beds are available."

However, critics said Kejriwal was clashing with private hospitals at a time when he should be getting them to collaborate in the fight against the virus.

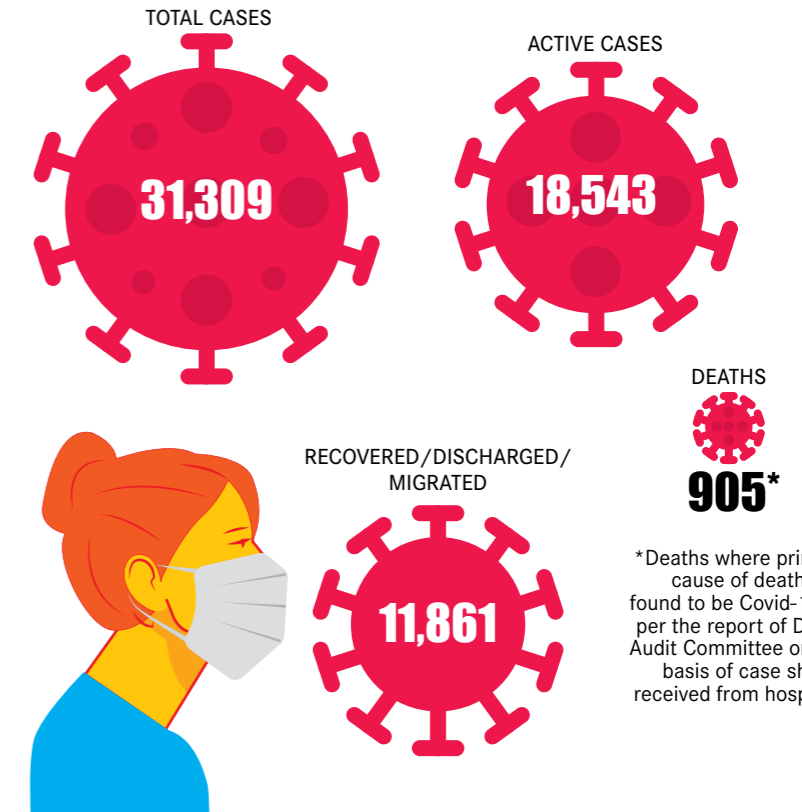
Another point of contention was the Delhi government's decision, on June 8, to reserve beds exclusively for Delhi residents. The opposition said the move was insensitive, parochial and smacked of an attempt to divert attention from the government's failure to create the required infrastructure.

"A large number of migrants do not have IDs," said Indranil Mukhopadhyay, associate professor at the School of Government and Public Policy, Jindal Global University, and co-convenor of Jan Swasthya Abhiyan.

"What about street dwellers? How will they prove they are Delhi residents? A large number of students come to Delhi from all over the country. Let us not discriminate against them. The entire NCR depends on Delhi for secondary and tertiary health care."

DELHI'S SLIPPERY SLOPE

COVID-19 CASES (AS OF JUNE 9)



*Deaths where primary cause of death was found to be Covid-19, as per the report of Death Audit Committee on the basis of case sheets received from hospitals

No dignity in death

Around 2:15pm on May 22, a teary-eyed Dharmendra Bhardwaj recorded a video, seated in his car parked outside Max Super Speciality Hospital, Patparganj. In the six-minute video, he recounted how his 68-year-old mother was denied treatment by the hospital after she tested positive for Covid-19. The deputy medical superintendent, he said, informed him via intercom to arrange his own bed and ventilator. "I approached so many other hospitals after that... no response anywhere. We are in India's capital and we feel so helpless. First, you teach the public how to arrange their own beds and ventilators," said Bhardwaj in the video. It was only after the video went viral that Max hospital called him and agreed to treat his mother. Even the Delhi High Court took suo motu cognisance of the incident and pointed out how the video "raises serious issues of public concern". Bhardwaj's mother died on May 31.



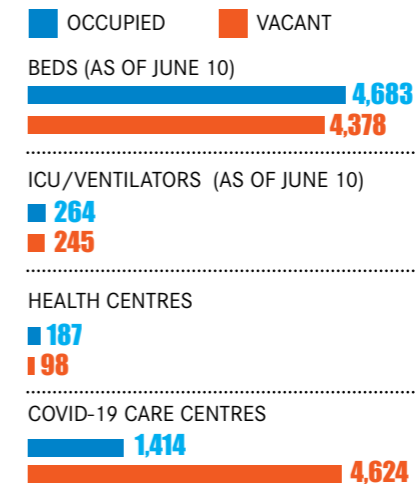
BIG LOSS
Dharmendra Bhardwaj with his mother

The next day at the Nigambodh Ghat crematorium, Bhardwaj had to buy a PPE kit for ₹500 from another mourner on the spot to complete his mother's last rites. "There is no humanity in the way they handle dead bodies there," he said. "Have you seen a porter handle luggage at a railways station? I get goosebumps when I recall that day." He said that the authorities there charged different rates from grieving families. "I paid ₹8,000," he said. "I saw another man screaming about how he paid ₹20,000 and yet his relative's body was so shoddily treated. They deny us entry on the pretext of contamination. The priest and the helper did not even wear a mask."

Bhardwaj and his four-year-old daughter, both asymptomatic, have tested positive and are in home isolation.

—SNEHA BHURA

DEDICATED COVID-19 FACILITIES



SOURCES: DIRECTORATE GENERAL OF HEALTH SERVICES (DELHI) AND CORONA DASHBOARD (DELHI)

GRAPHICS: SREEMANIKANDAN S. RESEARCH: KARTHIK RAVINDRANATH

COVID-19 PATIENTS IN HOME ISOLATION (CUMULATIVE)

14,556

TESTS (CUMULATIVE)

2,61,079

CONTAINMENT ZONES

188



BAD TIMES
People sleeping outside LNJP Hospital in Delhi

On June 9, Lieutenant Governor Anil Baijal overturned the decision. The AAP said he did so under BJP pressure. "It is projected that by July 31, 80,000 beds will be required for only the people of Delhi," said senior AAP leader Sanjay Singh. "In such a scenario, if the hospitals are thrown open for people from outside Delhi, [more than] two lakh beds will be required. When this question was put before the lieutenant governor, he had no answers." Even in regular times, said AAP leaders, 50 per cent of patients in private hospitals and 70 per cent in government hospitals were from outside Delhi.

It was wrong to say that Kejriwal had lost the plot, argued his aides. They said he has been directly monitoring the arrangements, and a team stationed in the chief minister's office has been constantly monitoring the status of beds and ventilators and the condition of patients who are serious. After he tested negative for the virus, Kejriwal announced that he would personally inspect stadiums and other facilities to arrange for additional beds and called for a jan andolan (people's movement) to ensure that social distancing norms

were practised. This was clearly aimed at conveying to the people that he was totally in control.

Currently, the government's efforts to augment Covid-19 facilities includes a plan to take over stadiums, banquet halls and hotels. By June 15, the number of beds could increase by 2,000. A new 450-bed hospital is being built in Burari, on the border with Haryana. The government has also asked 22 private hospitals to reserve 20 per cent more beds for Covid-19 patients, which will add around 2,000 beds.

As of now, more than 14,500 people, who are asymptomatic or have mild symptoms, are in home isolation. This, said the government's detractors, betrayed its lack of preparedness. Moreover, this system is fraught with danger as many areas

in the capital are densely populated, with small, cramped houses.

The government, however, has defended the home-isolation arrangement, saying that a proper protocol was in place, and if there were patients who found it difficult to self-isolate in their homes, they were put up at the government's Covid-19 care centres.

The AAP government has also been accused of being opaque about the Covid-19 death toll. The BJP and the Congress have accused the government of underreporting deaths. A plea regarding this was filed in the Delhi High Court in late May, but it was dismissed. The government countered the allegations, saying that the hospitals were not reporting deaths on time. Over the past several days, a corrective exercise has been

Currently, the government's efforts to augment Covid-19 facilities includes a plan to take over stadiums, banquet halls and hotels.

visible in Delhi's Covid-19 bulletins. The government has added additional deaths, which happened earlier, but were reviewed and deemed Covid-19 deaths by the death audit committee (formed on April 20) only later.

Another issue the Delhi government has been criticised for was the alleged low level of testing at a time when the virus was spreading fast. The government was also criticised for disallowing testing of asymptomatic persons, and it was argued that the decision to not test dead bodies, taken on June 2, would impact contact tracing and isolation efforts.

As many as six labs were issued notices for flouting the new testing norms. The charges against them included conducting tests on asymptomatic people and delaying test results. However, the lieutenant governor once again stepped in, overruling the Delhi government's decision to not test asymptomatic patients. Now, the six labs have been allowed to test again.

"It is a myth that testing in Delhi has come down," said Shah. "One needs to look beyond the past few days and take into account the overall context. States like Maharashtra and Gujarat, which are going through a grave crisis, are testing three to four times less than Delhi."

According to the Delhi government, the capital is conducting 13,537 tests per million, compared with the national average of 3,531. The numbers for Maharashtra and Gujarat are 4,766 and 3,715, respectively.

Mukhopadhyay said that a more accurate indicator of the level of testing was how many tests per positive person were being conducted. This, he said, was 22 tests per person nationally. Karnataka carried out 100 tests per positive person, while the figure was 70 for Kerala. It was much lower in the states where the situation was more alarming, such as Maharashtra (seven), Gujarat (13)

Hari 'Atmanirbhar' Singh

Hari Singh from north Delhi's Adarsh Nagar has a litany of ailments to deal with. He is HIV positive and diabetic, and has kidney and cardiac problems. On June 1, he got tested for Covid-19 at Jag Pravesh Chandra Hospital, where he works as a medical counsellor for drug addicts. He was planning to meet his daughter in Dwarka, where she had just given birth a day before. So, he thought it best to do the responsible thing. Singh, 52, had earlier got tested at Baba Saheb Ambedkar Hospital in March. But the hospital apparently lost his report. "My welfare is my responsibility," said Singh. His June 1 test results came back positive.



Despite finding beds in Lok Nayak Jai Prakash Narayan Hospital and Lady Hardinge Hospital,

Singh isolated himself in an empty shop on the ground floor of his building. "This is the best decision I have taken and I know I am recovering," he said. "If I had checked into those hospitals, I would have been dead by now. They would have thrown me with other Covid-19 patients. My case needs a separate facility, otherwise I might end up with TB or something." His only plea is to get someone to come and collect his blood samples for glucose and other tests, apart from conducting the second round of Covid-19 testing after seven days. "I am too weak to step out of my house," said Singh. "And I have worked in Delhi hospitals for 25 years. I don't have an iota of faith in Delhi's government hospitals... because our healthcare system is so rotten. Most Delhi government hospitals are houses for the dead. The hospital where I work, there is no cleanliness, no one wears a mask.... I am much better off here."

His wife and children living on the floor above have not been tested yet.

—SNEHA BHURA

and Delhi (12.4), he said.

However, he supported the Delhi government's policy of not testing asymptomatic persons. "It is really not fair to feed on fear and test people by charging them huge fees," he said. "This is an extraordinary situation and a lot that is happening in the private sector is limiting our capacity to test and treat people."

More importantly, amid the hectic politicking and the tussle between the Delhi government and the Centre, Kejriwal has struck a conciliatory note. On June 10, in his first public appearance after testing negative for

the virus, he said, "If we fight among ourselves, corona will win. Till we do not collaborate, we will not be able to fight corona."

Mukhopadhyay agreed. "Public health requires collective leadership," he said. "A lot of planning happens at the level of local institutions. So, the municipal corporations have a big role to play. The Central government, too, has an important role in terms of providing adequate funds. While Kejriwal may have to take the blame for any failure of governance, the Centre and the local bodies also have accountability." ●

A time to talk

The Delhi government has to collaborate more effectively with health care experts to better manage Covid-19

BY NAMITA KOHLI

IN DELHI, BETWEEN life and death, there is a dashboard of numbers. You could look at the Delhi government's Corona Dashboard that gives an estimate of beds and ventilators dedicated to Covid-19 and feel, at least somewhat, reassured. On June 10, out of 9,061 beds and 509 ventilators, 4,378 beds and 245 ventilators were vacant. But, juxtapose this with the latest Delhi health bulletin that shows an active case count of 18,543, and you could not be faulted for being unsettled. Moreover, when the estimate of beds and ventilators is read against Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia's dystopian estimate of 5.5 lakh cases by July 31, and the need for 80,000 beds, you ought to feel terrified.

Sisodia's comments imply that over the next month and a half, around one in 40 people in Delhi would be infected. Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal's repeated assurances—most recently on May 25 and June 10—that Delhi was ready to handle the deluge, will be put to the test. Experiences from the early phase of the pandemic in the capital, however, are far from encouraging. Anecdotal accounts from those seeking health

care in the capital, including several prominent citizens, suggest that it is difficult to get a simple Covid-19 test, find a hospital bed and even a place to lay the deceased to rest.

The government's claims of adequate infrastructure seem to have fallen flat. Short of ideas, it has tried to rope in private hospitals, luxury hotels, and encountered some resistance from both. A five-member expert committee has now suggested that a few stadiums be taken over for makeshift Covid-19 facilities. After asking 117 private hospitals to reserve 20 per cent of the beds for Covid-19 patients, on June 9, the government increased the quota of beds by 50 per cent in 22 private hospitals.

The government's claims of adequate infrastructure seem to have fallen flat. Short of ideas, it has tried to rope in private hospitals, luxury hotels, and encountered some resistance from both.



AAVUSH GOEL

CRISIS MANAGEMENT
Coronavirus and flu help desk at Civil Hospital, Gurugram

“On paper, it looks good,” says Dr Aqsa Shaikh, assistant professor, department of community medicine, Hamdard Institute of Medical Sciences and Research, Jamia Hamdard, Delhi. “On the ground, however, the situation is pretty chaotic.” Last week, Union Health Minister Harsh Vardhan termed the Delhi Covid-19 situation worrisome.

At a meeting with top Delhi health officials, he said that the average test per million in some districts, such as North East Delhi and South East Delhi, was around 500-700, as against Delhi's average of 2,018. He also said that while the Union territory's positivity rate was 25.7 per cent, several districts reported figures above 38 per cent. A high positivity rate implies that only the sickest are getting tested, and testing needs to be expanded.

An order by the Delhi government restricting testing to only symptomatic people—now overturned by the lieutenant governor—further exacerbated the crisis. “While it is true that most of the people have mild symptoms and can recover at home, there is anxiety among them to know their status,” says Shaikh, who is part of a volunteer group helping people

access Covid-19 care. “The demand for testing has been increasing, especially since offices have reopened.” Instead of expanding access to tests, government testing laboratories that are short of kits have resorted to restricting timings for testing from 8am to 4pm. Moreover, reports take a long time because of the backlog at laboratories.

According to Professor Jugal Kishore, head, department of community medicine, Safdarjung Hospital and Vardhman Medical College, testing for Covid-19 requires a processing time of up to eight hours. This has contributed to backlogs. Kishore says that given the high demand, the Delhi government was compelled to restrict the testing to symptomatic people so as to better manage the increasing load. “Fear drove many to seek a test, creating a

backlog,” he says.

At the heart of the crisis, according to Kishore, who has been part of the rapid response team of the Union health ministry for several states, is the capital's “unique” health care system. “It's a problem of coordination,” he says. Delhi has Central government hospitals, railways hospitals, state government hospitals, municipal hospitals and ESI (Employees' State Insurance) hospitals, among others. “Unlike other cities such as Mumbai and Chennai, we do not have one chain of command,” says Kishore. If all the beds and facilities were merged into a single system, the issue could be resolved, he adds.

Besides, in Delhi, the government has also been locked in a battle with the private health care system. “In a pandemic, the first line of defence has to be government hospitals,” says Dr Giridhar Gyani, who heads the Association of Healthcare Providers (India). “The Delhi government has 37 hospitals, out of which only five have been made into dedicated Covid-19 facilities. What is stopping the government from turning the rest into Covid-19 hospitals?”

He adds that it is difficult for all private hospitals to reserve 20 per cent beds for Covid-19 patients. “The big hospitals have separate buildings which they can convert into Covid-19 facilities,” he says. “But how will smaller hospitals that have 70 to 100 beds with common entry and exit points and central air-conditioning do that? We even said that we would give them the 3,000-odd beds that they wanted. If we talk, solutions can be found. We are willing to work with the government.”

Gyani says that the government ought to discuss alternative ways to manage the situation, such as converting community centres in residential colonies to makeshift Covid-19 facilities with the help of hospitals. “This way, if we manage

INTERVIEW

Manish Sisodia
deputy chief minister, Delhi

Private hospitals show no commitment

BY SONI MISHRA

patients early with oxygen, they won't need the ICUs and ventilators," he says. "In Mumbai, this is already being done."

Another issue is that the cost of Covid-19 treatment has not been regulated, leading to inflated bills. The matter has now reached the Supreme Court. "Private hospitals have hiked charges to make up for the losses they incurred during the lockdown," says Shaikh. "A bed at one of the hospitals, that used to cost ₹1,000 a day, now costs ₹10,000," says Shaikh. The government is trying to discipline the private sector, but it would not be able to manage by using the stick, she adds. "Not only do the patients pay huge amounts, they are also telling us that until they can prove they are almost dying, hospitals are turning them away saying your symptoms are mild and can be managed at home," she says. A government-appointed nursing officer has now been handed over the responsibility to decide which cases are severe. "So now it is not an experienced consultant who decides whether the patient is severe, but a nursing officer," says Shaikh.

Dr G.S. Grewal, president-elect of Delhi Medical Association, says that there is a communication gap between the government and the medical fraternity. "The government needs to speak to relevant experts, especially those in the fields of epidemiology and community medicine," he says. "The five-member committee appointed by the government does not even have a single expert from these fields." He says that apart from creating infrastructure, there has to be an aggressive push on behavioural change, and adds that governments seem to have forgotten the lessons learnt from HIV. Says Grewal: "Then, while the government kept focusing on blood transfusion to prevent transmission, the simple strategy of advocating safe sex helped control the spread more effectively." ❶

Q/An expert panel says Delhi could have one lakh cases by the end of June. How well prepared is the capital?

A/ No government anywhere in the world was prepared for the scale of impact that Covid-19 can have. We have been constantly working to enhance the health care capacity in Delhi. We have around 10,000 beds right now. We are already working on augmenting capacity in hospitals and setting up makeshift facilities. By the end of this month, we will have 20,000 beds.

Space is not an issue. We need to put in amenities such as washrooms and drinking water. We have to post medical staff there. That is what we are arranging for. We are scouting banquet halls and stadia. The Delhi government's schools are closed right now, so we can use their halls to arrange more beds. By the end of July, we will need 80,000 beds.

Q/Did the lockdown help in keeping numbers low, or was the benefit limited?

A/ The lockdown did help in controlling the pandemic. Otherwise, there would have been mayhem.

It was a time when we augmented our medical infrastructure. More importantly, the lockdown helped in bringing about the behavioural change required to fight Covid-19. People understood the importance of social distancing, wearing masks and washing hands.

Q/The state government's decision to reserve Delhi's hospitals for Delhiites was criticised as narrow-minded.

A/ These are unprecedented times, which have forced governments to take unprecedented decisions. Weren't people barred from leaving their homes? Didn't our neighbouring states Uttar Pradesh and Haryana seal their borders with Delhi? We had to plead with Haryana to let Delhi Police personnel and medical staff who live there come to Delhi. Haryana went to the extent of digging [trenches near] the border. That is narrow-minded.

Q/Lt Governor Anil Baijal has revoked the order reserving hospitals in Delhi for residents. How will you take care of the additional number of patients?



SANJAY AHLAWAT

A/ I put the same question to the honourable lieutenant governor. I asked him if he had done any calculation on how many more beds would be required and what additional facilities would be needed in the light of his decision. He simply said he had not done any such calculation. We will try our level best to ensure that everyone who approaches Delhi hospitals for treatment gets it.

This is petty politics. We know that he took the decision under political pressure. Now is not the time to do politics, but to fight Covid-19 together.

Q/Will you ask the Centre to ensure that its hospitals in Delhi also reserve more beds for Covid-19 patients?

A/ Yes, we will definitely ask the Centre to pitch in, in terms of more number of beds in its hospitals. AIIMS (the All India Institute of Medical Sciences) is a 5,000-bed facility. Why doesn't the Centre declare it a Covid-only hospital for the time

being? That will be a major help.

Q/What is the role of private hospitals now?

A/ Private hospitals, unfortunately, have failed to show a commitment to the country. We have been able to regulate private educational institutions; maybe now is the opportunity to bring in greater accountability for private hospitals. We had asked private hospitals to reserve 20 per cent beds for Covid-19 patients. Some of them said they were unable to do so. So we told them: Okay, we will then convert the entire hospital into a Covid-only facility.

Q/There has been a lot of criticism about testing numbers in Delhi going down at a time when the disease is rapidly spreading.

A/ It is ridiculous to say that Delhi is not testing enough. Delhi's testing rate is the highest in the country. We are conducting more than 13,000 tests per million people, compared with 4,000 or 5,000 in other states.

Q/It appears that the Centre and the Delhi government are not on the same page. Is it hampering efforts to curb the spread?

A/ We followed every guideline issued by the Centre with regard to Covid-19. While the Centre does have a leadership role in the fight against Covid-19, it is for the states to take decisions on the steps to be taken at the local level. Unfortunately, the Centre chose to interfere in it. This is not a time to fight each other. Either the Centre takes all decisions and all responsibility, or it should let the states decide on how the fight has to take place at the local level.

Q/You asked the Centre for financial aid. Has there been any response?

A/ We have not got anything from the Covid-19 relief fund. Other states have got some money from it, but we have got nothing. Delhi's earnings have dipped sharply. We have asked the Centre to give us ₹5,000 crore. ❶



AMEY MANSABDAR

Fright in flights

Despite stringent measures, Covid-19 is spreading rapidly among pilots and cabin crew

BY PRADIP R. SAGAR

CAPTAIN NAVEEN KUMAR, pilot of an Air India A320, returned home to Mumbai recently after a flight to Jakarta. Though he tested negative in a post-flight Covid-19 test, he said he is afraid of passing on the virus to his wife and two daughters, one of whom is an infant. He has a mandatory second Covid-19 test coming up, but the job Kumar loves has now become a cause for worry.

His fear is justified. Despite stringent guidelines and standard operating procedures laid out by the ministry of civil aviation, incidents of pilots and crew being infected with Covid-19 has increased unabated.

Around 50 pilots across the country are learned to have tested positive in the last few days. A 58-year-old Air India pilot, who retired in May, reportedly died of Covid-19.

In the first two phases of the Vande Bharat Mission to repatriate Indians stranded abroad, Air India operated 423 inbound flights, bringing back 58,867 citizens, according to the civil aviation ministry. In the third phase, starting June 10, the carrier will operate around 300 flights to Europe, Australia, Canada, the US, the UK and Africa. Major private airlines, too, have offered their services for the third phase.

BAD WEATHER

A pilot arrives at Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj International Airport in Mumbai

Pilots said that the current protocols are not enough, though they have separate entry and exit gates and hardly interact with passengers. An A320 pilot, who has been flying regularly for the last month, said: "We cannot use protective headgear because we use our headset to communicate." He also asked how the microphone could be disinfected and added that pilots use the same toilets as passengers.

An office-bearer of the Indian Commercial Pilots Association (ICPA) said that for one Vande Bharat flight, pilots undergo three tests—pre-flight, post-flight and on the fifth day after landing. Most cases of Covid-19 are reported in the third test. However, the government is not following a similar procedure for the domestic sector, which was greenlit with effect from May 25. "Some pilots who come back after Vande Bharat [flights] are being asked to fly domestic flights without taking the (third) test," he said. "By doing this, authorities are putting cabin crew and passengers at risk." On May 30, a Delhi-Moscow Air India flight was forced to return midway after the ground team realised that the pilot was Covid-19 positive; there had been an error in the pre-flight test report.

Meanwhile, Captain Deven Kanani, 51, a pilot with Air India, moved Mumbai High Court alleging that the national carrier is not maintaining social distancing norms. Kanani, who flew to Shanghai twice, on April 29 and May 10, and brought back medical supplies and equipment, has submitted photographs of a flight between San Francisco and Mumbai on May 14, showing all seats occupied. The directorate general of civil aviation's order on March 23 had said that the middle seat should be left vacant. During the last hearing on May 22, the government informed the High Court

that the new circular, dated May 22, issued while permitting domestic flights, does not say the middle seat needs to be empty. It stated that the May 22 order supersedes the March 23 order. Kanani's lawyer Abhilash Panickar said that "based on information provided by the solicitor general of India during the hearing", the spread of Covid-19 was 36 times more during air travel.

In response to Kanani's petition, the government said that the Vande Bharat flights brought back Indians from countries with a higher prevalence of Covid-19, and, therefore, higher rate of prevalence was likely among the passengers of those flights. "There is nothing to indicate that the passengers contracted Covid-19 during and onboard the Vande Bharat flights," the government's reply stated.

Manish Mehta and his wife Payal, both cabin crew, have been flying regularly for the last one month. "Who is going to look after my (six-year old daughter) when I am in quarantine at my place and my husband is flying?" she asked. "Social distancing is not being maintained. Airlines are only looking at the commercial aspect. We risk our lives to perform our duty, but many of us face trouble from neighbours. One of my colleagues has been given notice to vacate the flat."

A senior cabin crew member—who lives with his wife, three kids, and a father who has undergone kidney transplant—said that crew have been testing positive at an alarming rate, in spite of all safeguards. "Mumbai alone has seen over a dozen cases of cabin crew testing positive," he said. Reportedly, around 200 crew mem-

bers are either Covid-19 positive or have been quarantined after passengers on their flights tested positive.

With the resumption of domestic flights by private airlines, there have been cases of pilots getting infected during routine simulator training sessions. Early this month, a Vistara spokesperson admitted that two of their pilots had tested positive after flight simulator training.

Interestingly, despite the challenges, there are also those who are thankful that they were able to keep their jobs. Said a pilot: "People are grateful for having their jobs, [rather than [worrying about] putting their lives at risk."

Pilots and cabin crew have been given fictional names or left unnamed to protect identities as they are not authorised to speak to the media.

INFOCUS

WE NEED A NEW SOCIAL CONTRACT



MR. ADITYA BERLIA
Co-Promoter, Apeejay Styra & Svrn Group

Every citizen of a country effectively signs a social contract with the country and community at birth. As minors, they have had no choice in the matter, and it is only later in life they get an opportunity to have a voice (vote) or move to a different social contract (immigration). In a competitive world of social contracts, those countries with better ones attract more

immigrants than those with poorer ones.

In India, in 2020, we can safely say the social contract that was put into place by our founders and modified over the years is broken and no longer works for the vast majority of the country. Covid-19 has only served to highlight the cracks that had formed.

Part of the problem is that the assumption of good faith and trust has been routinely broken by governments (even with good intentions) at all levels and functions over the last two decades. Breaches have ranged from retroactive amendments and policies, failure to hold up the end of the partnership in terms of taxation and support of business, and routine institutional disregard for natural justice. Most importantly, there has been an epic disaster for our most vulnerable society members, many of them who have given up. With a broken social contract, there is a danger of people refusing to follow it and that what should instil pride and freedom turns to something that chains people. It results in the regression of civilization and the rise of barbarism and the law of the jungle. India has the opportunity to define a new social contract in a 21st-century context.

This is not something that can be simply done with the launch of a few programs and schemes.

We have leaders in the government with great intent and ability, and they need to take up the mandate to truly articulate what rights and responsibility every Indian should have - and then ensure it is executed down to the last citizen.

This will not be easy, and in a democracy should be a national conversation. We need to have these conversations led by our governments and start to fix the social contract bit by bit. It is also fraught with danger as it opens up conversations on fundamental rights that are today sacrosanct but by the tyranny of the majority might be diluted or encourages populist additions that are detrimental to the country's growth and development.

If there is one lesson we all took away from Covid-19 is that not only we can't go on with business as usual, we cannot let go on and sustain our governance and social contract as usual. We need a new social contract and we need it before the idea and the project of India becomes irrecoverable or worst irrelevant.

Views are Personal.



VVIP flights: wings commandeered

Our top three VVIPs—the president, the vice-president and the prime minister—have been flying around the world in Air India One for several years. The tickets issued to the VVIPs and to every person in their entourage mention the flight number as AI-1.

Yes, they still issue printed ticket-books for VVIP overseas flights—those pretty little floral-print multi-pagers, complete with bright red carbon-copy sheets, which easily slide into a gentleman's inner coat pocket or a lady's little clutch.

Actually, there is no single aircraft designated as Air India One or AI-1. Whenever any of the trimurtis wants to fly out, our flag carrier would convert two (one as standby) of its best Jumbos into executive jets, with prefabricated cabins, conference rooms, secretariat space, confidential communication consoles, working desks, lounge sofas, beds, curtains, carpets, magazine racks, metallic nameplates et al. There would be separate seating space for aides, delegation members, security men and for the media, too (not on Narendra Modi's flights).

The flight, and not the aircraft, is given the call sign Air India One. The outfitted aircraft is ground-checked and flight-tested several times before it is stamped fit for taking the VVIP load. This whole mantling and dismantling would take Air India a few days, even if the actual VVIP trip is only a one-day dash to Thimpu or Timbuktu.

All this is going to change. There will not be any need for outfitting the plane every time a VVIP wants to fly out. India is getting a special airplane for the prez, the vice and the premier. (No prize for guessing who among the three will be flying it more.)

To be precise, it will not be one plane but identical two. Two machines, bought from Boeing, were given to Air India two years ago, but have since

been sent back to the maker for outfitting them with missile protection suites. One of those, we are told, is a high-intensity laser suite that will misguide any man-portable missile flying towards the plane. Most of the missile-killing will be done automatically, without the pilot or the crew knowing anything about it. The gizmo will simply neutralise the incoming missile, and then tell the pilot, "Honney, I killed a missile."

The flight is slightly delayed. Boeing was scheduled to deliver the two outfitted 777s in June, but has now asked for time till September, citing Covid-19-caused delay in getting the work done.

No heartburn. In these physical distancing days, our VVIPs are sitting pretty at home. Narendra Modi has not done any globe-trotting since mid-November, after he came back from Brazil. Since February end, no Bharat yatra either (though domestic flying is on the Air Headquarters Communication Squadron's Embraer executive jets), save a day trip to Kolkata

and Bhubaneswar on May 22.

Diplomacy has gone digital. Modi had a digital pow-wow with Australia's Scott Morrison last week. Politicking is physically distanced. Buddy Amit Shah has been addressing Bihar's voters without stepping out of Delhi. "Do gaz doori bahut hai zaroori," says Modi. That's two yards away—more than an arm's length at which he keeps Nehruvians.

The loser in the bargain is Air India. Even before it loses the status of being the flag carrier, it will lose the honour of being the flag-bearer carrier. After the outfitted 777s arrive, they will be deregistered from Air India and registered with the IAF. Air Force pilots will fly them, but Air India Engineering Services Ltd will be looking after them.

What would they call the flight? Not Air Force One, please. That's Donald Trump's. How about IAF-1?



PHOTO PTI; File picture of a Boeing 777 in New delhi

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Down Under looks up

The virtual summit between Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison and Prime Minister Narendra Modi was historic—both in form and content. Given the media focus on Covid-19 and on India-China border tensions, the meeting did not get the attention it deserved. Apart from the foreign policy *cognoscenti au fait* with the ups and downs of India-Australia relations, few may be aware of the difficult journey that both Australian and Indian diplomats have had to make to get to the point where Modi and Morrison found themselves.

While both countries paid little attention to each other through most of the Cold War, despite their shared history of British rule, the bilateral relationship actually worsened after the Cold War, when Australia sanctioned India for the Pokhran-II nuclear tests.

However, prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee was willing to forgive Australian high-handedness at the time and pay a visit to Canberra. I discovered this when I turned up for lunch at the home of the Australian high commissioner Penny Wensley in early 2004. My host had just returned from a meeting with national security advisor Brajesh Mishra, and told me very excitedly that Vajpayee had agreed to travel to Australia "after the elections". Vajpayee ended up losing those elections and Manmohan Singh kept delaying his visit, waiting for Australia to come to terms with India's nuclear weapons status and agree to sell uranium.

Meanwhile, something else turned up to spoil the bilateral equation. China. While students of foreign affairs can read the pro-China writings of Australian strategists like Hugh White, and some of the early speeches of former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd (a Mandarin speaking China lover who has since changed colours), to appreciate the depth of the Australia-China bonhomie in early 2000s, the best popular introduction to how Australia was kow-towing to China would be the

Australian television series *Secret City!* Imagine a TV series that showed an Indian cabinet minister having an affair with the spouse of a foreign diplomat, of whatever country. *Secret City* had the Australian defence minister in bed with the wife of the Chinese ambassador. Nothing could be more candid in revealing the depth of Chinese penetration into Australian elite circles.

The Modi-Morrison joint statement on a comprehensive strategic partnership inaugurates a new phase in the bilateral relationship. In November 2014, Modi delivered on Vajpayee's promise and visited Australia. From then on, Australian officials favouring closer relations with India have had to work hard to overcome the influence of the

China-lobby in Canberra. If there is one person who deserves credit for cementing the bilateral relationship it is former Australian high commissioner to India, Peter Varghese.

I first met Varghese in Singapore when he came to see me at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, where I was then teaching. Varghese was preparing for his New Delhi posting and wanted to know all about India. On completing his extended

tenure, he returned home as Australia's foreign secretary and subsequently wrote an influential report on an India strategy up to 2035. Battling the China-lobby at home, diplomats and analysts like Varghese had to convince their peers and political masters that placing all eggs in the China basket was no strategy.

While a bulk of Varghese's report focused on economic opportunities in India, the last chapter provided a "geopolitical pillar" to the relationship, identifying shared strategic interests and perspectives within the wider Indo-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions. However, geopolitical considerations alone cannot keep Australia engaged, given China's continuing economic allure. India will have to deliver on the economic and trade fronts to get those Down Under to look up.



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

ILLUSTRATION BHASKARAN



Signal of change

Big Tech's interest in Indian telecom companies could be a game-changer for the sector

BY NACHIKET KELKAR

ON JUNE 7, Reliance Industries raised ₹5,683.5 crore from the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority, by selling 1.16 per cent stake in its subsidiary Jio Platforms. This was the eighth deal that Reliance had struck in a few weeks with marquee investors that included private equity firms like Silver Lake, Vista Equity Partners and General Atlantic. One name, however, stood out among the investors—Facebook. The social networking giant picked up a 9.99 per cent stake in Jio Platforms for ₹43,574 crore on April 22.

Facebook is not the only technolo-

gy giant eyeing a piece of India's telecom pie. Google is said to be looking for a 5 per cent stake in Vodafone Idea, and Amazon might make a \$2 billion investment in Bharti Airtel. Though Airtel and Vodafone Idea denied the reports, industry watchers feel India is set to be Big Tech's next big battleground. The reasons are obvious—despite being the second largest telecom market, India is still under-penetrated when it comes to smartphones and internet. The change has already begun; investment bank Morgan Stanley pointed out that data usage in the country in

the past few years had seen a 'hockey stick' growth.

The Covid-19 pandemic, which forced the country into a lockdown, might have been a tipping point for the industry. Morgan Stanley estimates that India's internet users could jump to 914 million by 2027 from 670 million last year. Total online shoppers are expected see a three-fold growth, to 590 million from 190 million, while average spend per online shopper will surge to \$318 from \$171. That will generate a glut of data.

"India is on the cusp of a revolutionary change in terms of demographics, telecom bundle pricing dynamics, digital penetration, technology adoption and content ingestion potential," said Yash Jethani, research manager, regional telecommunications team, IDC. "India's appetite for growth across chat apps, digital media, payments, e-commerce and online government

FRIEND REQUEST

Jio Platforms fund raising

	DEAL VALUE (₹ CRORE)	STAKE (%)
Facebook (April 22)	43,574	9.99
Silver Lake (May 3)	5,656	1.15
Vista (May 8)	11,367	2.32
General Atlantic (May 17)	6,598	1.34
KKR (May 22)	11,367	2.32
Mubadala (June 5)	9,093	1.85
Silver Lake (June 5)	4,547	0.93
Abu Dhabi Investment Authority (June 7)	5,683.5	1.16

GRAPHICS SREEMANIKANDAN S.

services is also huge. Covid-19 only acts as a catalyst in digitalising manufacturing, banking and financial services and other industries, and the tech hyperscalers now need local partners who understand granular insights and requirements."

Undoubtedly, companies like Google, Facebook, Amazon and Microsoft that collect and use consumer data to drive online advertising see a huge opportunity in India. Jio, for instance, is India's largest telecom company, and Facebook will gain from the data generated by its 380 million 4G subscribers. At the same time, Jio, which owns the largest retail network in the country and recently rolled out an online grocery service, will gain from Facebook's digital expertise and Facebook-owned platforms like WhatsApp.

"It is said that data is the new oil. I would argue that data is the new crude. And what companies like Jio or Facebook or Google do with this crude, converting it into big information, is going to shape the future business model in the telecom space," said Neil Shah, vice-president of research at Counterpoint.

Jethani said deals like the one

between Jio and Facebook could be a win-win solution. "In a multi-cloud world where lock-ins are generally disregarded, it is imperative to find new partners that give you sufficient voice and video traffic in a young country like India to propel their cloud offerings into the edge via these telcos. In turn, the use of third platform technologies (mobile, big data, cloud computing, social media) will lead to better localised telecom offers," he said.

Many of the telecom operators are in urgent need of funds for their survival after the Supreme Court asked them to pay the dues in adjusted gross revenue to the Department of Telecom. These dues are in excess of ₹1 lakh crore. Airtel reported a loss of more than ₹32,000 crore in the year that ended in March. Vodafone Idea is yet to report its full year results, but in the nine months ended in December 2019, it posted a net loss of around ₹62,000 crore.

They will also need a war chest for the upcoming 5G auctions. "Vodafone Idea's cumulative funding need will be \$2.3 billion, including hefty spectrum payments from financial year 2023," said Deepti Chaturvedi,

an analyst at the broking firm CLSA.

Through the sale of stake in Jio Platforms, Reliance has now raised more than ₹97,000 crore. This, coupled with the ₹53,000 crore rights issue, will help the company significantly reduce its net debt, which stood at ₹1.61 lakh crore at the end of March.

Vodafone Idea and Bharti Airtel, too, have huge debts. Airtel's net debt, including lease obligations, stood at ₹1.18 lakh crore as of March 2020, while Vodafone Idea had a net debt of ₹1.03 lakh crore at the end of December 2019. "Their main aim is to get out of debt. Then only will they look to invest in the 5G networks," said Shah. Vodafone Idea shares have risen by more than 69 per cent since May 29, when rumours about Google's investment surfaced. The Amazon investment rumour pushed up Bharti Airtel shares by more than 6 per cent.

Shah expects some of the Big Tech companies to emerge as telecom players in the country. "Like in Japan, where Rakuten (an e-commerce player) expanded into telecom as MVNO (mobile virtual network operator) and is now transforming into a mobile network operator," he said.

India's telecom industry has seen cutthroat competition and price war since Jio launched its services three years ago. The industry, which had more than a dozen players at that time, now has just three private players and the state-owned BSNL and MTNL. Late last year, however, companies raised tariffs by 40 per cent. Analysts expect another round of hikes in the current year, which should boost the companies' balance sheets.

As they grow and embrace newer technologies, telecom companies will morph beyond just being utilities, and cloud computing will help them provide the scale. How they deal with data privacy and data-sharing pacts will be the thing to watch out for. ●

Uday Kotak,
president of CII and managing director of
Kotak Mahindra Bank

India can be the factory and the office of the world

BY K. SUNIL THOMAS

As the newly anointed head of India's biggest business chamber, Confederation of Indian Industry, Uday Kotak has his task cut out—chart out a roadmap for corporate India to traverse the biggest challenge it has faced in a long time. His first shot is a 10-point agenda for getting growth back while saving lives and livelihood. Excerpts from an exclusive interview:

Q/Your 10-point agenda to build India in a post-pandemic world says getting growth back is non-negotiable. But it admits that of the four engines of economic growth, consumption, investment and exports have been lagging, and only government expenditure is propping it up. How do you get the rest to pick up?

A/For a long time, consumption and government spending were holding up the economy. Just before Covid hit, slowdown of consumption also set in, so we were beginning to depend disproportionately on government spending. But the factor which has been a big challenge for a long time has been private investment. There could be a number of reasons for this—ease of doing business in India, real interest rates, opportunities, bureaucracy and, to a certain extent, the transition of Indian system to a much cleaner one which a lot of businesses were not used to. The transition had more or less happened; we have a much cleaner system [now]. But then, we had this accident in Covid-19.

We now need to re-imagine investment. Let's not think about investment in the traditional sense. We normally associate investments with factories, steel, cars, etc.



But it is a lot more. Health care, for example, is 1.3 per cent of GDP. Why can't it be 5 per cent or more? Similarly, with education and environment. We have to think of these in the medium term. In the short run, we have to fight the here-and-now battle of lives and livelihood.

Q/There was a consumption slowdown even before Covid hit. Now the job losses and salary cuts and overall uncertainty have further affected growth. Is there anything that can be done?

A/Think about the economy like the human body. The choice in front of us is to give steroid which will make the patient feel good for a while and make him assume everything is all right. Or, you decide [to give] medication which will medium-term solve this but it will have to be done for a few months consistently. That is what we say—part of the medicine is medium-term and part is here-and-now.

Q/The rural-urban rebalance you talked about, and which some state governments are also targeting, envisages a sudden development of the rural hinterland, establishing industries and using the migrants who have returned to scale up quickly. How feasible is that?

A/[The migrant worker] left his village to come to the city because the village had low prospects and income levels were better in the city. He lived in poor conditions and the job was not secure, but it was better than the village, so he struggled on. Then Covid happened. He was worried over the safety of his loved ones, lost his job. So he decided, enough of it, I want to go back and stay there. What is wrong in it? It is his choice. It is up to us industry and society to convince him that if he comes back, we will create an environment better than the choice he has taken. Why can't we use this opportunity to create employability and sustainability and give the individual a choice, to be wherever he believes is his calling? And, if you really want him back in the factory, what are employers doing to make it worthwhile for him to come back?

Q/You tweeted that India can be the back office of the world. In the 30 years of liberalisation, India has become a powerhouse in the services sector. Now, the focus of the government is to move from this to manufacturing, with the Make in India campaign and the get-business-from-China narrative.

A/I don't think it is [an] either-or [situation]. Make in India is an opportunity. These are turning points of history. The China-US situation is not something we created. Concentration of manufacturing in China is bothering most players in the world, and we are not doing anything to upset the apple cart. But if we are a competitive nation, we must get people to make in India on the strength of what we are. And we must do whatever it takes. Therefore, if we are to become the 'factory of the world', which is what China has been, we must try.

But that does not preclude us from becoming back office. Work from home has taught us that we have the opportunity to also become the office to the world. Be it in California or in a village in India, if a worker has the skill required in the new post-Covid world, he can be operating from anywhere in the world and be hired by anyone, from Google to Jio. You don't need to be the back office; you can be the front office of the world, and, without in any way upsetting our game plan of Make in India. Ideally, we should be both the factory and the office of the world.

Q/The success of the government's stimulus package hinges on quick and efficient disbursement of credit, which may not really happen because banks will just play safe. What is your analysis?

A/MSME is a very big opportunity; the guarantee given by the government is real. The ₹3 lakh crore can happen between now and September. We should be going all out to make it happen. I am quite hopeful. In addition to the guarantees, we have made the criteria for MSMEs more liberal. Both these put together will certainly help the MSME sector.

Q/Is there anything in the government's stimulus package which you feel has been left out?

A/One thing we obviously should have had at the top of our priority is to do whatever it takes to protect livelihoods. The government has done a lot—give food grains, first round of giving money to the bottom-of-the-pyramid women, etc. But if there is a way of protecting livelihood, including for people losing jobs, some ability to have at least a basic level of subsistence, we should not hesitate to do whatever it takes.

Q/Are you saying, make a direct bank transfer?

A/Whatever it takes. To protect lives and livelihoods is our No 1 duty as a nation. And that is a short-term here-and-now necessity. In the medium term, we have to transform Indian health care and education, and we have to transform our relationship with mother nature. That must take priority over short-term [demands] of business or industry based on pressures.

Q/In this survivalist rush for growth, nature could well be a frontline casualty. How does one strike a balance?

A/I don't think there is an easy answer. Obviously there [has to be] a balance. There is a famous quote by John Maynard Keynes: "In the long run we are all dead". There is a counter quote to that: "Keynes is dead, and we are in the long run!" Mother nature is like that!

In Mumbai, I saw beautiful clear skies, the kind I've not seen in ages. How do we preserve this harmony with nature and, at the same time, get our growth back? If there is one thing I have learned in life, it is that it is never 'either' or 'or'. The most powerful word in the English language is 'and'!

Q/Your growth projection—will it be V-shaped or L or something else? Everybody has been asking for an alphabet!

A/I'll give you one. The alphabet with which my name starts—Uday! ●

Gentle touch to lonely giants

Kottoor provides succour to abandoned and ill-treated elephants

BY CITHARA PAUL

AMMU, 17, is prim and proper. Covid or not, she performs the handwashing ritual every time she is offered water. And, she drinks only freshly drawn water from wells. She is one of the inmates at the Kottoor Elephant Rehabilitation Centre in Thiruvananthapuram district, the first such facility in India.

One of her companions, Soman, 82, is the oldest elephant in the country. Though healthy for his age, Soman gets extra care in the time of coronavirus.

The youngest elephant here, Sree-kutty, is barely six months old. She is on a diet of baby food, glucose, ragi, jaggery and rice, and will start on

cow's milk after two months. She was found abandoned near a riverbank as a 15-day-old calf and was kept in observation for a few days. When no one came looking for her, the rehabilitation centre adopted her.

The she-elephant Poorna, who is eight years old, looks after Sree-kutty with almost motherly affection, and teaches her how to eat and drink by herself and how to splash water on her body while bathing. Poorna also fans away the flies with her ears and wards off other unwanted things that come near Sree-kutty. A four-year-old elephant, Kannan, tags along with Poorna and never leaves her side.

Like everyone else, the elephants at the rehabilitation centre, too, are

under lockdown. "Though elephants are said to be least prone to Covid owing to the absence of certain receptors, we did not want to take any risk," said Dr E.K. Easwaran, a key figure behind the Kottoor centre who recently retired as the chief veterinary officer of the Kerala forest department. "We followed all the Covid protocols and gave the mahouts special instructions." As with humans, the little ones and the elderly here get special attention.

"We declared lockdown long before the rest of the country went into one," said range officer N.V. Sath-eeshan. "We stopped having visitors and our mahouts have not stepped out of the centre for the last three months."

The centre, set up in 2005, got a facelift last year and is now home to 18 abandoned and rescued elephants. Spread over 56 hectares in the Agasthyavanam Biological Park Range, it also has a mahout training centre.

"Like Sree-kutty, most of the elephants were found abandoned in the forests at a very young age," said Easwaran. "We still do not know the exact reason for the abandonment."

Most of the foundlings had some physical deformity. Sree-kutty, for instance, has a slight bend on her foot. Perhaps she could not keep pace with the herd and was left behind. Sometimes a calf would refuse to

leave her dead mother's side and the herd would pass on. Some calves fall in rapid rivers during the rains and are carried away by the currents.

Some elephants at the Kottoor centre were tamed elephants whom their owners had deserted in sickness. A few others were rescued from their cruel owners. Three of the elephants here have gone to Wayanad district to be trained as kungki elephants that assist in rescuing or giving medical treatment to injured or trapped wild elephants. Of the remaining 15 elephants, 11 are female.

Sree-kutty is yet to meet any outsiders. Two mahouts take care of her 24/7, and they say she is too young to be exposed to the outside world.

"Most of our mahouts are tribals and they follow here every custom that they observe for their own children. We don't interfere with those practices as they are like mothers to the young ones," said Sath-eeshan. If the mahout is not within sight, Sree-kutty panics; such is their bonding, he said.

The elephants take bath twice a day in the nearby river. The bath in the morning is elaborate but in the evening it is quick. After breakfast, the elephants are allowed to roam around in groups. But not all are friendly and caring like Poorna or Sunitha, 47, the oldest female here. Raja is "haughty," said Sath-eeshan. "He does not like to be touched or caressed."

Kerala has 521 captive elephants, according to a 2018 survey. While most of them are with temples, a few are owned by individuals. The state government has allocated funds for elephant care during the lockdown as many owners had found it difficult to meet the huge expense.

Though the lockdown is being lifted, the Kottoor centre is not going to open anytime soon. "Our topmost priority is the health of the elephants," said Sath-eeshan. "So we will be the last to open." 📍



PHOTOS: R.S. GOPAN

JUMBO EFFORT
An elephant's tusk being cleaned with sand and mud; (below) Soman, 82, is the oldest elephant in India





Back in action

Workers returned in full strength to jute mills in West Bengal on June 1 after a gap

For harvest, for hearth

The jute mills in West Bengal are open for business. Top priority: bags for the rabi crop

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY SALIL BERA

PHOTO-FEATURE
THE JUTE MAKERS

The once teeming jute industry in West Bengal has put its best foot forward during the pandemic. On June 1, the Indian Jute Mills Association (IJMA)—an apex body that controls the trade of the fibre—opened 70 of its mills on the banks of the Hooghly in Howrah, and in North 24 Parganas district, amid easing of lockdown restrictions.

This, after the state government allowed mills to function with 100 per cent work force.

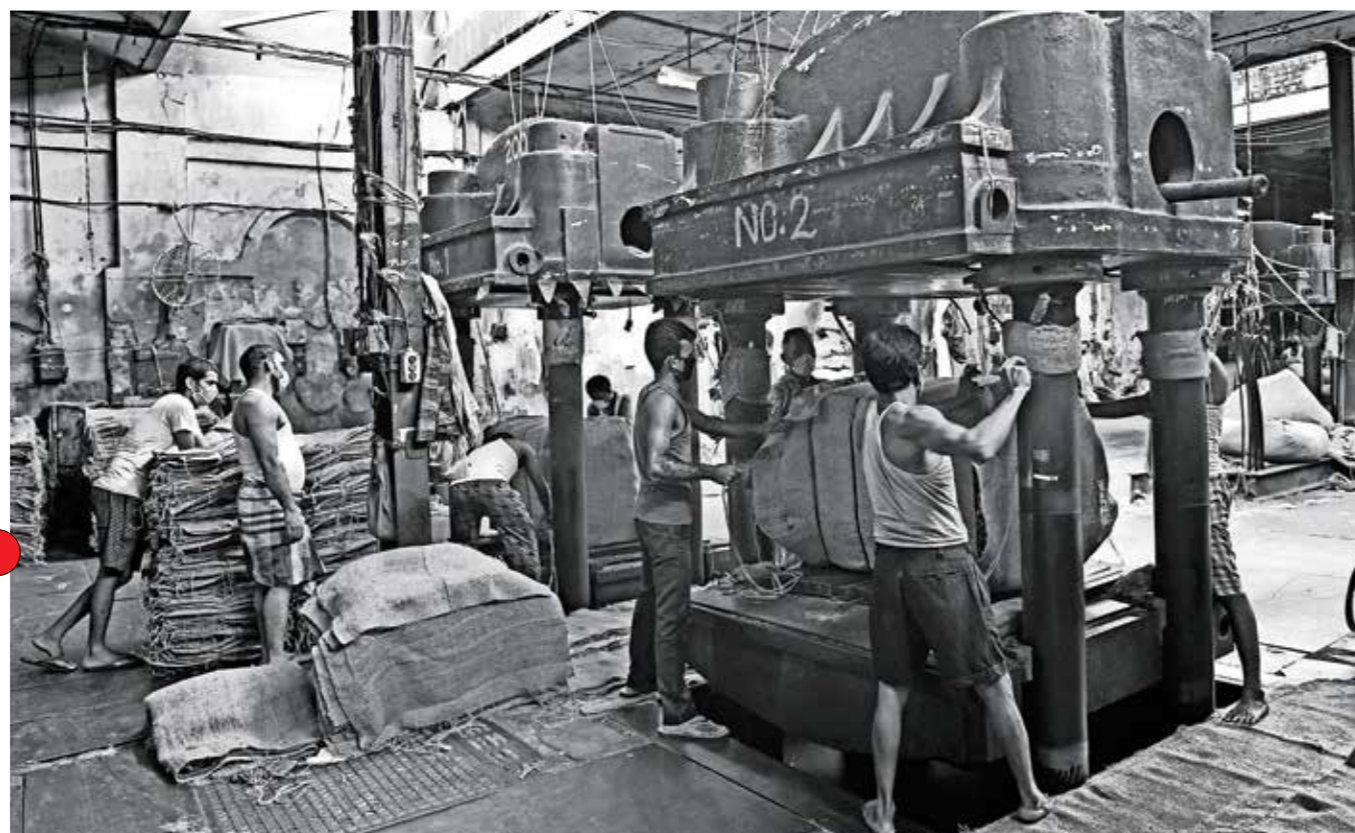
Earlier, in April, the government had allowed jute industries to open with 15 per cent workforce, on the lines of the labour-intensive tea plantations in north Bengal. But many mills could not start operations till June 1, as the industry needs at least 50 per cent of the labour force to begin manufacturing.

The jute industry has an inherent strength, because its labourers maintain over two metres social distancing

while at work. The IJMA believes that it would take up to three months for the business to gain momentum, amid an estimated loss of ₹1,250 crore.

“Gradually, production will come back to normal because we had to wait for long to start functioning,” said Sanjay Kajaria, ex-chairman, IJMA. “There was an acute labour crunch, as many had left during the initial enforcement of lockdown restrictions.... To make matters worse, the deadly strain of pathogen, and the growing fear of contamination halted manufacturing.” The mill owners are now trying to meet pressing deadlines, as the supply backlog has risen to 2.5 lakh bales for the rabi season. Jute is crucial to Bengal’s economy, as some 70 mills together employ around three lakh workers. A crucial employer in a state struggling with unemployment, and the fallout of Covid-19 infections and Cyclone Amphan.

A worker checks the quality of a product at a jute mill



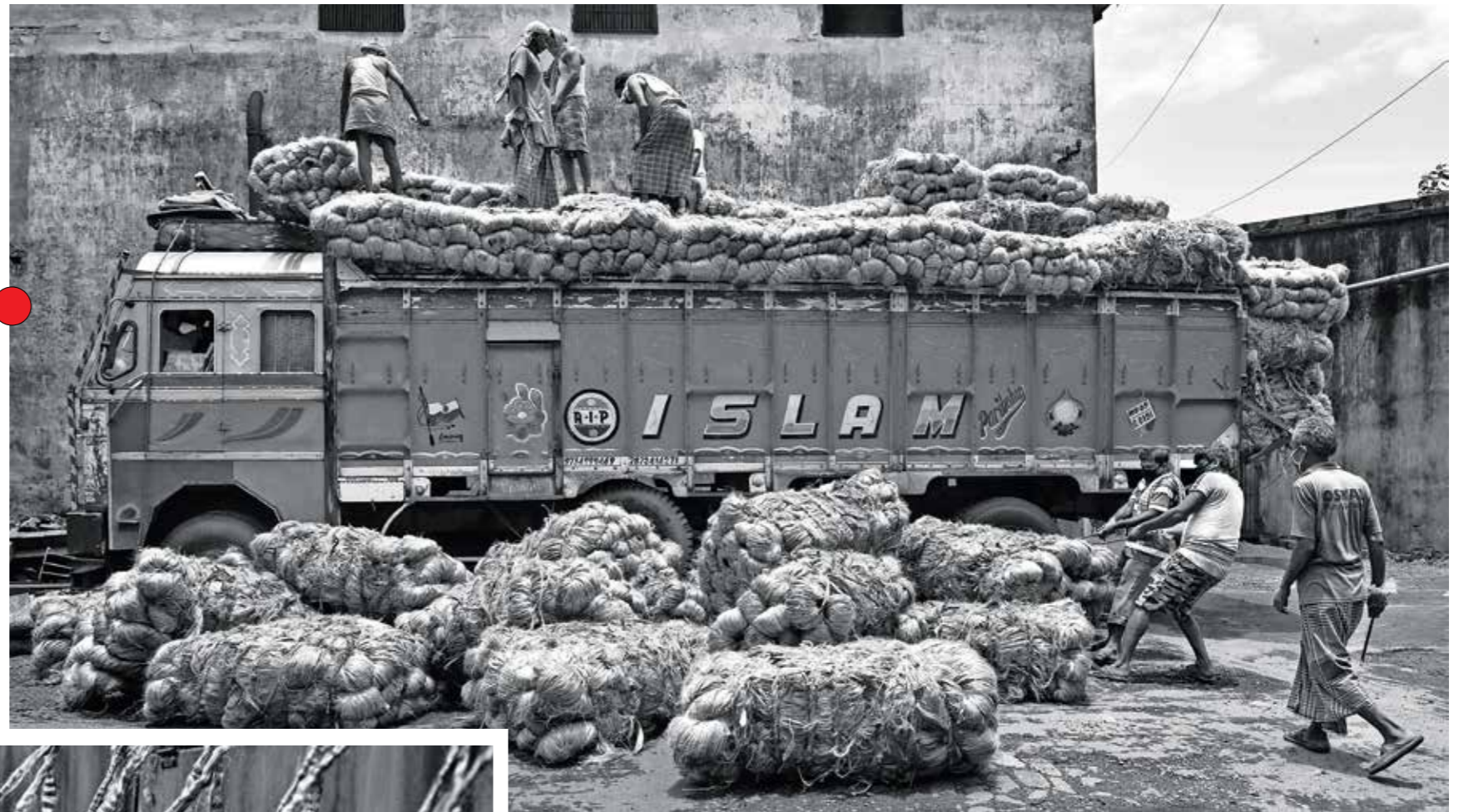
Workers pack jute sacks, which are essential during the rabi season

PHOTO-FEATURE
THE JUTE MAKERS

Labourers await their turn to carry raw jute to the factory

Raw materials unloaded from a truck at the Hastings Jute Mills in Rishra town in Hooghly district

Jute ropes stored in barrels in the factory



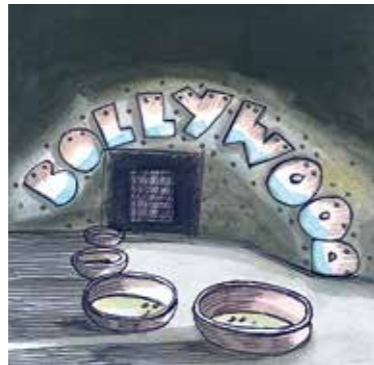


Just a bad play

Bollywood has been at the receiving end of brickbats these past two months. On March 27, social media was flooded with news that businessman-philanthropist Azim Premji donated ₹50,000 crore towards Covid-19 relief. This was later found to be a donation from 2019. Nevertheless, people began to ask Bollywood stars where their donations were. The questions had accusatory tones and the cacophony was shaming actors for being rich but not contributing towards alleviating a national crisis. Soon enough, Bollywood stars, one after another began announcing the amounts they had donated or pledged toward Covid-19 relief. A niggling question arose in my mind but I pushed it out.

A few weeks later, the din died down, only to be renewed when actor Sonu Sood began doing some stellar work with arranging transport for migrants stuck in Mumbai. Right-wing Twitter began to tag celebrities who had participated in the CAA-NRC protests in December 2019, asking in varying degrees of vulgarity and glee where they had all disappeared. Once again, a few celebrities posted about their relief efforts. I, too, felt compelled to post about the relief efforts I was participating in to send migrants in Delhi back to their homes in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. It was a satisfying and hope-inspiring effort. I felt humbled to see how hard on-ground volunteers were working to help strangers. It was gratifying to see how willing citizens and corporates were to donate money and items of use. Not one call for help that I made went unfulfilled. I was struck by the alacrity with which officers and bureaucrats responded at this time. For the first time in months, I felt hopeful about our humanity.

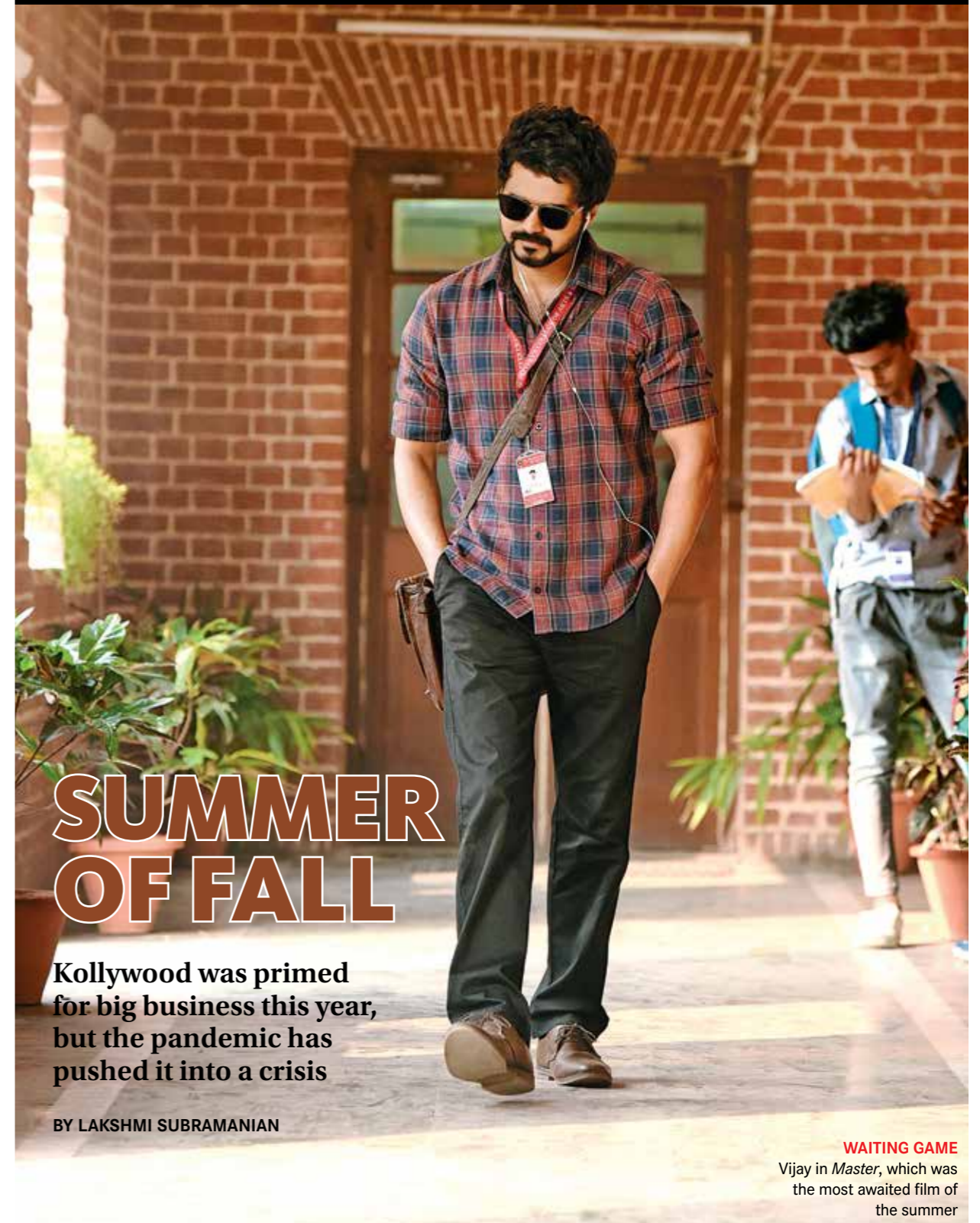
Then the niggling question returned with a few more friends. This time, I feel I have earned my right to articulate them. While it was gratifying to see civil society rise to the occasion and unite in generosity, I couldn't help but ask those shaming Bollywood on



social media—are countries supposed to be run on charity? Are national crises tided over by the philanthropy of movie stars and business tycoons? What happened to our health budget? Was it all spent? Was it Bollywood's responsibility to bail out the country? Was Hollywood similarly saving the USA? The Central government had announced an economic stimulus package, of which 50 per cent were programmes and schemes that were already under way. Doctors and medical staff were reporting a horrifying lack of PPEs. Meanwhile, the migrant crisis in India was becoming a humanitarian disaster. Hungry and hapless migrant labourers who were walking back to their homes battled the heat, police brutality, government inaction, hunger and death. And, of course, the coronavirus. Shramik Special trains were announced to take migrants home—those trains caused riots and over-crowding and near-stampede like situations in some cities. Reports came of migrants dying from hunger and dehydration on these trains, as trains lost their routes and ended up in wrong destinations! It was like a bad play. The Food Corpora-

tion Of India and an online portal bickered about the veracity of a story on food wastage during Covid-19 crisis. Another death was reported from hunger. The Central government refused to allow a public audit of the PM Cares Fund—the total corpus of which, it is reported, stands at about ₹10,000 crore.

The Covid-19 crisis continues unabated. Numbers of infected patients are rising astronomically as hospital beds fall short drastically. State and Central governments flounder with damage control. It behoves us to ask how we got here, whether there was a more prepared manner to go into the lockdown, about the money in the PM Cares Fund and the PM's Relief Fund, about the inadequate health bill, about the mess of our public infrastructure and the shortage of PPEs. These and many more questions need to be asked. But not of Bollywood!



SUMMER OF FALL

Kollywood was primed for big business this year, but the pandemic has pushed it into a crisis

BY LAKSHMI SUBRAMANIAN

WAITING GAME

Vijay in *Master*, which was the most awaited film of the summer

Just as India was getting ready for Unlock 1, the Tamil Nadu government had some good news for its television industry. On May 30, it relaxed the norms for shooting of TV serials (the green signal was given in an order dated May 21). Most significantly, the new guidelines allowed up to 60 people on set, compared with 20 as per the initial order. However, Kollywood, for now, has to settle for the resumption of post-production.

Post-production work, such as dubbing and editing, of around 20 films have resumed with strict security protocols. But, in the case of TV serials, not much has happened despite the go-ahead. Actor Khushbu, general secretary of the state's small screen producers association, said that as serial shoots mostly happen within a small space or inside a building, social distancing is difficult.

But, despite the practical difficulties, there is now hope in the television industry. The film industry on the other hand is facing a crisis. Kollywood had a turnover of ₹2,000 crore in 2019 and stakeholders were hoping for a major growth at the start of the new decade. But the lockdown resulted in an all-time low; the loss is estimated to be around ₹800 crore. "Kollywood business is usually higher during summer vacation," said G. Dhananjayan, film producer and trade expert.

The biggest blow was the postponement of action thriller *Master*, starring Vijay. Made at a cost of ₹180 crore, *Master* was the most awaited release of the summer. Vijay's *Bigil* (2019) reportedly made close to ₹300 crore; his *Sarkar* (2018) and *Mersal* (2017) were both estimated to have crossed ₹250 crore. Other major postponed releases include Suriya-starrer *Soorai Pottru* (based on the life of Air Deccan founder G.R.



WAITING FOR TAKE OFF
Aparna Balamurali and Suriya in *Soorai Pottru*



Vikram's *Cobra* is yet to complete shooting. The remaining part—20 per cent—has to be shot abroad.

Gopinath), Dhanush's *Jagame Thandhiram* and Jayam Ravi's *Bhoomi*.

Vikram's *Cobra* is yet to complete shooting. The remaining part—20 per cent—has to be shot abroad. Rajinikanth's *Annaathe* has around 40 per cent shooting left; it was scheduled for a Diwali release, but has now been pushed to January 2021. Even if film shooting is greenlit, sources said stars may not return to work before August. Some are said to be ready to work only by October. Moreover, actors aged 60 and above may not be allowed to work immediately.

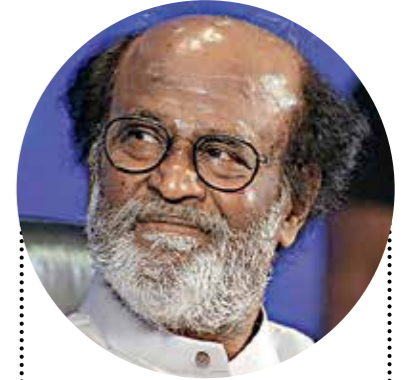
Apart from the big-budget movies, around 80 smaller movies

are waiting for the theatres to open. Trade analyst P. Ramanujam said the lockdown had halted the release of 125 movies. This includes completed films and those which were under post-production. Thirty-four movies, which needed just five to 15 days to complete, were also stopped. "Even if the theatres open, only the big-ticket films can bring back the crowds," said Dhananjayan. He said the audience may become more choosy.

In fact, a survey conducted by Cinema Central, a part of Dhananjayan's film institute BOFTA, found that 39 per cent of the respondents were ready to go to the theatres if a much-anticipated film was released. Sixty-six per cent missed the theatres and 43 per cent were willing to go

to cinema halls within three weeks of them being reopened. Fifty per cent were concerned about safety, while 13 per cent were worried about spending. Also, 20 per cent said they were comfortable watching movies online.

However, not everyone believes the big-ticket releases are the way to go. Kothanda Ramaiah, a senior member of the producer's council, said that *Master* should not be released as soon as the theatres are reopened as it may bring in big crowds and wreak the social distancing efforts. He said small budget films should be run in the theatres for a few weeks before the big films are released. "This is because of the politics in the industry," said



Rajinikanth's *Annaathe* has around 40 per cent shooting left; it was scheduled for a Diwali release, but has now been pushed to January 2021.

Ramanujam. "The producer's council election is scheduled to take place in September and there are many small producers who will support him."

Meanwhile, theatres have seen a loss of over ₹5 crore a day during the lockdown. With 1,100 screens across Tamil Nadu, Ramanujam estimated that each theatre, even when closed, has to spend at least ₹5,000 daily for maintenance. Rakesh Gowthaman, managing director of Vetri theatres, said that summer releases were expected to help in achieving a 30 per cent increase in the overall business this year. In fact, theatre owners were expecting more business this year as there were highly anticipated Hollywood releases like Scarlett Johansson-starrer *Black Widow* and *Fast & Furious 9*, and Bollywood sports drama '83.

"Overall, ₹1,000 crore investment has got locked in the industry this summer, as Tamil box office is associated with malls and multiplexes," said Dhananjayan. ●

Through the looking glass

BY ANJULY MATHAI
ILLUSTRATIONS BY JAIRAJ T.G.

For a while, it seemed like the world had drawn to a close, with offices shut, film releases getting indefinitely postponed and live music and fashion shows going online. We are facing such an unprecedented situation that it is difficult to conjecture what a post-Covid-19 world will look like. Still, one has to limp back to normalcy. So, we asked five industry experts from fashion, food, music, cinema and art on what they think is the future of their industries. Sometimes the best perspective is gotten amidst the worst crises. As the lyrics of a song by Brandi Carlile goes: "You can dance in a hurricane. But only if you are in the eye."

SUDARSHAN SHETTY, artist and former curator, Kochi-Muziris Biennale

"NOW IS THE TIME TO BRING ART BACK TO THE IDEA OF 'AVANT GARDE'"

Coming out of this, there ought to be something of an essential change in the way we look at the world and our place in it. This is the time to question the ways in which we have failed so far, and how we can proceed further.

I think the social need for 'art', as we see it now, is on the wane. There was a time when art produced information. Today, most art that you may see is secondary or dependent on the information that is [already] out there. This can be very conformist, so as to conform to a generally accepted notion or images of the dystopic times we live in. I think now, more than ever, is an artist's responsibility to bring art back, if at all, to the idea of 'avant garde'. To not only produce information that has transformative power for society at large, but also to find possible ways in which we can perceive the world outside or inside of ourselves.

The art industry, in the way it operates now, is not conducive to this approach, as it is tied inextricably to the market forces and is controlled by a very small group of people in the west. To begin with, we must



stop playing 'catch up' with them. I hope this lockdown may help restructure some of the ways in which the industry and the art market are conducted.

I think that the internet can provide one way of dissemination. Right now, it seems to be the first response to the situation we find ourselves in, with museums and art spaces holding virtual tours and exhibitions. It would be interesting to see how artists respond in the future that may throw up some very interesting ways of dissemination of knowledge and vision outside of the internet.

RICKY KEJ, Grammy award-winning musician

"COLLABORATIONS ARE GOING TO BE KEY IN FUTURE"

Live concerts will be majorly impacted as people cannot come out in large gatherings. However, today, the technology just does not exist for musicians from different locations to get online streaming to fans [in a seamless way]. Just take Zoom—the audio quality is terrible. Even if there is half a second of latency, it can throw off a drummer or a percussionist. Because of the poor quality, you cannot charge money for online concerts. However, one can use the popularity they provide to make money through branded content or by coming up with advertising jingles for clients. Musicians will need to think very creatively to make money.

Pre-recorded concerts are a good option, if you have absolutely exclusive

content for the audience and can offer a brand-new experience. Online concerts also open up the whole world for collaborations, which are going to be key in future. I can collaborate with a musician from another country in the same way I can collaborate with one two doors down my road.

Personally, 17 of my concerts in different countries have gotten cancelled. I have 16 albums streaming on various platforms; the royalty I get from them gives me a steady income. Many musicians whom I hire for concerts, though, have been really affected. The musicians who are going to thrive are the ones who are technologically adept. Things are going to be completely DIY (do it yourself).



CHEF MANU CHANDRA, chef partner, Olive group of restaurants

"BEING CLOSED FOR OVER 70 DAYS IS LIKE BEING STRUCK BY A METEOR. IT IS ARMAGEDDON"

These are desperate times. I see no silver lining. From what I can see, [even after restaurants reopen] people will want to wait before entering crowded spaces. This will have an overall impact on the whole eco-system of the restaurant industry and will determine whether it weathers the storm or perishes.

How is dining going to change? A lot has been written about digitised menus and servers wearing PPE suits. One thing seems to be piling onto another and the impact seems to be substantial. You take a hit if you are closed for 3 days. Being closed for over 70 days is like being struck by a meteor. It is Armageddon.

You have no choice but to introspect. After a point, introspection gives way



and desperation takes hold. Will you be able to create a replacement model for what exists? It is not going to happen. So then what will happen? And what about the young, starry-eyed hotel management graduates? Lakhs of them entering the job market have nowhere to go. We were huge creators of demand. What's going to happen to the families of our suppliers?

If this continues for another four to six months, 35 to 40 per cent of the restaurant industry is not going to survive. I see no light at the end of the tunnel yet. Only when every stakeholder is willing to work constructively and share the immense pain this has caused, will there be a glimmer of hope to overcome these extraordinary odds. It cannot be an option, but the new reality, till we return to the normal we knew.

IMTIAZ ALI, filmmaker

“THIS WILL LEAD TO SEVERAL IMPROVEMENTS IN THE FILM INDUSTRY”

We will face a lot of immediate problems—like how the infectiousness of the disease will affect the collaborative processes of film-making, shooting, post-production.... It seems like some form of shooting will begin in August-September. Then, the advantage will be to those whose films were half-made. Then to those who had not yet started filming. And finally, those films which were not yet sanctioned will get sanction. This means that the creative flow of our industry will have a lag of six months or so when it comes to production, even though people are writing a lot.



Despite all this, this period will result in several improvements in the next five years. First, when it comes to budgeting, things have been hyper-priced for long. The size of the units, for example, will be naturally controlled as a result of the pandemic. When you reduce the unit size, there will be more accountability and efficiency, as is there in the west. Secondly, filmmakers will take a re-look at their scripts. Focus on those things that were good but not ready, instead of those that were ready but not good. Thus, the general level of cinema will improve. Thirdly, the OTT space will really raise the bar of films that are produced. As filmmakers, we know that we have a space where our films can be placed; we can escape narrow-minded release strategies.

MANDIRA WIRK, fashion designer

“THE FUTURE IS DIGITAL, WITH MORE VIRTUAL APPOINTMENTS AND TOURS”

Things are going to change drastically in fashion. The future is digital. There are going to be more virtual appointments and tours of showrooms and garments. When it comes to the price point, there might be a pause on luxury and greater focus on comfort—more cotton and fabrics made in India. The emphasis is going to be on smart clothing that you can wear to meetings or to work, but nothing over the top. The artisans have taken a major hit. That is why we need to go back to our heritage and give importance to our tradition and culture.

With technology, we need to make the experience as personalised as possible. The customer will have to be included in each step in the process of making a garment, so that they know we are taking enough precautions in terms of safety and sanitisation. If a customer in London or California wants to know how a fabric feels, we must invest in courier services to send her samples. Earlier, maybe we were not so personally involved with our customers.



Spell-mell

The new Netflix documentary about Indian-American spelling champs is slapdash and shallow, but it is packaged to please

BY NAVIN J. ANTONY



SPELLING THE DREAM
Available on Netflix

Rating ★★★★★

For more than a decade now, Indian-Americans have been dominating a time-honoured white American tradition. Twenty-six of the last 31 winners of the prestigious Scripps National Spelling Bee—a televised annual contest in which whiz-kids from across America take on the dictionary—have been from the community that makes up just 1 per cent of the US population.

“Something clearly is going on here that needs to be better understood,” says the narrator of the new Netflix documentary *Spelling the Dream*. Sadly, Netflix is not in the ‘understanding issues’ business; it is in the content-packaging business.

Spelling the Dream, therefore, is just another sleek specimen of the sports-drama genre. The documentary is crammed with information, but never demands your full attention; it features fascinating people,

but they are portrayed as instantly forgettable characters; its workman-like filmmaking culminates in the kind of stirring denouement that is customary for the genre, but it leaves you empty and unsatisfied.

There is, however, much to relish if you are a desi culture warrior. The documentary has approving voice-overs of how India’s civilisation and ethos foster a flair for languages; and montages that show white, black and Latino children struggling to spell words as simple as capsule, while Indian-Americans romp home with ‘echolalia’ and ‘scilicet’. Netflix is so focused on making Indians happy that it even shows India’s map with China- and Pakistan-occupied parts of Kashmir as undisputed Indian territory—a first for a foreign production like this.

But, why is Netflix risking a controversy? Perhaps the stream-

ing giant knows that *Spelling the Dream* would be streamed only by Indians. Given this cynical audience targeting, how can you expect *Spelling the Dream* to capture what modern bee-movie classics like *Akeelah and the Bee* (2006) and Oscar-nominated documentary *Spellbound* (2002) did?

The best sports movies are often a nod to the power of the collective, but the Netflix documentary focuses too much on the struggle of individuals. Its storytelling form is the very antithesis of the spirit of the bee and its etymology. (The word has its roots in the medieval community get-togethers where people helped each other with their work—as in quilting bee or apple bee.) Instead, we get moments such as where the taciturn parents of an Indian-American prodigy talk about their secret database of words that will help their son win. “We are sharing this database only because this is our last year, and so far we have kept this as a family trade secret, and that gives [our son] a competitive advantage,” says the father proudly.

Most Indian-American parents in the film come across as fiercely competent and selfish, with insular views of what they owe to their adopted country. “The goal for [my son] would be to be a good citizen,” says one father. “So, whatever he does, whatever he learns, it should benefit the community, the country, the world. Something like Microsoft, for example.”

It is annoying that the filmmakers paint this hackneyed picture at a time when Indian-Americans are making their presence felt in almost every sphere of American life, and not just in technology and medicine. “Something is clearly going on” indeed with Indian-Americans, but this incredibly lazy film about incredibly hardworking children proves that Netflix does not quite get it. ●

DECODING AN ENIGMA

Satyarth Nayak's book on Sridevi, though adulatory, is a convincing retelling of the actor's life on and off the screen

BY PRIYANKA BHADANI



In the first chapter of *Sridevi: The Eternal Screen Goddess*, author Satyarth Nayak talks about the actor's dual personality—the one who was reticent and soft-spoken, and also the one who danced with abandon. This duality would become synonymous with Sridevi's image going forward. It is as close to reality as it could get.

Yet, there is a slight apprehension in picking up the book. One wonders if it is too soon, as it released in less than two years after her tragic death. Will it do justice to her 50-year-long illustrious film career? Will it be hagiographical, what with her husband, filmmaker Boney Kapoor, being the force behind the book?

But with a linear narrative that begins with Sridevi's early days in life and in acting (as Lord Murugan in *Thunaiwan* (1967)), Nayak moves on to her process, her collaborations and her rise to the top, becoming the most revered female actor of her time. Nayak, a graduate in literature from St Stephen's College in Delhi, makes it a convincing retelling of her life. The fan in the author never takes a backseat, but the objectivity remains intact. "I am a Sridevi admirer," he says, "But I have also been critical about aspects of her career. Like, how many of her film choices were questionable and how her performance in films like *Roop Ki Rani Choron ka Raja* almost borders on caricature."

The most insightful segment in the book is the actor's early years in Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and Kannada film industries, her acting stint with former Tamil Nadu chief minister J. Jayalalithaa and her rivalry with Jaya Prada. "I was very clear from the beginning that I have to cover her 50-year journey and not just Bollywood," says Nayak. Regarding her Bollywood foray, he raises important questions like how she never explored parallel cinema with art-house directors. Or, how in the later years she was restricted in her film choices.

Another plus is that Nayak has used Sridevi's archival interviews and spoken



ENGLISH VINGLISH



RANUVU VEERAN



KUMARASAMBHAVAM

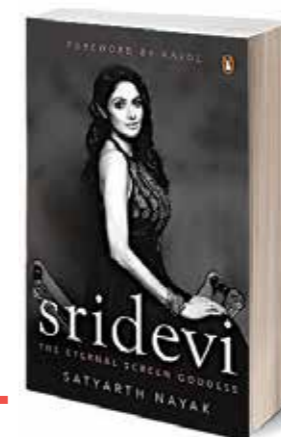


MISTER INDIA

to "70-odd people who have worked with her over the years". His initial idea though was to hear it all from her instead of archival interviews. In 2017, he got in touch with Boney during the release of *Mom*—Sridevi's 300th film, which also marked her 50th year as an actor. "But Janhvi had just signed *Dhadak* (2018) and while Sridevi agreed to do the book, she wanted to focus on Janhvi's film at the time," Nayak said.

So, the book was pushed further. Then in February 2018, she died. "I was in deep shock, like so many around me. But a friend texted me saying, 'You owe this book to her since you promised.' He said the only difference now is that your book will have a last chapter [chronicling the last chapter of her life]."

A Lucknow lad, Nayak was 13 when *Gumrah* (1993) released. "I became a huge fan of hers after watching the film," he says. Earlier that year, *Roop Ki Rani Choron Ka Raja* had tanked at the box-office. 'Fall of a star,' 'Is this the end of Sridevi?' were the kind of articles doing the rounds then. But *Gumrah* changed all that; she was 'Back with a bang'.



SRIDEVI: THE ETERNAL SCREEN GODDESS

Author: **Satyarth Nayak**

Publisher: **Penguin eBury Press**

Pages: **296**; price **₹599**

That is when Nayak's interest in her piqued. "I got really interested in how she came out of her adversity," he says.

That was the time when he started collecting old magazine copies with Sridevi's interviews. "I collected them just as a fan, but that collection became a big resource for me," says Nayak. "It gave me a chronology of her career, her thoughts about her life and career—what was her

mind space in the 1980s, in the 1990s. In her absence, those quotes have become a voice in the book."

The book has some interesting snippets. For instance, how Sridevi was "bored sick" of doing *Solva Sawan* (1979) that was a remake of a film that she had already done twice, in Tamil and Telugu. Or, her confession of being a "quintessential child-woman" in a cover story of the magazine, *Movie*. "I was very sure that the book should be something where you discover things that you don't know," says Nayak. He was surprised to discover that senior actors like Dharmendra and Amrish Puri would stand up when she entered the sets. "That was the level of adulation that she enjoyed," he says.

With the same reverence, there is much deliberation in the book on her acting, her comic timing, which was pitch perfect, and her vivacity in front of the camera. And, Nayak strikes a balance between her work and personal life with anecdotes, like Kamal Haasan recalling how Sridevi's mother would often discuss her marriage with him. "She would joke with me that maybe I should marry her daughter," said Haasan.

Even if the tone of the book is adulatory to an extent, it is a sincere effort in putting together the life of an actor who remained an enigma till the end. ●



AP

Loosening the purse strings

With increasing unrest in the US, many celebrities are coming out in support of the protesters. Singer Kanye West went one step further by setting up a college fund for Gianna, the six-year-old daughter of George Floyd, who died a brutal death at the hand of a police officer. West is also donating \$2 million to charities associated with the death of three black people—Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery.

A spirited repartee

After Sara Ali Khan, who recently posted on Instagram a cute picture of her as a toddler, yet another throwback Thursday video has surfaced, this time of Deepika Padukone at the Cannes green room last year. She is seen dancing to a song by Snoop Dogg feat. Pharell Williams. In a white bathrobe and a wide headband, the actor looks like she is having a lot of fun. "Green Room Shenanigans," she captioned the picture, which led a confused Kartik Aaryan to comment, "Shenanigans matlab?" Padukone had the perfect comeback: "Silly or high-spirited behavior; mischief (like you on most days)."

AFP



MITHILA PALKAR/actor

In one night, Mithila Palkar went from being anonymous to famous, all thanks to her Marathi version of the Cups (song). And then came digital shows like *Girl in the City* (2016) and *Little Things* (2016), followed by films like *Karwaan* (2018) and *Chopsticks* (2019). Palkar, who started out with backstage production work in Quasar Thakore Padamsee's theatre group and followed it up with acting on stage, has some interesting work lined up.

Q/ You seem to be doing a lot even during the lockdown.

A/ I am someone who cannot sit idle.... I am working out and am back to my kathak classes (online). Apart from that, I have *The Behens Are Back*, an improvised version of the play *Dekh Behen*, which is being performed for digital platforms. We are finding ways to keep theatre alive. I am also spending a lot of time with my grandparents. That's the most valuable thing during this lockdown. Their only entertainment was to watch the world go by from the balcony, but there is no world going by right now. So, they are a little perplexed.

Q/ You have *Tribhanga* coming up soon on Netflix.

A/ It was fantastic to work on the film. I got to work with phenomenal women like Renuka Shahane (director), Kajol and Tanvi Azmi (actors).... I have always been in awe of Shahane. I absolutely enjoy her writing and admire the things she stands up for. It was surreal to share screen with Kajol. It took me two days to even talk to her off-camera. I was so nervous. She was too chilled out. The inhibition was my own. The same had happened when I met Irrfan (Khan) sir for the first time on



CONTRIBUTORS / SNEHA BHURA AND PRIYANKA BHADANI
COMPILED BY ANJULY MATHAI

Work play

the sets of *Karwaan*. I was intimidated, not because he made me feel that way, but because I have admired him for years.

Q/ Have you come to terms with his death?

A/ I didn't even know how to articulate my thoughts on the day he passed away. It was numbing. People who have not even met him—the only introduction they have of him is through his films—they, too, felt it as a personal loss. For people who have worked with him, it has been too hard. But his legacy will live on. When we were doing *Karwaan* in 2017... Irrfan sir was still getting a hang of the internet, trying to understand the new world of entertainment. He was so inquisitive about my work. He asked me, "Jo tu kaam karti hai, woh kahan dikhta hai [Where does the work you do get featured]?" He was such a curious person all the time.

Q/ You studied advertising in college. Do you think that helps you build your brand?

A/ I studied mass media and brand management, and marketing was a part of our curriculum. These things come handy because you present yourself as a brand. Even while collaborating with someone [for brand promotions], you know how to present that. I believe that no education goes waste.

— PRIYANKA BHADANI



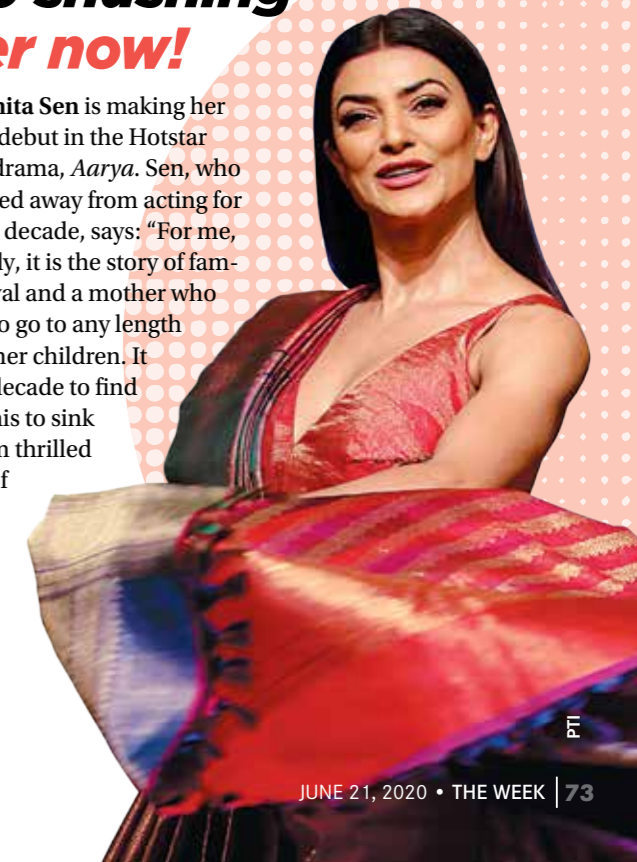
SALIL BERA

Faux pas central

Former cricketer Yuvraj Singh tweeted his apology for a comment he made on an Instagram video chat last month. "If I have unintentionally hurt anybody's sentiments or feelings, I would like to express regret for the same," he wrote. It was considered a casteist slur when he referred to leg spinner Yuzvendra Chahal as a "bhangi" person. Bhangi is used as a pejorative for the Valmiki community. Although uttered in jest, social media users ensured that their cricket heroes are more politically correct.

No shushing her now!

Sushmita Sen is making her digital debut in the Hotstar crime-drama, *Aarya*. Sen, who has stayed away from acting for almost a decade, says: "For me, personally, it is the story of family, betrayal and a mother who is willing to go to any length to protect her children. It took me a decade to find a role like this to sink into and I am thrilled to be a part of this incredible story." Directed by Ram Madhvani, the show is set to release on June 19.



PTI

LAST WORD

BIBEK DEBROY



Need a good model

Abraham Wald (1902-1950) was a mathematician, born in Hungary. Not many know that he, and his wife, died while he was in India, delivering lectures. Their Air India plane crashed in the Nilgiris. During World War II, he was a member of the Statistical Research Group (SRG) at Columbia University. A problem was examined by SRG: aircraft that returned from missions showed damage from enemy fire in different parts (wings, tail, fuselage). So, to which part of the aircraft should armour be added? Armouring the entire aircraft would require more material and it would make the plane heavier. We like dumbed-down versions.

The dumbed-down version of what Wald did is something like this. Returning aircraft had hits in some parts and the US navy wanted to add extra armour there. But Wald argued exactly the opposite. Extra armour should be put in places that had no hits. Because planes hit in those parts (engine, fuel supply) never returned. This is known as survivor bias, and is plain common sense.

Wald must have done something more substantial. Indeed, he did. He estimated the vulnerability of different parts of the aircraft, based on hits in returning aircraft. These are conditional probabilities. Let us skip the technical details.

At that time, he wrote several memoranda, and these were declassified in 1980. At that time, this was pioneering work and similar ideas were used in course of the Korean and Vietnam wars. Today, within broad statistical theory, we would say Wald worked on estimators. I mentioned Wald because there is an analogy with reactions to Covid-19, in both the dumbed-down and non-dumbed-down versions. We need to protect lives. But if we burden the plane with heavy armour, the aircraft—that is the economy—will not fly. That is the lockdown versus key-up dilemma.



There is an anecdote about Catherine the Great of Russia, the philosopher Denis Diderot and the mathematician Leonhard Euler. Diderot had become an atheist by the time he visited St Petersburg, and this upset the court. Diderot was told that a famous mathematician (Euler) would establish the existence of God. Euler went up to Diderot and said, “ $(a+b^n)/n = x$. Therefore, God exists.” Diderot understood no algebra and no mathematics. So, he promptly fled St Petersburg.

People are often scared by mathematics and the mention of models. Reactions to Covid-19 models are no different. Several models have been floated. A model, used for predictive purposes, requires data. Data means data for the entire population. If not that, a representative sample. We do not have that. We have data on those infected, those with travel history and those in contact. These are ones who have been tested and the number of tests varies widely between states, apart from problems of false positives and false negatives. To state the problem in Wald terms, we need conditional probabilities for the entire population, given that we have only limited

information about those who have been tested. I am unaware of any model for India that has done this. (In passing, Wald never had a model. He did the estimation without one.)

Therefore, India’s models have plugged in data from other countries, without controlling for co-morbidities or life expectancy. They have been proved wrong, in predicting and suggesting policies, and we are none the wiser. We know a vaccine is a long way off. Apart from natural immunity, BCG vaccine and Vitamin D, the only armour is herd immunity. Herd immunity occurs when the virus runs out of human hosts to infect. Hence, more people need to be infected, and we armour the ones who are serious.

ILLUSTRATION BHASKARAN Bibek Debroy is the chairman of the Economic Advisory Council to the prime minister.

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