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WE CAN CAPITALISE ON WORLD'S WARINESS OF CHINA

JOURNALISM WITH A HUMAN TOUCH

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HONG KONG
FREEDOMS DISAPPEAR,
UNCERTAINTY LOOMS

D.K. SHIVAKUMAR
READY TO REBOOT THE
CONGRESS IN KARNATAKA

RAHUL DRAVID EXCLUSIVE
HOPE THE TRAINING
SEASON ISN'T WIPED OUT

THE WEEK

JUNE 28, 2020



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ground, but is there
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This will pass

Most Indians could relate to Mumbai, directly or vicariously. Hence, the city's excruciating plight is of grave concern to all of us ('The city of perils', June 14). It is the homeless and the poor in the city who have to bear the brunt of the pandemic more.

Mumbai has weathered many ups and downs—man-made and otherwise. Hopefully, this would also pass soon, from a pandemic to an epidemic and then to an endemic.

Raveendranath A.,
On email.

Containing the spread of Covid-19 in a city like Mumbai was always a challenge. I feel, the blame, to a large extent, goes to the opportunistic political

alliance formed in Maharashtra, which is now ruling the state. Ideally, Sharad Pawar should have been the chief minister of Maharashtra in the

present circumstance. Uddhav Thackeray has no experience, and it seems like he wants to finish his tenure come what may.

A strong BJP government or a strong Congress-NCP coalition in the state would have been far more effective in dealing with this crisis. Looks like most of the ministers in the cabinet do not see eye to eye on most matters concerning the state. What a pity!

Gaurav Mathur,
On email.

It is fair to presume that the governments, both at the Centre and in the states, have taken strict anti-Covid-19 measures keeping in view the interests of the people.

No government can claim that there were no flaws, and brush aside criticism, especially about the plight of migrant workers.

While services rendered by civic bodies have been commendable, some attempts by politicians to take advantage of the situation have been unethical and

lamentable.

The spike in cases in Maharashtra and other states in the country will continue to be a matter of concern until an effective medicine or vaccine is developed.

K.K. Cherian,
On email

The problem with Mumbai is that it is heavily congested, and unlike Delhi, it does not have the scope to expand because of the sea. Mumbai, every year, suffers in some manner or the other. The government of India cannot afford to let Mumbai remain in such a condition. After all, it is the economic capital of the country. I fail to understand why adequate contact tracing is still not being done in Mumbai. The Centre needs to help the people in Mumbai in a sincere manner.

Tapesh Nagpal,
On email.

Private hospitals that do not cooperate with the government should be taken to task. Mumbai, I am sure, will bounce back. But the recovery

is likely to be slow. Dharavi, which was once the epicentre of the virus, has flattened the curve. This is a positive sign and an indication that things are working well at the ground level.

Tigin Thomas,
On email.

If Mumbai is facing a crisis, Bollywood is sure to face problems. All leading actors, directors and producers have enough money to survive this period. But, my heart goes out to the daily-wage workers like the spot-boys, light-men and technicians associated with film shooting who are suffering. Some actors and filmmakers have been generous enough to help them, which is good. But, I am sure, there are many who are still suffering. Reach out to us, please.

T.K. Nandagopal,
On email.

Save lives

The Tamil Nadu government has failed miserably in handling the pandemic. It needs to accept at least now that there is community transmission in the state ('Enough is not enough', June 14).

The government was harping on the fact that the death rate in the state is low compared with other states. Edappadi Palaniswamy and team should realise

there is no point drawing a comparison with other states, and seeing which state scores what in handling the crisis. The government should do its job and save as many lives as possible.

R. Sairam,
On email.

Acting to politics?

Sonu Sood is the real superstar of Bollywood ('Superstar of the season', June 14). I agree with Shobhaa De that Sonu has catapulted himself to another league with all the help that he has been providing to migrants across the country. Like her, I feel he could join politics. He has already proven himself in Bollywood and there is nothing more he has to do. Politics needs more of people like him.

Vismay Mathur,
On email.

Disparity and suffering

Swara Bhasker's column ('Put yourself in their shoes', June 7) delved deep into my conscience.

The predicament, agony and pain of migrants cannot easily be understood, sitting in the comforts of home. Imagine people having matching slippers, shoes and sandals for different occasions and the plight of those deprived of it. Disparity alone is the sole cause of suffering of the poor.

Surinder Pal,
On email.

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— APERITIF —
THE BIG PICTURE

GOING THE EXTRA MILE

Dr Manjusha S. Chaugule uses a six-foot stethoscope to maintain distance while examining a patient. Chaugule has been working continuously since the lockdown at her clinic in Dharavi. More than 120 private clinics are working in the Dharavi slums.

PHOTO BY VISHNU V. NAIR

POINT BLANK



Life is beautiful. Don't get caught up in the rat race. Choose music, food, travel, reading, your work and loved ones. Do what makes you happy. Choose life.
Milind Deora, Congress leader

Probably, world cricket has missed one thing, and that is that M.S. Dhoni didn't bat at number three. Had he not captained India and batted at number three, probably world cricket would have seen a completely different player. Probably, he could have got many more runs, and he would have broken many more records.

Gautam Gambhir, ex-cricketer and BJP MP

Tennis is like riding a bike for me. The muscle memory that I have is far superior to any young one coming up. [If] it takes 10,000 hours and three million repetitions to create muscle memory on each stroke, I may have got 60,000 hours and 12 million repetitions on each stroke because of eating, living and breathing tennis from the age of 5 to 47.

Leander Paes, tennis player

The governor of West Bengal is back to firing BJP arrows at the state government, which is handling Covid, Amphan and migrant return, smoothly, all at once. A rotten apple never falls far from the tree.

Mahua Moitra, Trinamool Congress MP, on Twitter

The more you sleep, the virus [Covid-19] will also be sleeping. It will not harm you. If the virus sleeps when you are sleeping, then it also dies when you die.

Fazal-ur-Rehman, Pakistani lawmaker



Moderation is of key importance. It is the level to live at.... It blends the two extremes. It is a key vantage point to see the whole picture. It is reasonable and realistic. It is at the core.

Bipasha Basu, actor

WORD PLAY

Recently, a Bengaluru church hosted the first **worship-on-wheels** service in the country. Worship-on-wheels is a concept that allows churchgoers to attend the community services from the safety of their vehicles. Also known as drive-in worship, the idea emerged as a solution to facilitate a 100 per cent contactless community gathering, amid the ongoing pandemic. Surely, desperate times call for desperate measures.

MILESTONES

SOIL SUPERMAN

Indian-American soil scientist Rattan Lal won the World Food Prize, which is considered equivalent to the Nobel Prize in the field of agriculture. Lal is best known for developing and mainstreaming a soil-centric approach to increasing food production.



TOP ECONOMY

Singapore retained the top spot as the most competitive economy, in the world competitiveness ranking by the Institute for Management Development. The rankings were based on economic performance, government efficiency, business efficiency and infrastructure.



BRAINY WORK

Stanford researchers have created a device that can integrate and interact with neuron-like cells. The invention could help in developing an artificial synapse—the site of transmission of electric nerve impulses between two neurons—for use in brain-computer interfaces.



POWER POINT

SACHIDANANDA MURTHY



Money in the bank

Diplomacy is one profession where statements are made carefully, especially if it involves intruding into other ministerial domains. But Sanjay Bhattacharyya—the secretary in the external affairs ministry, who has been coordinating Mission Vande Bharat—has tweeted something which should evoke interest in the finance ministry and the Reserve Bank of India. Bhattacharyya, who has served as ambassador in countries such as Turkey and Egypt, looked at one of the major positives of the Covid-19 crisis—India's foreign exchange reserves hitting the \$500 billion mark. In early January, it was \$461 billion.

Bhattacharyya wonders whether this is "too high" and feels it is time to reconsider the optimal reserve level, and capitalise the excess. Ever since foreign reserves started growing after the economic reforms of 1991, there has been questions whether these funds should sit idle with the Reserve Bank or can be used to meet government expenditure. Successive finance ministers have considered using it, but Reserve Bank governors and economists have consistently argued against tinkering with the funds. They said that the reserves are a hedge against currency manipulation and sudden surge in imports, while being a morale booster to attract both long-term and short-term investment.

There were also suggestions that the reserves should be used to pay off the huge foreign debts. But, it has been pointed out that these loans, procured at low interest rates with long repayment periods, need not be paid in a hurry, even though there is a substantial interest burden on the budget every year. Economists argue that the country has a huge import bill due to the dependence on oil imports and needs to maintain a more than adequate reserve, especially if there is a sharp drop in exports like during the pandemic.

But cashing even 20 per cent of the reserves would release ₹6.5 lakh crore to meet the ever growing hunger of the Central and state governments. In 2018, the Narendra Modi government asked the Reserve Bank to transfer more than ₹3 lakh crore of its reserves. The Central bank's governors Raghuram Rajan and Urjit Patel had resisted the idea, but it happened after a committee led by former governor Bimal Jalan studied the surplus and made a detailed recommendation. The money went into the consolidated fund, helping the government to reduce the fiscal deficit.

The finance ministry is happy that the flow of foreign institutional investments (FII) into the stock and other markets has not suffered because of the global economic crisis; India is still considered a reasonable country to invest in. The government is also anticipating that the reforms announced as part of the ₹20 lakh crore economic stimulus package, like

opening up defence, space, agriculture, coal and mining for foreign investments, would fetch more long-term foreign direct investment. FDI is less prone to be withdrawn compared with FII which come into the markets. The information technology ministry is also expecting a ₹1 lakh crore investment into the electronics industry under the new scheme approved by the cabinet to go for self reliance in the hardware sector.

But there are economists who point out that the reserves may not stay at \$500 billion, as payments are released towards pending import bills and imports shoot up post the current crisis. Thus they want to look at the actual position of balance of payments between imports and exports before any move is made to use even a small portion of the foreign exchange reserves. However, if the economic slowdown persists longer, Bhattacharyya's suggestion may merit urgent consideration by a government in dire need of funds.



ILLUSTRATION BHASKARAN

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CHAMBER OF STATUES

During a recent hearing by video-conference, Chief Justice of India, S.A. Bobde, was intrigued by the many statues he saw in the backdrop when former attorney general Mukul Rohatgi appeared online. “Are you sitting in a museum?” he asked Rohatgi, who replied that he had shifted to his farmhouse so that he could swim twice a day. As Rohatgi began to argue, his voice boomed and echoed, prompting Bobde to remark that he should spend on a good sound system rather than on artefacts. The next day, Rohatgi changed the orientation of the camera to shut out the artefacts from view.

HACK ON HYPOCRISY

Telangana’s ruling party is facing multifront criticism regarding the two-facedness in some of its Covid-19 measures. Recently, three legislators of the Telangana Rashtra Samiti tested positive for Covid-19. News spread that two of them got admitted in a private hospital. Since the state government had been promoting state-run hospitals for Covid-19 care, netizens sought to know why the politicians were admitted in a corporate hospital.

The government’s official stance is not to test any asymptomatic patients. Recently, a member of the Hyderabad mayor’s staff—who also belongs to the ruling party—had tested positive for Covid-19. Subsequently, the mayor’s samples were also taken for testing, though he had no symptoms. This, too, brought the fury of netizens on the government.

SECRETARIAL SCAPEGOATS

The list of health secretaries being replaced in the middle of the current pandemic has only been growing. Bihar, Uttarakhand and West Bengal had shunted their health secretaries out, and the latest to get the axe is Beela Rajesh, who was helming Tamil Nadu’s Covid-19 response. Rajesh has been replaced with J. Radhakrishnan, who was in-charge of the health ministry for six years before Rajesh took over last year. Radhakrishnan is known to be an able administrator. However, public health experts in the state say that Rajesh’s leadership, especially her role in establishing laboratories, has been commendable, too.

CLASSY ACT

Amid Covid-19-induced lockdown, former Karnataka MLA, Y.S.V. Datta of the Janata Dal (Secular), decided to do what he knows best—teaching. As soon as the state government announced the dates for the Class 10 exams, Datta, who had a teaching career spanning across four decades, started revision classes for students, in mathematics and physics, via Facebook Live.

Datta’s thoughtful gesture has earned praise from both the students and parents, and the daily session of an hour, has at times crossed 7.2 lakh views on Facebook.



SYSTEM UPDATE PENDING

BJP national president J.P. Nadda has completed six months in his new assignment, yet everyone is keenly waiting for him to appoint his new team of office-bearers. His predecessor, Amit Shah, had adopted a conservative approach; he did not make any drastic changes in the team he had got. Nadda is expected to induct some fresh faces soon to give more state leaders a chance to work at the national level. Apparently, Nadda is continuing his massive exercise of engaging with leaders and cadres from all states.

ROOT CAUSE IDENTIFIED

Many reasons are being cited as to why the BJP continues to struggle to make a mark in Kerala. Some attribute it to the high percentage of minority population in the state, and some to the presence of communists. But there are some within the BJP who think that the root cause is the “*vaastu dosha* [architectural defect]” of its party headquarters. The state unit had been functioning from a rented building for the last few years as the construction of the state headquarters was being delayed. But with the *vaastu* of the building coming under suspicion, the state unit has decided to shift to yet another rented building in the state capital. With this change, the party hopes to deliver a stellar performance in the next assembly elections, which is to happen within a year.



ILLUSTRATIONS JAIRAJ T.G.



IN SAFE HANDS
Indian forces evacuating residents of Dardpora in Uri, Jammu and Kashmir, after an unexploded shell was found there

Costs of escalation

Buoyed by the Chinese aggression in Ladakh, Pakistan steps up infiltration and cross-border attacks to stymie India's ruthless pursuit of militants during lockdown

BY TARIQ BHAT

WHEN ARTICLE 370 was revoked last August, a strict lockdown and communication blackout was imposed all over Jammu and Kashmir to prevent any backlash against the move. Operations against militants were also suspended. In contrast, after lockdown was imposed early this year to tackle the Covid-19 pandemic, 59 militants were gunned down by security forces. Those killed include senior commanders of the Hizbul

Mujahideen like Riyaz Naikoo and Junaid Sherri, Lashkar-e-Taiba commander Haider, Jaish-e-Muhammad commander Qari Yasir and Burhan Koka, commander of Ansar Ghazwat-ul-Hind (AGH), an Al Qaeda affiliate in Kashmir.

Such has been the pace of anti-militancy operations during the lockdown that 23 militants were killed in the first 24 days of April. Meanwhile, 15 civilians and 20 security personnel

lost their lives in encounters, targeted killings by militants and shelling by Pakistan this year till June 15. Since February, a new militant group called The Resistance Front (TRF) has been quite active in Kashmir. Security forces say TRF is LeT in disguise and has been formed to mislead the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), which has threatened to blacklist Pakistan for supporting terrorism. According to Kashmir inspector-general of police

Vijay Kumar, TRF has members from the LeT and the Hizbul Mujahideen. He said the hunt for Naikoo, who was Hizb's chief operations commander, was intensified after security forces suffered setbacks in north Kashmir.

Naikoo and aide Adil were killed on May 6 at Beighpora in Pulwama, within hours of another encounter at Handwara in which a colonel, a major, two soldiers and a police sub-inspector were killed. Kumar said the police were on Naikoo's trail for six months and managed to bust six of his hideouts before tracking him down to Beighpora. "We interrogated some of his over ground workers (OGWs) and got important information about him," he said.

Security experts believe that Naikoo, a former mathematics teacher, was more of a strategist than a hardcore militant. He led the Hizb well after Musa, who replaced Burhan

Wani, then parted ways with the group and joined AGH. He wooed recruits and used social media to good effect. Kumar said Naikoo's killing was a big jolt to militancy in Kashmir.

Once the lockdown began, the police stopped handing over the bodies of local militants for burial. Such burials attract huge crowds and motivate young men to take up militancy. Like foreign militants, local militants, too, are now buried at places like Sonamarg and Baramulla, where only family members are allowed. According to police sources, the order not to hand over the bodies came from the Union home ministry. The matter had first come up for discussion in 2018, but no decision was taken because of opposition from the state government.

The Centre also slipped in the new domicile law just five days into the lockdown, granting domicile status to anybody who has served in Jammu and Kashmir for ten years or lived there for 15 years. It also confers domicile status to those who have studied in Jammu and Kashmir for seven years and passed their class X/XII examinations from any institution in the Union territory. Political parties in Kashmir have questioned the timing of the new law and have accused the BJP of using it to engineer a demographic change.

While security forces have been relentlessly pursuing militants in Kashmir, Chinese incursion in Ladakh has led to increased attempts of infiltration along the LoC and the international border. Pakistan has also increased shelling on the LoC. On June 1, the Army foiled a major infiltration bid in the Naushera sector in Rajouri, killing three militants and seizing weapons and a large quantity of ammunition. Two days later, Pakistan violated ceasefire in the Sunderbani sector, killing a soldier and injuring two others.

On June 7, Pakistan targeted the

Keran sector. Three days later, a soldier was killed at Rajouri after Pakistan violated ceasefire once again. The next provocation came in the Uri sector where a woman was killed and two other civilians were injured in intense shelling on June 12. Two days later, a soldier was killed and two others were injured in the Poonch sector.

Increased attacks by Pakistan have come in the wake of Pakistan Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Quraishi's statement that "China cannot ignore India's illegal construction in Ladakh". He said if India attacked Pakistan again, the world should not expect restraint from Pakistan like it showed in February 2019. Security experts in Kashmir see a nexus between Chinese incursion and Pakistan's aggression on the LoC. They believe that Pakistan is trying to exploit the situation at a time when India is trying to avoid a confrontation with China. What lends credence to the China-Pakistan military nexus against India is a tweet by Chinese diplomat Wang Xianfeng saying the standoff between India and China in Ladakh was linked to New Delhi's decision to scrap Jammu and Kashmir's special status last year.

Wang's statement has come as a shot in the arm for separatists and their supporters in Kashmir. The visit of Pakistan army chief Qamar Bajwa to Gilgit-Baltistan on Eid is yet another indication of China and Pakistan ganging up against India. The Pakistanis are delighted about the Chinese move in Ladakh, which has come at a time when New Delhi had openly pledged to reclaim Pakistan-occupied Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan and started issuing weather updates for the region. Given the Chinese intransigence in Ladakh, the possibility of infiltration of militants into Kashmir and further heating up of the LoC cannot be ruled out. **●**

Online onslaught

The Congress has used the lockdown to strengthen its social media campaign and is trying to beat the BJP at its own game

BY SRAVANI SARKAR

THE MADHYA PRADESH BJP had hoped to take social media by storm on the afternoon of June 10; Union Transport Minister Nitin Gadkari was to feature in the state's first virtual rally. The aim was to not only publicise the achievements of the Modi government in its sixth year, but also to use the rally as a soft launchpad for campaign mode. The state will soon see crucial byelections to 24 assembly seats.

However, just before the rally could begin, a June 8 clip—purportedly of Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan addressing BJP workers in one of the constituencies up for election—went viral. “The (BJP) central leadership decided that the (Congress) government should fall. And was it possible to fell the government without Jyotiraditya Scindia *ji* and Tulsi *bhai* (Tulsiram Silawat, former MLA of Sanwer)?” he asked in the clip.

Hundreds of Congress-supporting accounts had posted the clip, claiming that Chouhan had openly admitted to the conspiracy to dislodge the Congress government. The clip drowned out the Gadkari rally.

Scores of memes and slogans surfaced, and #BJPloktantrapedaaghai (BJP is a stain on democracy) was soon the number one trend—it was featured in more than 52,000 unique tweets and reached 90 million users, claimed the state Congress social media and IT department.

Before the furore had died down, another clip popped up. It allegedly featured a female Congress worker from Ashoknagar district talking to Jyotiraditya Scindia on phone, claiming that she had paid ₹50 lakh to one of his staffers for an assembly ticket for her daughter-in-law.

Then came the third audio clip, allegedly of Scindia supporter and former minister Imarti Devi, who is heard threatening a worker for tell-

ing her that she was losing support among people in her constituency. Yet another clip appeared, in which a policeman claimed that Scindia was getting him posted in Lahar, the constituency of former Congress minister Govind Singh, allegedly to cause Singh discomfort. The policeman was later suspended.

Said political commentator and avid social media user Shams Ur Rehman Alavi: “During these past three months, the party (Congress) has surely sharpened its strategy, managing to impact the public perception regarding the role of the BJP in dislodging its government, [in] probably allowing Covid-19 to spread due to this reason and [in] the consequent failure to prevent the pandemic from exploding in the state and elsewhere.”

Also, the Congress seems to have foiled Scindia's attempts to portray himself as someone the party neglected, by painting him and his supporters as betrayers who flipped for money, added Alavi.

Political observer Manish Dixit agreed that the Congress looked far sharper online compared with the BJP, which usually has the edge on social media. “The Congress has [also] taken up issues that directly concern the common people—inflated electricity bills, problems faced by farmers, students forced to appear for exams amid a pandemic, the rising crime rate and so on,” he said. “They managed to generate interesting hashtags like ‘Shivraj *atta chor hai*’ (Shivraj is a wheat-flour thief) and coin terms like ‘Bikaulal’ (one who is sold), which have been a hit with the people.”

Dixit said that, at a time when

there is no physical connect with the voter, the Congress has definitely stolen a march on the BJP in the on-line world. “This constant campaign can definitely have an impact on the voters' mind, although only a section of them are on social media,” he said.

However, Abhay Tiwari, the key man behind the Congress's online strategy, said that his party would definitely win more than 19 of the 24 seats. “We noticed during the political turmoil in March that social media users were leaning towards the Congress's stand that dislodging the government was a BJP conspiracy and that huge money was involved in it,” the chief of the state Congress IT department told THE WEEK. “So, we decided to use that momentum and sharpened our attack. We coined terms like ‘Jaichand’ (a historical figure said to have betrayed Prithviraj Chauhan against invader Muhammad Ghori), ‘Bikaulal’, ‘Shri-ant’ (Mr End; Scindia is commonly called ‘Shrimant’) and ‘Panauti’ (bad omen, for Chouhan), and also convinced people that the ex-MLAs had taken ₹35 crore each for the deal.”

The Congress also conducted online polls to gauge the public mood, and even pitted BJP supporters against each other. “For example, we asked who the ‘Panauti’ was and we found BJP supporters voting on the Scindia option and Scindia supporters voting on the Chouhan option,” said Tiwari.

“For the past three months, we have been gaining 3,000 followers a day on Twitter (@INCMP had 653k followers as on June 15) and we have surpassed the BJP handle (@BJP4MP had 561k followers),” he added. “During the past two years, we gained five lakh followers; the BJP managed just one lakh. Also, among the Congress state units, we have the most Twitter followers.”

The party has posted a WhatsApp

coordinator in 58,000 of 63,000 polling booths in the state; these coordinators spread content on non-political groups. Also, the party has a Facebook page and a Twitter handle for each of the 230 assembly constituencies. The Youth Congress and the National Students' Union of India are an important part of the online strategy.

Senior Congress leaders have also been active on social media. “Kamal Nath *ji* monitors the social media campaign daily,” said Tiwari. Others involved in strategy making and guidance, said sources, include state Congress media cell chairman Jitu Patwari, former minister Sajjan Singh Verma and former assembly speaker N.P. Prajapati.

Akshay Hunka, a Congress member who is working to bring together a ‘Twitter activist team’ from among party supporters, said people were organically sharing his tweets on this effort. “This shows people's inclination to become part of a campaign that seeks to bring out the truth of the BJP's games,” he said.

For his part, Shivraj Dabi, the coordinator of the IT department of the Madhya Pradesh BJP, said there could not be comparisons because the ruling party will always focus on its achievements and future plans, while the opposition will try to find faults. “The Congress campaign is simply focused on distracting people from real issues and thrives on fake information,” he said. “We want to create awareness among people, tell them about welfare schemes and help them. The Congress might be getting a little more visibility because of its irrelevant and false attacks. We do not want to lend credence to everything they say by responding to them. Only when it is about big leaders or sensitive matters do we clarify the situation with facts and figures.”

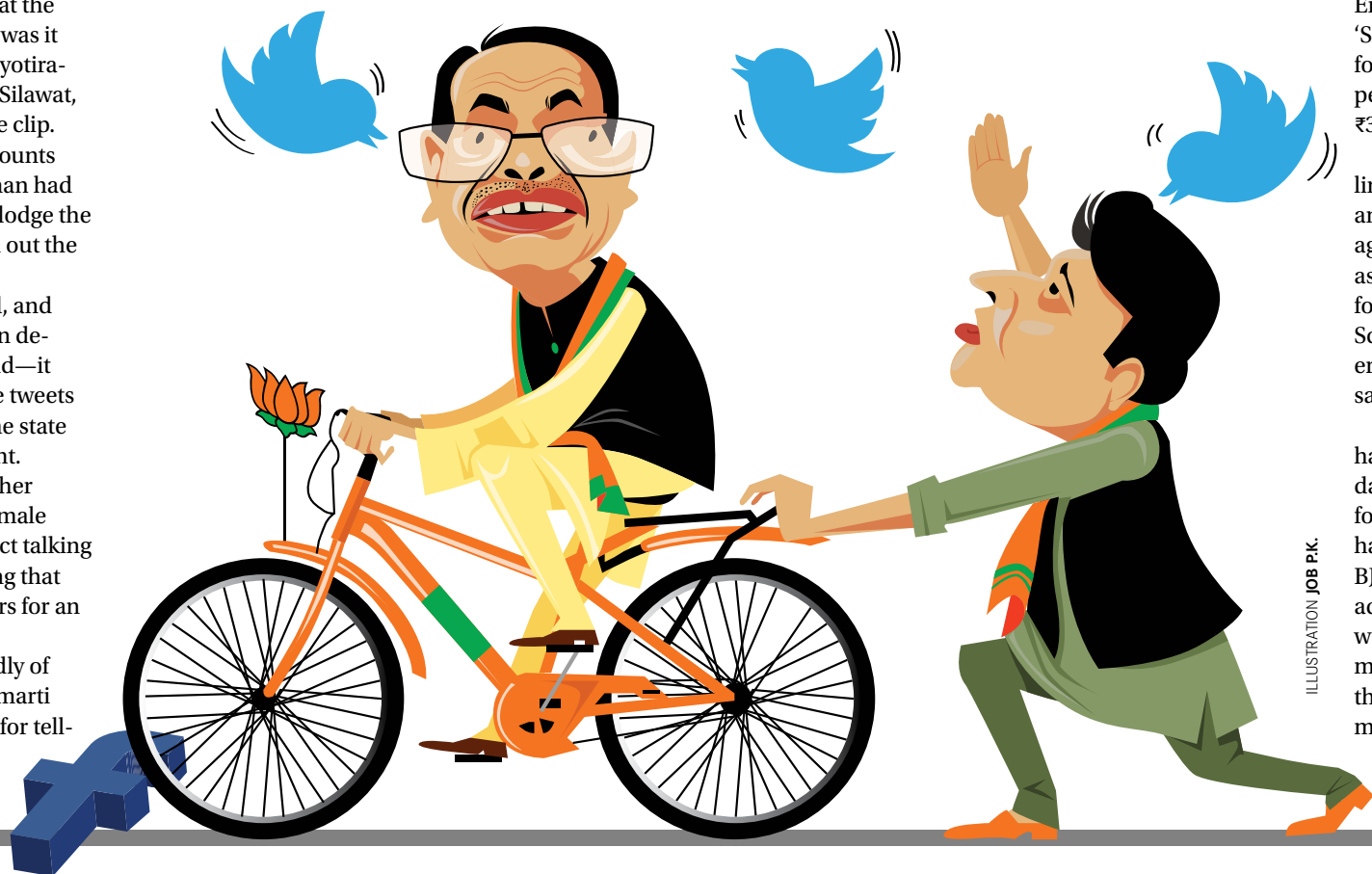


ILLUSTRATION JOB P.K.

CHANGE OF
GUARD

New Karnataka Congress chief D.K. Shivakumar being welcomed by his supporters in Bengaluru

Troubleshooter on the throne

Karnataka Congress is regrouping under D.K. Shivakumar and the Covid-19 crisis gives it a chance to win back the people

BY PRATHIMA NANDAKUMAR

THE KARNATAKA CONGRESS

seems to be taking a leaf out of the RSS-BJP playbook for its revival. The state unit is gearing up for a transformation into a “cadre-based party” with focus on empowering the booth worker and strengthening booths.

The party hopes to channel the power of social media by appointing a booth-level social media-in-charge and by using technology to gather traction among the youth.

Riddled with electoral debacles, factional feuds, mass defections, a

waning support base and a demoralised cadre, the story of the Congress in Karnataka was no different from that in most of the rest of India. But the sudden change of guard on March 11, when Congress president Sonia Gandhi appointed D.K. Shiva-

kumar as the new state president, has brought hopes of a revival.

Shivakumar, the party’s troubleshooter, is expected to take charge during “Pratijna Dina”—the official swearing in ceremony that will be livestreamed across 7,800 locations, including the district and block Congress offices in the state. The date of the event has not been confirmed, yet. But, it is expected to mark a new start for the Congress as a tech-savvy party and highlight Shivakumar’s focus on the cadre.

Shivakumar has already visited senior leaders to emphasise that the party believes in collective leadership. The factional feuds between the “original” Congressmen and the “outsiders” (identified with former chief minister Siddaramaiah

who joined the party in 2007), had triggered the collapse of the Janata Dal (Secular)-Congress coalition government in July 2019.

After losing power, the Karnataka Pradesh Congress Committee had fallen into total disarray. Following the December 2019 bypolls, when the Congress won only two out of 15 seats, Dinesh Gundu Rao resigned as state chief. But the party high command desisted from naming Rao’s successor fearing a backlash from the overlooked faction.

Now, as Shivakumar has the top post, the rival faction got three working presidents—Eshwar Khandre (Lingayat), Satish Jarkiholi (scheduled tribe; Valmiki) and Saleem Ahmed—reportedly to balance the demographic equation. But insiders felt that it was an effort to rein in Shivakumar. The new state chief is focused on uniting the party and bringing it to power. “Rest of the things can wait,” he said.

Senior Congress leader V.R. Sudarshan said that Shivakumar understood the need to listen to the party worker. “This is a competitive era and all parties are wooing new voters and the youth,” he said. “If the booths are empowered, pro-active and pro-people, it will appeal to the youth. It is the committed booth worker who needs to be valued to strengthen the party as he is also the voice of the people, the voters.”

The exodus of Congress leaders has meant losing experienced hands who wield immense political clout in their constituencies. Moreover, the exit of a leader also translates to losing his supporters—grassroots workers for the party. So, bringing back at least some of the turncoats is also part of the expansion plans. However, a committee has been set up to decide on who gets to join.

Any leader hoping to return to the party or new entrants who wish to join it will have to go through the screening committee, headed by

MLC and former KPCC president Al-lam Veerabhadrappe. This panel will consult the block level and district level units to avoid infighting and groupism. “The party will not impose a leader on the cadre, but arrive at a consensus to induct a leader into its fold,” says Sudarshan.

The mantra under the new leadership is “perform or perish”. Insiders hinted that the revamping of the state and district units would see new faces, too. All 68 Congress MLAs in the 224-member assembly would be held responsible for strengthening the booth level committees in their constituencies. MLCs will handle two constituencies, and anyone aspiring for a party post should have booth-level experience.

Karnataka has seen the majority community lean right in recent years. Though the Congress managed to hold on to a lot of the Ahinda (Kannada term for minorities, dalits and backward classes) votes, the BJP split the votes of the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes and added it to a Hindu vote bank. Chief Minister B.S. Yediyurappa has the support of the Lingayats, who hold sway in over 100 northern constituencies.

In the Old Mysuru region, the politically influential Vokkaliga community continues to patronise the JD(S), though Shivakumar, too, belongs to the same community. But,

Shivakumar said that he never believed in communal or caste-based politics. “The broad-basing of the party will happen by grooming local leadership and by creating equal opportunities for all,” he said.

The Congress will plan its expansion without sacrificing its inclusive ideologies, said Sudarshan. Soon after the swearing-in, Shivakumar plans to tour the state to “listen” to the people suffering because of Covid-19. “The party will ensure that people get what has been promised to them by the Yediyurappa government,” he said. ■

■ EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW



D.K. Shivakumar,
president, Karnataka Pradesh Congress Committee

Modi government has no eyes, ears or heart

BY PRATHIMA NANDAKUMAR

IN AN EXCLUSIVE interview with THE WEEK, Karnataka Congress president D.K. Shivakumar shares his plan to strengthen the party in time for the 2023 assembly elections and talks about the response of the Centre and the state government to Covid-19. Excerpts:

Q/What is top on the agenda to revive the party?

A/My first agenda is to convert Karnataka Congress from a mass-based party to a cadre-based party. We will transform into a party that values the party worker and involves him in every decision as he is the voice of the common man. The voice of the party worker should be the voice of the party, too. I do not want to impose my ideas and decisions as I want people to hear the voice of the ordinary party worker.

Q/The Congress's organisational structure at booth-level has weakened. How will a cadre-based party shape up?

A/I believe there already is a structure and presence of our workers in every booth. But we need to connect to them. We are working on identifying and grooming the local workers into leaders. There is

a disconnect and that is the reason why Rahul Gandhi called for a programme—"Shakti"—to connect every party worker to the leadership.

Q/How do you plan to fill the vacuum left by senior leaders who left the party?

A/Besides the leaders, I want their supporters also to return. We have constituted a screening committee to examine requests from leaders inclined to join the Congress. The panel's recommendation will be based on the feedback it gets from the local leaders and party workers.

Q/How do you rate the Covid-19 response of the Centre and the state government?

A/The Modi and the Yeddiyurapa governments have no eyes, ears or hearts. It is clear from their Covid-19 response. The Centre announced a ₹20 lakh crore package and the state government announced a ₹1,680 crore package. But are benefits reaching the people? The food kits given during the crisis was part of the common minimum programme started by the UPA. We saw the food kits meant for migrants being distributed among the BJP supporters and voters. They put photos of BJP

leaders on the packets. If the migrants had got food kits and money, they would have stayed back in Karnataka. The Congress extended all support to the ruling party during the Covid-19 crisis. But we were assertive and aggressive when we realised the people were suffering.

Q/During the migrants crisis, the Congress was accused of playing politics as it staged a dharna and offered to pay the bus fare for migrants. Comments.

A/The Congress party is worried about the migrant workers as they are the sole bread winners of their families. It is a fact that though they stay away from their homes, they have the power to influence their people back home. They tell their people who to vote for, or which party is good or bad. The IT guy, the government employee, the rich man, the poor man, each has a single vote. So, everyone is equal. We must listen and respond to every individual voice.

Q/How will you ensure that the people get what is promised in the packages?

A/They have put in many rules and regulations in place to claim the benefits. This is not practical. The government wants to discourage people from availing the benefits. The barber or the washerman needs to access an app and fill in his information to avail the benefit. Is it not a joke? There are better ways to do it. The village officers can get the details and photograph of everyone eligible for benefits with just a mobile phone, and disburse the benefit (money) on the spot. You can authorise the tehsildar to sign the cheque. We want to ensure that the packages do not remain as announcements.

To read the full interview

Visit www.theweek.in



FORTHWRITE

MEENAKSHI LEKHI



Support from agriculture

The Union government is eyeing the positive growth in the agricultural sector to revive the Covid-19-battered economy. The agricultural sector accounts for almost 16.5 per cent of our GDP. Farmers, as a community, have kept the agricultural engine running. They have quietly harvested wheat, the main rabi crop, in north and central India, and even managed to notch up early kharif planting, topping last year's figures. This can also be owed to the fact that the government had exempted farmers from the lockdown.

The year 2019-2020 saw India's agricultural sector grow by 11.3 per cent. According to NITI Aayog, this is the first time since 1980-1981, when farm sector growth has exceeded that of non-farm by such a wide margin. That farming activity has been relatively unaffected is also captured by the fact that retail fertiliser sales rose 45 per cent year-on-year in April.

In the 2020 Union budget, the Union finance minister had said that steps would be taken to replicate zero-budget farming—that promotes use of locally available cow dung, cow urine, pulse flour and jaggery instead of chemical fertilisers and pesticides—in all of India, taking cue from a few states that practice it. Union government has also introduced appropriate new laws or amended old ones to firmly integrate farm markets across the country.

We are moving towards stepping up our game to increase the export of agricultural produce as well as aquaculture to a level where we compete with global players like the United States, the Netherlands and China. We have the resources, but the major issue with Indian agricultural market is that it is fragmented. Every state has its own laws when it comes to sales of produce. The Narendra Modi government is trying to facilitate better coordination between states. Our farmers and supply chains are reorganising themselves to address a global

market under the aegis of the Agriculture Export Policy, 2018. Commodity-specific administration bodies can be set up; promotion of agriculture clusters as well as contract farming will boost exports. Demand for basic agricultural produce in domestic market—arising from Covid-19-induced closure of lakhs of eateries—has decreased, and will not rise to pre-Covid-19 levels for at least a year. The extra produce can be exported.

A strong performance in agricultural exports would mean better price realisation for farmers, increased awareness regarding good agricultural practices and consequently greater trust on quality.

The different government agencies need to work in a coordinated manner to improve the quality of the entire food supply chain. While reforms in Agriculture and Produce Market Committee and contract farming may address long-standing concerns about farmers getting fair prices, a systematic initiative to address the logistics issues will make our agricultural exports hassle-free and more competitive. Developing the right kind

of sea protocol for perishables is crucial to increasing exports. Better coordination between exporters and government bodies is required. Agencies like the Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority and the Marine Products Exports Development Authority, which pursue market access request for India's agricultural and aquaculture products, should be better-equipped.

We need an aggressive approach in promoting Indian produce like basmati rice, ethnic and organic foods, herbs, millets and bamboo products to grab a larger market share in countries where these products have large demand.

India has primarily been identified as an agricultural country. It is no wonder that in a pandemic-hit period, our roots will support to push the economy forward.



ILLUSTRATION BHASKARAN

Lekhi is member of Parliament • forthwriteml@gmail.com

Needle in a haystack

As the hunt for a Covid-19 vaccine gathers momentum, the complexities involved pose many challenges to the researchers

BY NAMITA KOHLI

AS THE WORLD eagerly awaits a vaccine for SARS-CoV-2, those who are developing the shot face several challenges in making a safe and effective product in a short time. According to the World Health Organization's draft landscape for Covid-19 vaccines, there are 133 candidates at different stages of development. Ten of these are in the clinical evaluation stage, while 123 are in pre-clinical stages. The Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations, the global body that is funding vaccine candidates, lists 224 candidates across the globe that are being worked on using diverse technologies. The sheer numbers, and the different technologies being used, mean that the chances of a successful candidate are high, say experts.

Here is the bitter truth, though. Experts also concede that given the complexities involved in building a vaccine, a majority of these candidates are bound to fail—one would be lucky if a couple of them succeeded. In India, some 30 groups are working on a vaccine; only two or three look promising, said some top government officials.

Typically a vaccine takes 10-15 years to reach the market, and the process involves several stages where

animals and humans are tested in large numbers to ensure that the shot is safe, it induces the right immune response and has a protective effect against the disease in a healthy person. But with Covid-19 spreading fast, researchers do not have the luxury of time. "To determine the efficacy of a vaccine, you need to test it on large numbers of healthy people who have not been exposed to the virus, or live in areas where few have been infected. In a pandemic where the disease footprint is increasing rapidly with time, such a population is hard to find," said Dr Vineeta Bal, immunologist and visiting faculty at the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research, Pune.

Before the human trials begin, researchers test vaccines on animal models. The traditional mouse model is not the most appropriate one for SARS-CoV-2, and alternative models such as cats, ferrets and monkeys were being tried for the testing, said Bal.

Since this is a new virus for which specific animal models cannot be designed given the short window, researchers are testing with available models. "We are using rodents for the initial animal testing," said Dr Prabuddha Kundu, co-founder

of Manesar-based Premas Biotech. "The questions we are asking are, one, is the vaccine safe? Two, does it generate antibody response? The next step would then be to test if the antibody is protective against the disease."

Researchers at Oxford University recently tested their vaccine candidate in monkeys, and the results showed that the animals were not protected against the virus, but they did not develop pneumonia. In China, too, researchers testing a vaccine candidate found that monkeys did

not develop severe disease.

Primate studies cannot be a replacement for human trials, and were typically done to complement data gathered in humans, said Dr Gagandeep Kang, director, Translational Health Science and Technology Institute, an autonomous body under the Department of Biotechnology. She was speaking at a discussion organised by the Indian Scientists' Response to Covid-19, a voluntary group of scientists.

"Primate models are not particularly great for SARS-CoV-2," she said.

"Therefore, the only option we have is to generate data in humans, which follow the phase 1, phase 2, phase 3 route," she said. In these three phases, researchers start with a small group of people whom they test it on, and then increase the number, with phase 3 trials involving large numbers of people. In normal times, each of these phases take a lot of time, as each phase requires approval and people given the vaccine are followed up for a long time. Kang said that in case a rescue treatment was available, researchers might

consider human challenge studies—where vaccinated people are challenged with the disease to test its efficacy—but these studies were still not considered equivalent to phase 3 trials. "If we do get to the point of human challenge studies, that might speed up our ability to develop new vaccines, and could lead to us discarding a lot of candidates that are likely to fail in phase 3," she said.

Finding a large number of people for phase 3 efficacy trials is not easy not only because the population should not have been exposed to



REUTERS



SANJAY AHLAWAT

the infection, but also because the cohort design has to be well thought out for the trials. “For instance, pregnant women and elderly people are a high risk population, to be part of such a cohort. So, for those who are going to do such studies, picking healthy people for the trial will be a huge issue,” said Kundu.

In India, however, there is access to only a limited number of animal models. Ferrets, which are widely used to study respiratory diseases, are currently not available in the country, said Raghavan Varadarajan, professor at Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru, and cofounder of Mynvax, which is developing a vaccine candidate against SARS-CoV-2. Also, India does not have a non-human primate facility where viral challenge experiments can be conducted. Since it is difficult to get permission to euthanise non-human primates at the conclusion of study, carrying out vaccine studies with large numbers of animals has become difficult from a logistical point of view for the facility, said Varadarajan.

Fortunately, hamsters are emerging as a convenient animal model for SARS-CoV-2. At the moment, for



You need to test it (a vaccine) on large numbers of healthy people who have not been exposed to the virus. In a pandemic, such a population is hard to find.

—Dr Vineeta Bal, immunologist

the IISc-Mynvax candidates that are in early stages of development, a number of spike protein derivatives have been designed, characterised and tested in mice and guinea pigs with some promising initial results, Varadarajan said. The design which shows the best results in animals will be advanced to process development, safety, toxicity and subsequent clinical testing.

Varadarajan said the true efficacy of the vaccine would only be established after post-marketing surveillance was done. “But since this is a difficult situation, researchers might

target partial efficacy, or look for surrogate markers of immunity,” he said. Usually researchers measure the level of neutralising antibodies to determine vaccine efficacy.

Besides, there is the complex interaction of antibodies. In respiratory viruses and dengue virus, for instance, it has been found that the antibodies that develop in response to the disease enhance the entry of the virus, and in some cases, the replication of the virus. This phenomenon is called antibody dependant enhancement (ADE), said Bal.

The ADE mechanism hampers vaccine development because the neutralising antibodies produced by the vaccine are insufficient to prevent this from happening. This was seen in SARS-CoV-2 in vitro (outside a living organism), but it is not known whether the same would show up in vivo (inside a living organism).

Even as complex questions of antibody response in animals and humans are being worked on, having a vaccine ready does not mean that everyone will have it. There are issues of scaling up. Varadarajan, for instance, pointed out that mRNA vaccines, such as the one the American biotech company Moderna was making, were difficult to manufacture in bulk. “For India, where routine immunisation is a challenge and public health cadres are not available, how will we deliver the vaccine to everyone?” asked Bal. Besides, she said, decisions would have to be made on what kind of vulnerable populations would be given the vaccine.

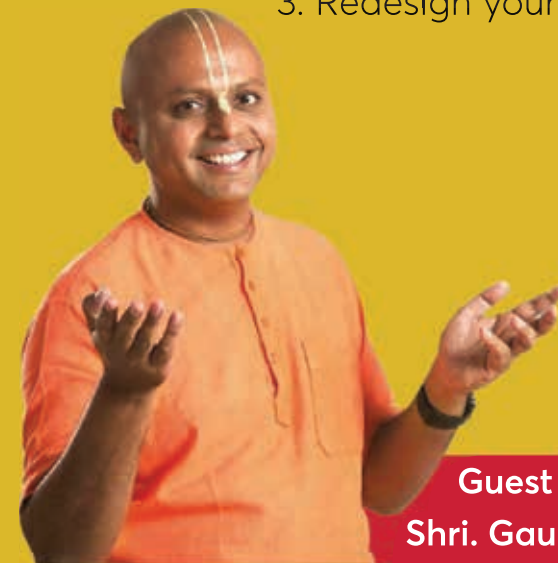
“The vaccine has to be safe, effective, scalable and cost-effective,” said Kundu. “In a situation such as the current pandemic, where things are being rushed through—take the case of Hydroxychloroquine, where the narrative has constantly been changing—it tells us that many of these complex questions need time to be solved. And responses may not always be right in the first instance. ☐

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HARD TIMES
Hirra Azmat with
her grandmother
Hajra Begum

Death, by other means

Non-Covid-19 patients have been largely neglected amid the scramble to contain the pandemic

BY MINI P. THOMAS

HIRRA AZMAT from Srinagar has had a hard time making her grandmother, Hajra Begum, understand social distancing. “She can’t come to terms with this new form of imprisonment called quarantine,” said 26-year-old Azmat. Begum, 80, gets so annoyed that she even threatens to retaliate. “Nani suffers from dementia and heart blockage,” said Azmat. “She missed her monthly follow-ups. Her body aches have increased and she needs a change of medication for symptomatic relief.”

Getting care for non-Covid-19 ailments has been a nightmare in India

in the last three months. With the focus on tackling Covid-19, the rising burden of non-communicable diseases is being neglected. Those with acute and life-threatening problems like snake bites and pneumonia also find it difficult to get treated.

At All India Institute of Medical Sciences, the OPDs remain closed. “Even now, they are not planning to open the OPDs,” said a senior AIIMS doctor who wished to remain anonymous. “So, no new patient can come in. Even the old ones cannot come. If liquor shops and malls can be opened, why not OPDs?” Current-

ly, only trauma and cancer surgeries are being done in the hospital, and chemotherapy and radiotherapy are not being offered to all patients, said the doctor. A 200-bed trauma centre in AIIMS has been converted into a Covid-19 hospital. “Nowhere in the world has a tertiary centre been converted into a Covid-19 hospital. It just shows how rotten our health care system is,” he said.

As arrangements were not made for existing patients in hospitals that were converted to Covid-19 centres, the health care system took a hit. Kamal Shah, cofounder and director

of guest services at the dialysis care provider NephroPlus in Hyderabad, said: “They don’t take into account what happens to the dialysis patients. Where will they go?” Shah, 44, has been on dialysis for 23 years. “We have figured out alternatives in some cases but those centres are farther off than their regular centres,” he said. “Because of this, some of our patients could not get to the dialysis centre and they died.” The health system has turned a blind eye to such deaths and they seem to be less significant than the Covid-19 deaths.

Dr Yogesh Jain, cofounder of the Jan Swasthya Sahyog, which offers highly subsidised health care services to villages in Chhattisgarh, says it is important to have specific non-Covid-19 hospitals as well. “Maternal and infant deaths are happening because of lack of access to health care. If I want to admit a patient with severe pneumonia, I don’t have a place to send him. If you set aside all your resources for Covid-19 care, where do people go for treatment of communicable diseases?” he said.

In Chhattisgarh, one wing of each district hospital has been converted into a Covid-19 hospital. “Ideally, private hospitals should be made Covid-19 hospitals operating under the government, and a district hospital should be the designated non-Covid-19 hospital,” said Jain.

Shah says that the lack of public transport is a big problem as patients below the poverty line depend on it. But even those with vehicles avoid hospitals if the illness is not life threatening. They see hospitals as vectors of Covid-19 and follow-up visits have declined remarkably in hospitals.

As Hyderabad sees a surge in cases, non-Covid-19 hospitals and clinics are faced with an ethical dilemma. If the hospital accepts a patient without a Covid-19 test, it puts existing patients at risk. But it is hard



We restricted hospital visits to only one mandatory scan and other consultations were done over the phone.

—**Ruchi Dwivedi**, who says technology had been a lifesaver while she was pregnant with daughter Shreya

to get the test done in many places, unless one has strong symptoms.

Many private hospitals in Chhattisgarh have remained closed. “I have no doubt that the deaths and disabilities arising out of the lack of care given to non-Covid-19 problems will be far more than those caused by Covid-19,” said Jain. “Be it TB patients not getting a refill of their medication, women not getting their C-section on time or diabetics who have stopped treatment as the doctor is not available in the OPD... they are going to suffer hugely,” he said.

Puja Bhattacharjee from Kolkata, who suffers from psoriasis and psoriatic arthritis, agrees. “Since last winter, my psoriasis has flared up,

and now, I have large patches on my skin,” said the 32-year-old. “I really need to go to the dermatologist to get medicines. My old medicines are not working anymore.” Bhattacharjee had set an appointment for mid-May, which did not happen. The clinic is closed now and she is making do with the old medicines.

Amid all the chaos, telemedicine has been a boon for some. Unlike Begum, who did not benefit much from it, Bhattacharjee has been able to avail mental health care online. She made an appointment with her psychiatrist through HealthPlix, an app. “I used to go to his clinic before. During the lockdown, we had a video session and he gave me some directions,” she said.

Technology has been a lifesaver for Ruchi Dwivedi too, who was in her final month of pregnancy when the lockdown was announced. “We restricted hospital visits to only one mandatory scan and all other consultations with my gynaecologist were done over the phone,” she said. “Even after the delivery, my visits to the paediatrician were limited to getting vaccines, which were again clubbed together.”

But the lockdown has been a testing time for her mother-in-law, Ajitha S., a rheumatoid arthritis patient, who has been on HCQS 300 for two years. With the increased use of hydroxychloroquine for Covid-19 treatment, the drug is hard to come by in medical stores, even with a prescription. “It was a nightmare as I normally do not hoard medicines,” says Ajitha, 62. “I wish the government had either given us a heads up or made some alternate arrangements.”

“There is a difference between fear and caution,” said the doctor from AIIMS. “The government has instilled fear in the minds of people at the cost of treatment for non-communicable diseases, instead of inducing caution.”

Care and chaos

Chennai will face another intense lockdown from June 19. But that alone will not contain the spread of Covid-19

BY LAKSHMI SUBRAMANIAN

AARTHI RAVIKUMAR (name changed), 46, a staff nurse at the Tamil Nadu Government Multi Super Speciality Hospital, Omandurar Estate, Chennai, is physically and mentally tired. She is currently on a seven-day home quarantine, after having nursed Covid-19 patients for a fortnight. She had become used to seeing at least four deaths a day at the designated Covid-19 facility. “It is a horrible experience,” she said. But Aarthi consoles herself saying that she could save a Covid-19 patient with diabetes, with her timely intervention.

Nursing has become an ordeal these days. “Taking care of patients has always been my love. But my experience in these three months was terrible,” she said. The Omandurar Estate hospital, where she works, has two towers and 14 floors with more than 400 beds for Covid-19 patients. The hospital is one of the biggest government facilities in the state for Covid-19 patients.

Tamil Nadu has more than 46,000 Covid-19 cases; 73 per cent of them

are from Chennai and majority are active. As per data available from the Greater Chennai Corporation, 15,385 people in Chennai are still under treatment for Covid-19, and at least 5,000 of them are in home care (as on June 15).

“The numbers strike a fear,” said Parthasarathy Ranganathan, 56, a resident of West Mambalam in Chennai. “Recently, more than 50 shops in my locality were closed. My neighbour said that a shop owner tested positive for Covid-19. I used to shop from most of the shops which have been closed. I feel no precaution can save Chennai anymore.”

On June 15, the state government announced that Chennai and the neighbouring districts of Tiruvallur, Kancheepuram and Chengalpattu will have an intense lockdown from June 19.

Apparently, it was only on June 12 that Chief Minister Edappadi K. Palaniswami had said that the government had no intention to declare an intense lockdown.

The upcoming lockdown will be for 12 days— including two Sundays, without relaxations. Sources in the Chennai Corporation and the state health department said that during this lockdown, there will be a coordinated effort to collect data of the infected people and to intensify contact tracing. But the 12-day lockdown might not be sufficient to bring down the numbers, say experts. In fact, the medical expert committee wanted a stricter quarantine and increased monitoring and testing in containment zones, instead of a lockdown.

“What can a lockdown achieve when the past five lockdowns have not yielded results as expected?”

asked infectious disease expert Dr Subramanian Swaminathan. “For disrupting transmission [of virus] we need at least three weeks, and these 12 days will not be of any help. It does not make any epidemiological sense.”

Apparently, members of the medical expert committee also said that bringing Chennai under control within a 12-day period is “impossible”. They also pointed out that even if the numbers are brought down as of now, the city might witness a second wave like in China. “The only way out is to encourage hand hygiene and social distancing,” said Dr J. Amalorpavanathan, former director at the Institute of Vascular Surgery, Madras Medical College. He feels that the previous lockdowns did not yield the expected results as the government failed to ramp-up testing.

A study by the Tamil Nadu Dr MGR Medical University in May predicted that the spread and the death rate in the state will see a new peak by July: With loosened lockdown, at least 1,50,244 cases and 1,654 deaths (by July 15); without lockdown, cases up to 2,10,197. The study also predicts a bigger peak in September-October.

“The infectivity rate in Chennai is high,” said Dr S. Poongulali, senior consultant at Voluntary Health Services, Infectious Diseases Medical Centre. “Out of 18,000 people tested daily, at least 2,000 people test positive, which means close to 11 per cent of the cases are positive. Lockdown will not help without increased testing rate and contact tracing. Lockdown cannot be a strategy by itself.”

Dr Jayaprakash Muliyl, former principal at the Christian Medical College, Vellore, however, feels that

Chennai is slowly coming out of the epidemic. “Piece by piece, each cluster is coming to an end, and each containment zone has got herd immunity,” he said.

There is a general notion that the Koyambedu cluster was responsible for the spread of the virus in Chennai. But experts question the source for Covid 19 clusters in the police department, government hospitals and Puzhal Central Prison, and a cluster at Kannagi Nagar slum area.

The high exposure of doctors and nurses at the government hospitals could also not be controlled due to the shortage in man power. According to Aarthi, many staff nurses at the Rajiv Gandhi Government General Hospital (RGGGH) and Omandurar Estate hospital, who had tested positive for Covid-19, have underwent treatment and returned to work. Incidentally, Thanga Lakshmi one of the staff nurses at RGGGH, who had a second exposure, died on June 14.

At Omandurar Estate hospital, 140 nurses work in two batches. At a time, one batch will be in quarantine, while the other batch (split into three groups of 23-24 personnel) works in three shifts. “Just 23 people for 400 patients. Imagine the burden on us,” said Aarthi.

Meanwhile, the government has greenlit a controversial step to increase the man power. On June 14, an advertisement in a Tamil daily said a private firm named Gentleman HR Recruiting Agency is recruiting for the posts of ward boys, lab technicians, radiologists and dialysis experts at the government hospitals. The permission given to the agency for the recruitment was apparently cancelled by the government on June 17, following criticism from the media and the opposition. “The government is working round the clock to serve the people. We are very transparent in handling the pandemic,” said Health Minister Dr C. Vijayabaskar. ●



AFP

SPRAY AND PRAY
A firefighter sprays disinfectant in a containment zone in Chennai

■ Nitin Gadkari, minister of micro, small and medium enterprises; road transport and highways; and shipping

We need to create industrial clusters to decongest cities

BY PRATUL SHARMA



Nitin Gadkari has been a man with a mission amid the Covid-19 crisis. Every day, he holds videoconferences with various stakeholders, listening to their concerns and offering them hope.

The micro, small and medium enterprises (MSME) sector has been the worst-affected by the lockdown. Several measures Gadkari had proposed have become part of the Union government's ₹20 lakh crore economic stimulus package.

Gadkari spoke to THE WEEK on a range of issues—from highways and industrial clusters to politics and China. His mantra in these gloomy times: Be positive and self-confident to emerge victorious. "*Kadam se kadam milakar chalna hoga. Koshish karne waalon ki kabhi haar nahi hoti* (We should march together. Those who try, will not lose)," Gadkari said, reciting lines from a poem written by former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

Excerpts from the interview:

Q/ You are very optimistic in your interactions with industry bodies. Has it rubbed off on the industry?

A/ I have spoken to a lot of people, ranging from those in the entertainment sector and hair salons to restaurant waiters and owners. This is not the first crisis we are facing. Our country has always faced disasters like earthquakes, floods and diseases. There is an urgent need to build positivity and self-confidence in people. If this happens, we will win.

Everyone is facing problems. Some state governments don't have enough funds to pay salaries. The government of India has seen its revenues drop. The banking system is facing challenges. Migrants are facing a jobs crisis.

My first suggestion is that everyone should face this grave problem with self-confidence. The government has given a package amounting to 10 per cent of the GDP—₹20 lakh crore. Still, there may be problems, for which we have opened a website called Champions (champions.gov.in) to redress grievances of MSMEs. Over 50,000 grievances have been addressed.

Q/ You had suggested liquidity of ₹50 lakh crore for the economy. Could you elaborate?

A/ I had said that there is a need to increase liquidity in the market. We have given a package of ₹20 lakh crore. Economists say there will be a ₹10 lakh crore budget deficit in the state and at the Centre. Now, [with] the funds available from the budgets of state governments and the Centre, the current economic

R.S. GOPAN

package, and ₹10 lakh crore from public-private investments, the Indian economy would get a boost of ₹50 lakh crore.

Q/ MSMEs say government departments owe them money, and that there are still problems in getting loans.

A/ Public-sector units and government departments owe some money to MSMEs; a decision was taken that [the money] be released in 45 days. I had also written to chief ministers to release payments that were pending with state departments.

The Reserve Bank of India had issued orders and guidelines for banks to smoothen the [lending] process. If someone still faces an issue, he can go to our new portal, Champions, and register a complaint. We will address it quickly.

Q/ The country witnessed a humanitarian crisis as migrants were forced to leave cities. What should the industry do?

A/ There is an impression that the entire industry is dependent on migrant labour. There are only 10 to 20 per cent migrant [labourers]; [the rest] are local workers. Now, up to 70 per cent of the industry has restarted, and most of the migrants want to return. I suggested that [industrialists] coordinate with district collectors to bring labourers back.

The ideal state is that people need not travel. MSMEs account for 29 per cent of the economy and 48 per cent of exports, and have created 11 crore jobs. The rural industry has a turnover of ₹88,000 crore. We have decided to increase this turnover by involving agro-industry, handloom, khadi, honey and biofuel. We will encourage them to become a ₹5 lakh crore industry in the next two years, so that people get jobs where they were born.

We want to create industrial clusters in Delhi, Mumbai, Noida, Gurgaon, Pune, Kolkata and Chen-

nai to decongest cities. For instance, 1.5 lakh people in Dharavi work in the leather industry. I told the Maharashtra government that we should create a leather cluster along the Delhi-Mumbai highway so that they could work and stay there. [The leather industry's] turnover is ₹1.45 lakh crore, of which ₹85,000 crore is from the domestic market. The workers will get homes and their condition will improve. The clusters will also decongest big cities and help stop migration.

Q/ The government is pushing for self-reliance and is trying to attract business from China to India. Some say it is easier said than done.

A/ Many countries do not want to do business with China. This has created an opportunity for us; we should take advantage of it. We have skilled labour, infrastructure, ports and raw material. For example, we have a textile cluster in Nagpur, Orange City, which makes Peter England shirts. I asked them to make PPE (personal protective equipment) kits. Now five lakhs PPE kits are being made in India and getting exported. This happened in just two months. Before that, we had to get a planeload of PPE kits from China.

Similarly, sanitiser used to cost ₹1,200 per litre. But we gave permission to sugar mills to make it, and it now costs ₹160 per litre. And we are ready to give it to the world. [This crisis] is a blessing in disguise. The industry needs foreign investment and technology upgrades. Countries that have better facilities and good foreign relations will benefit.

Q/ You gave the example of creating industrial clusters and moving people out of Dharavi. But how different is this model from the United Progressive Alliance government's failed special economic zones?

A/ We are constructing the Mumbai-Delhi highway—a 14-lane,



TESTING TIMES
An automobile parts shop in Prayagraj



[This crisis] is a blessing in disguise. The industry needs foreign investment and technology upgrades. Countries with better facilities and good foreign relations will benefit.

concrete road that starts from Sohna in Gurgaon and passes through Sawai Madhopur, Jabua, Ratlam and Vadodara to reach Mumbai. It will reduce 220km between Delhi and Mumbai. As it passes through tribal and backward regions of Rajasthan, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh, our acquisition cost has been reduced from ₹3 crore per acre to ₹10-20 lakh. We have saved ₹16,000 crore in land

acquisition. Our plan is to develop roadside facilities like industrial clusters, smart cities and smart villages.

This road passes through Thane district, so I told the state government that we would acquire land and create rail and airport connectivity. I suggested that the state government give power and water supply and arrange transport. Through this joint venture, we can create the leather cluster. People who move to the cluster can get houses through the PM Awas Yojna and claim benefits under 16 different schemes. If three lakh people move from Mumbai, it will help the city. And help other saturated cities.

Q/ You had set an ambitious target for highway construction. Will you need to rework it?

A/ Till March, we had been building around 30km every day. The target is 40km. Work has been very slow in

the last three months. It has re-started, but now it is monsoon time. But we have not changed the target. In the six months after the rains, we will work day and night to achieve it.

I have tried to get foreign funding as the National Highways Authority of India has AAA rating. Our toll income is ₹28,000 crore. We had expected it to reach ₹40,000 crore by year-end. Now, I don't know what we will earn. But we will get investments from banks like Asian Development Bank, BRICS, investors and pension funds. We are trying everywhere.

Q/ The opposition says the BJP has restarted political activities even before the pandemic is over, and that it has been focusing on destabilising state governments and trying to 'buy' MLAs.

A/ We never indulge in horse-trading. This is a wrong allegation. We are using technology to reach out

to people. The Congress can also do so. We have followed all health protocols, including social distancing norms. This opportunity is available to all political parties.

Q/ Some economists say social harmony is necessary for economic growth. They say the Centre's ideological policies will discourage foreign investors.

A/ Some people have been making these allegations because we have impacted their business. We don't do caste- or religion-based politics. In the past six years, we have not taken any decision that is against anyone. [Those who do] vote-bank politics think that they cannot win elections unless they play the minority card. They try to create fear in the minds of the minority; and when they fail, they confuse them. That is their strategy. We believe in Sabka Saath, Sabka Vishwas.

Q/ The Bihar assembly elections are round the corner. Do you think it would be held on time? Will campaigning be impacted?

A/ You have put the right question to the wrong person. I was BJP chief, but now my responsibility is the MSME ministry. My policy is to focus on the task at hand. [BJP president] J.P. Nadda is the right person to answer this question.

Q/ The government's response to China's border incursions appears to be muted.

A/ [Defence Minister] Rajnath Singh ji will be the right person to reply.

Q/ What are the lessons from this pandemic?

A/ There are people who convert problems into opportunities. And there are people who convert opportunities into problems. We should deal with this crisis with self-confidence. Together, we will fight the coronavirus and win the economic battle. ●

How to tame the dragon

As China's scant regard for old protocols spills blood on the border, India is looking for a fitting reply but less din

BY R. PRASANNAN AND PRADIP R. SAGAR

OBJECT OF HATE
Members of Shiv Sena and Dogra Front in Jammu burn a photo of Chinese President Xi Jinping

*For want of a nail the shoe was lost,
For want of a shoe the horse was lost,
For want of a horse the knight was lost,
For want of a knight the battle was lost,
For want of a battle the kingdom was lost.
So a kingdom was lost—all for want of a nail.*

T

he ancient rhyme rings true in South Block today. For want of a phone, 20 precious lives were lost.

For seven years, Indian and Chinese diplomats had been arguing over where to place a phone. Late last year they found a spot, but the ‘instrument’ has not yet been connected. It “is on the cards”, is what we heard last, in January, from Army chief General M.M. Naravane.

It is not an ordinary telephone, but a hotline between the armies of India and China. Had it been in place, perhaps the current military standoff in Ladakh could have been averted and the lives of 20-odd brave troopers of 16 Bihar, including its commander Colonel B. Santosh Babu, could have been saved.

The idea of a hotline, like the one between the military operations directorates of India and Pakistan, was agreed upon in the Sino-Indian border defence cooperation agreement of 2013, and reiterated during Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s Beijing visit in 2015. The Delhi-Islamabad line worked every Tuesday and on emergencies, and has averted several military mishaps on the line of control. However, the two sides could not decide where to place the China end. India wanted the line to



READY FOR ANYTHING
An Indian Army convoy makes its way towards the China border on June 17

The protocols were written at a time when infrastructure and technology were not as advanced as they are today.

Jabin Jacob, associate professor of international relations, Shiv Nadar University

run between the director general of military operations (DGMO) at the Army headquarters in Delhi and his counterpart in Beijing. But China wanted its end to be in Chengdu, at the headquarters of the People’s Liberation Army’s newly-formed western military command which looks after the entire border with India. Finally, India gave in. But before it could be installed, the Chinese

moved into the Pangong lakeside and the Galwan valley in eastern Ladakh, with a never-before-made claim that the valley was theirs. Now, many wonder whether hotline calls would be enough to sort out standoffs with the PLA, which has suddenly turned violent after four and half decades. “This changes the nature of the line of actual control [LAC] and the India-China relation-

ship significantly,” said Jabin Jacob, associate professor of international relations, Shiv Nadar University. “For many years, Indian officials tried to downplay the seriousness of growing tensions along the LAC, saying there were protocols and agreements in place, and that there had been no casualties since 1975. The protocols were written at a time when infrastructure and technology were not as

POINTS OF CONFLICT

HOW AND WHERE THE CLASHES TOOK PLACE

JUNE 15, MORNING

Battalion commander-level talks held as part of ongoing de-escalation attempts. Decision taken that Chinese troops would withdraw from standoff point at Galwan Valley in Indian territory

JUNE 15, EVENING

Commanding officer (CO) of 16 Bihar regiment, Col B. Santosh Babu, and 50 soldiers go to oversee withdrawal near Patrolling Point 14. Indian soldiers dismantle Chinese structures on Indian soil

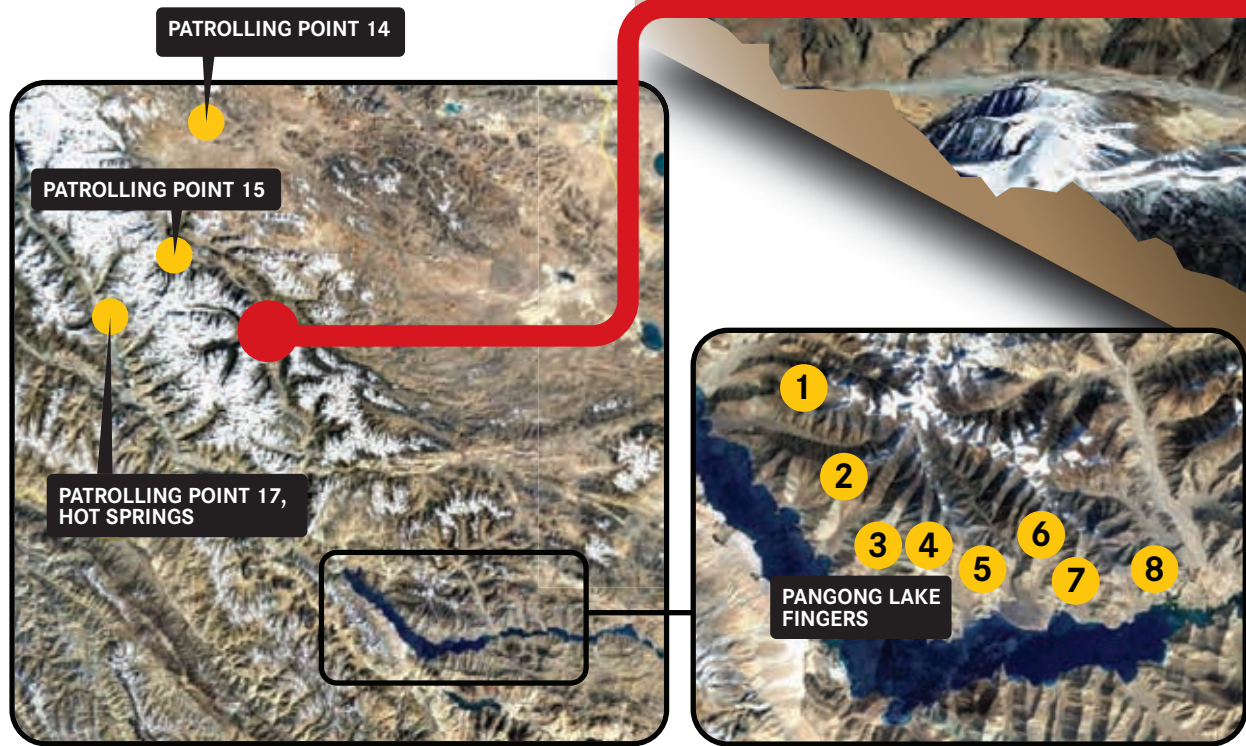
Chinese return in greater numbers, in excess of 250 according to some reports, and attack. Injured soldiers swept away by the Galwan river, which is in full spate, leading to higher casualties

CASUALTIES

CO among 20 soldiers killed in skirmish; no gunfire. Bodies recovered downstream; Indian soldiers were missing as of June 17. Unconfirmed reports put Chinese casualties at around 40

Col Babu and two others were martyred on the spot. The other 17 succumbed to injuries and hypothermia later

INDIA-CHINA STANDOFF POINTS



Map is illustrative

advanced as they are today.”

That China is no longer going by old protocols became clear on the evening of Monday, June 15, at Patrolling Point 14 in Galwan valley where Colonel Santosh Babu and his men were waiting, unarmed as per negotiated protocol, to ensure compliance of an agreement by which troops would disengage from

patrolling points 14, 15 and 17 in Galwan valley and from Chushul and the north bank of Pangong lake. The Chinese troops in Galwan valley were to fall back 5km to the east, according to the disengagement plan agreed on June 6 between Lieutenant General Harinder Singh, commander of India’s Leh-based XIV Corps, and Major General Lin Liu, commander

of China’s Xinjiang military district, at Chushul-Mondo border personnel meeting point. Around dusk, a group of Chinese soldiers armed with iron rods and construction tools (which they had brought for building structures in the intruded area) suddenly attacked Babu and his two aides who were standing at the front. As colleagues jumped to their rescue,

Intelligence analysts believe that India’s handling of the situation was far from coordinated. There was very little involvement of the foreign office.

they too were attacked, and soon it was a free-for-all. The brawl went on till midnight.

But, why did the formations in the rear not send reinforcements? “Our posts were on the other side of the stream, and they were unaware of what was happening,” said an officer. “Even if they knew, it would have taken some time for them to cross the stream and reach the spot. On the other hand, the Chinese just have to roll down their troops. So, it was like an ambush.”

The initial reports suggested that 20 were killed—some in the scuffle, a few by hypothermia, and a few fell off the cliff. Their bodies were recovered downstream from the Shyok river, into which the Galwan stream flows. The injured could be taken to the 303 Field Hospital in Tangtse and the Army Hospital in Leh only by morning.

Many in the Army headquarters now feel that senior officers in the defence and external affairs ministries should have overseen the disengagement plans, instead of leaving things to the on-scene commanders, especially since the Chinese had shown signs of violence even earlier. On May 5, the commanding officer of 11 Mahar was badly beaten up during a skirmish.

The Chinese have been making the intrusions unarmed. The pattern had been to send unarmed building parties into Indian territory or disputed territory and set up tents and other infrastructure. These intrusions were all supported by heavily armed formations which would be positioned on Chinese territory, but within clear view of the Indian formations and posts. Thus, the Chinese had moved a brigade-size force close to the LAC. India’s response had been to protest the intrusions and deploy forces mirroring the Chinese formations.

Intelligence analysts believe that India’s handling of the situation was far from coordinated. From the



LONG-TIME ENEMIES
File photo of an Indian soldier and a Chinese soldier reinstalling a fence that was temporarily removed for a meeting at the border, in 2006



Col B. Santosh Babu



Sep Ankush Thakur



Hav (Gnr) K. Palani



Sep Kundan Kumar Ojha



Sep Rajesh Orang

beginning, there was very little involvement of the foreign office. When two major-general level and eight rounds of lower-level meetings failed to defuse the tension, India asked for talks at corps commander level, which was unprecedented. The five-hour meeting, held on June 6 between Lt Gen Harinder Singh and Maj Gen Lin Liu, led to an understanding that both sides would de-induct forces from Patrolling Point 14 in Galwan valley to Patrolling Point 17, along with gradual de-escalation in depth areas. However, there was no conclusion to the talks over the Pangong lake intrusion, and, therefore, another corps commanders meeting was being planned when all hell broke loose in Galwan valley.

Senior Army officials say that while the LAC is neither delineated nor demarcated, the local formation commanders are clear about the ground alignment. "Our troops, wherever deployed, dominate each bit of it by patrolling and aerial surveillance," said an officer at the headquarters who had served on the LAC. "Of course there are challenges of weather and terrain. We also have a reasonably good idea where Chinese perception of LAC runs on ground because we all observe them patrolling up to certain areas. This mutual understanding about LAC alignment on ground coupled with respect for protocols and agreements of 1993, 1996, 2005, 2012 and 2013 enabled peace and tranquillity so far."

But the problem is that, as Jacob pointed out, "the subsequent updates to these protocols also predate the current phase of aggressive Chinese nationalism and assertiveness under Xi Jinping". In fact, Xi's China is not just reiterating old claims over territory, but also making new claims. What sur-



WARRIOR'S KIN
Relatives of Hav Sunil Kumar, one of the 20 soldiers who were martyred

prised India was that China had never made a political claim over Galwan, though it had coveted it militarily. Realising that it could dominate the entire neighbourhood from atop the hills around the valley, the Army occupied them in 1961. In the 1962 war, the Chinese dislodged the Indians, but unilaterally retreated after the war, realising that they could not maintain the post. India had reoccupied the heights and the valley but had been finding it hard to maintain them.

The completion of the road from Durbuk to Daulat Beg Oldie (near the LAC) and the building of a

bridge across the Shyok have now changed the tactical picture. India can now maintain the Galwan heights and the neighbourhood of the LAC easily, by sending military supplies up the road. China worries that a well-supplied Indian Army may next be tempted to roll into Aksai Chin over which India has a claim.

Indeed, South Block had always known that building of the border roads and bridges would unnerve China. As External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, then as foreign secretary, told a parliamentary standing committee in October 2017, "as we build our border

infrastructure, there will be a little bit of action-reaction where they are concerned".

The scrapping of Article 370 of the Constitution and the reiteration of India's claims made by politicians in Parliament over the Chinese-held Aksai Chin and the Pakistan-held regions of Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan also are believed to have provoked China into military action. As much was clear from the tweet made by Wang Xianfeng, the press officer in the Chinese embassy in Islamabad: "India's actions of unilaterally changing the status quo of Kashmir and continuing to exacerbate

regional tensions have posed a challenge to the sovereignty of China and Pakistan and made the India-Pakistan relations and China-India relations more complex." The tweet was later deleted. All the same, as an Indian diplomat admitted, "the cumulative effect is that now China, too, has been drawn into the Kashmir dispute".

As much is clear also from the Chinese move to bring in a new political factor into the LAC situation. It has now, for the first time, made a political claim over the Galwan valley, which it had occupied only for military purposes in 1962 and subsequently vacated.



FALSE FRIENDS
Brigadier J.K.S. Virk and Senior Colonel Chen Zheng Shan at a border personnel meeting at Daulat Beg Oldie in 2015; (right) Modi and Xi in 2019



PHOTOS PTI

Letting China off the hook this time would contribute to upsetting the regional balance of power perception.

Lt Gen Anil Ahuja, former commander, 5 Mountain Division, Tawang, and 4 Corps

But in the May 5 intrusion, the PLA crossed its own claim line and made a political claim over territory up to the Galwan-Shyok confluence.

Now what? Naturally, the largest loss of life on the China frontier in half a century has put a question mark on whether India has the capability and the will. Comparisons will be made with Indira Gandhi's robust response to the intrusion in Nathu La in 1967. "The response shattered the myth of Chinese invincibility," said an officer. "We didn't concede

an inch then, and also gave them a bloody nose." Then there was the Sumdorong Chu incident during Rajiv Gandhi's reign when India showed signs of aggression and nearly went to war. The show of force led to Rajiv being invited to Beijing and the famous minute-long handshake with Deng Xiaoping.

Modi will have to live up not only to his combative reputation, but also to his two predecessors who had called the Chinese bluff even when they were militarily weaker. Right

now, there is absolute caution reigning in the political circles. Unlike in the case of any incident involving Pakistan, which leads to political leaders and ministry spokesmen getting competitively outraged, there has been complete silence from the establishment. Finally, at a video meeting with chief ministers to discuss the Covid-19 situation, Modi assured "the nation that the sacrifice of our jawans will not be in vain," and then called for an all-party meeting, which was another rare

move on his part.

Lt Gen D.S. Hooda, former northern Army commander who supervised the 2016 surgical strike against Pakistan, however, ruled out similar action against China. "It can't be something off the table," he said. "We also must have plans to enter in some of their territory. We have the capability to strike."

The recent accretions to the battle order, especially with the induction of tanks and armoured fighting vehicles, are signs of the Army's

enhanced self-confidence to hold against China in Ladakh where it had a disadvantage till recently. There are now three infantry brigades in eastern Ladakh, and a mechanised infantry battalion (equipped with armoured vehicles) and an armoured brigade with more than 100 recently inducted tanks. Since most machines behave oddly in the cold heights where air is thinner, new firing drills and protocols have been evolved and were proven in

the exercises last September-October. The capability was announced, rather boldly, with the release of photos of the then northern Army commander Lt Gen Ranbir Singh sitting atop a T-90 tank and watching the exercises.

All the same, currently the attempt on the border is to defuse the situation. With passions running high in the battalions that were involved in the clash, they are "likely to be replaced so as to prevent any untoward actions," said an officer. Though the opposition has been restrained, public anger could be simmering. "Public tempers can complicate matters for policy makers," said Harsh Pant, head of Observer Research Foundation's strategic studies programme, explaining why India should try for a "de-escalation quickly".

However, the loss of life would remain a slap on the Modi government's face unless it is avenged, especially since the Army has been contending that it has the capacity to stand up to the Chinese. "The Indian Army is not a pushover," said Lt Gen Anil Ahuja, who had commanded the 5 Mountain Division in Tawang and the 4 Corps which holds against China. "On the nearly 4,000km long boundary with China, there are places where we can give them a befitting response. Letting China off the hook this time would contribute to upsetting the regional balance of power perception."

Coupled with that is the perception that India's neighbourhood policy is in a shambles. With even puny Nepal, which had been beholden to India for two centuries since the Anglo-Gorkha wars of the early 19th century, cocking a cartographic snook, perhaps it is time to follow what Teddy Roosevelt said a century ago: "Speak softly and carry a big stick."

WITH MANDIRA NAYAR AND NAMRATA BIJI AHUJA



CLAP FOR THE MAP
Nepalese people in Kathmandu light candles in celebration of their parliament's approval of a new map

REUTERS

Road to normalcy

India needs to reimagine and reinvigorate its ties with Nepal to counter China's growing influence in Kathmandu

BY REKHA DIXIT



In June 13, Nepal's parliament amended its constitution and ratified a new map of the country, which shows around 335sqkm of Indian territory as being part of Nepal. The bold bill was passed nearly unanimously, and it brought together parties as divergent as the ruling communists, the oppo-

sition Congress, and groups representing the Mhadesi community.

The legislation was a knee-jerk reaction to India opening a new road to Kailash Mansarovar through the Kalapani valley, a region whose ownership has for long been a matter of dispute between the two neighbours.

Certain recent events may also have spurred Nepal into action. Last November, India released its new

map after the abrogation of Article 370. While the map did not alter international boundaries, China objected to designating Ladakh as a Union territory. It said there were disputes between the two countries in the region, and that India's move affected China's sovereignty. Nepal, too, objected to showing the Kalapani valley as Indian territory. It sent three notes last year to the Indian ambassa-

dor in Kathmandu and the government of India, proposing foreign secretary-level talks to resolve issues.

The matter went to the backburner as Covid-19 became a pandemic. The road inauguration in March, however, changed the situation. The haste with which Nepal drew up and ratified the new map has raised eyebrows. "Nepal raises the border issue usually when it wants to create an anti-India sentiment to divert public attention from [domestic] political troubles. It doesn't raise the issue during prime minister-level talks," said Ranjit Rae, former Indian ambassador to Kathmandu.

Sarita Giri, a member of parliament who opposed the new map saying it was not supported by historical evidence, is now facing expulsion from the Samajbadi Party. Nepal

itself has decided to set up a committee of experts to collect historical proof to bolster its claim.

India, though, is confident of the legality of its claim. An 1870 treaty recognised the region as Indian territory. Staking a claim on it after 150 years is absurd, says India.

The increasing Chinese influence in Kathmandu, however, complicates matters. Unlike previous communist leaders in Nepal, Prime Minister K.P.S. Oli makes no bones about his affinity with China. Also, Hou Yanqi, Beijing's envoy to Kathmandu, is a popular fixture in the city's social circuit, and she engages with leaders across the political spectrum.

India says it had agreed to foreign secretary-level talks even before the new map was tabled, and that Oli did not share this information with the parliament because of his rush to legislate at any cost. "This is not true," says Bishnu Rijal, deputy chief of foreign affairs of the Nepal Communist Party. "India has been repeatedly hurting our sentiments. The allegation that China is behind our act is another insult. India should know better about the spirit of nationalism. When Narendra Modi ordered the Balakot strikes, Rahul Gandhi lauded it. For us, the map is a matter of nationalism."

Nepalese leaders point out that China is actually pro-India on the Kalapani issue, since the two had agreed to a trade route through the region, ignoring Nepal's claims. The recent killing of an Indian citizen on the border near Sitamarhi in Bihar signals an emboldened Nepal. The killing was a lockdown violation issue that got out of hand, but it came at a difficult time. Nepal is now setting up 500 armed posts along the border, which is famed for its openness.

Oli continues to make anti-India remarks, mocking India's national emblem and accusing it of exporting the coronavirus. But not everyone in Nepal is buying his rhetoric. "Many

of us hadn't even heard of the Kalapani region," said S. Dahal (name changed), who works for an international start-up in Kathmandu. "If the government were so keen on the area, why haven't they invested in its development all these years?"

India says it is waiting for Nepal to create an atmosphere conducive for talks. But Oli may well have tied himself in knots. "Getting the constitution amended to include territory is easy," said Rae. "But will any leader be able to pass an amendment to restore it to the previous position? This is going to be a constant irritant in bilateral engagement."

Nepal insists that the map is an "internal matter". "Since our national emblem has the map of the country, we needed to amend the constitution to include the redrawn map," said Rijal. "This should not come in the way of talks with India."

India says it will continue its development work, which includes rebuilding posts destroyed in the 2015 earthquake. India has already given ₹4.5 crore to Nepal to battle Covid-19, and is willing to give more.

With its ties with China deteriorating, India will have to rethink its engagement with Nepal. New Delhi looks upon Nepal as a small, friendly country. Nepal looks at India as a giant that might swallow it whole. Yet, it does not consider China to be a threat.

It does not help India's cause that the triumvirate of Prime Minister Modi, Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar and National Security Adviser Ajit Doval is unpopular in Kathmandu. On the other hand, China is keen to see Oli, a master at playing the ultranationalist card against India, complete his term, which ends in 2023. To counter China's influence in Nepal, India has to step up engagement at every level. And it must do so quickly, too, before every second person in Kathmandu begins speaking fluent Mandarin. **●**



GUEST COLUMN • BY P. STOB DAN

Border tension is a manifestation of larger issues

What has happened in Galwan valley is a result of many factors. But the main question is

whether it was China's pre-planned mischief or just an incident at the local level that spiralled out of control.

This must be seen against the backdrop of previous such incidents since the 2017 Doklam standoff. The pain from that episode had not been forgotten, and the tension during the three-month-long standoff has lingered on despite the mutual de-escalation. Second, there has been a massive build-up of troops and infrastructure from both sides in eastern Ladakh. There was, hence, every possibility of an intense face-off taking a violent turn.

To claim that 20 Indian soldiers died in unarmed combat, and that no bullets were fired, will be to once again ignore stark realities. The clash took place at Patrolling Point 14 on the Indian side of the Galwan region, where the Chinese sit at a height. Despite the understanding reached on June 6 for disengagement, the Chinese PLA backtracked.

There has been a breach of trust once again. Is it a breach of the 1993 bilateral agreement or the 2013 border defence cooperation agreement? An inquiry will take place to ascertain this, but the fact is that the June

6 agreement has not been handled properly by both sides.

The Chinese PLA has been sitting in Galwan valley publicly claiming the territory. The Indian foreign ministry was taking a quiet, conciliatory position until this incident. This leaves one confused as to who is causing the problem then.

The border dispute seems to have occurred because relations between India and China have gone sour in the last few months. Covid-19 has only sharpened the differences.

When we talk of engaging China, a question that arises is whether India's US policy has changed. If that has happened, then the balancing strategy has been disturbed and the border skirmishes are a manifestation of New Delhi rubbing Beijing the wrong way. India is seen as moving away from its non-aligned policy while speaking America's language on key issues like the spread of Covid-19, Indo-Pacific issues, Taiwan and so on. We seem to be more tilted to the west than towards China.

Xi Jinping and Modi have shared a good equation, then why has there been a flare-up at this level? It could also be an attempt by the Chinese to show the US that it can open multiple frontiers if it interferes in Beijing's

military plans in Taiwan. China's stakes are higher in Taiwan than with the Indian boundary dispute.

Clearly, the tension on the border is a manifestation of larger issues. It could also be part of China's south Asia policy to project India as the big bully, after the abrogation of Article 370. What has also missed our attention is the complete neglect of Ladakh, while Jammu and Kashmir was busy sorting its own problems of militancy and terrorism. China, on the other hand, has been trying to make inroads in Ladakh gradually.

Ladakh has been facing these kinds of situations for centuries with Tibet—over border issues, pastureland rights, trade disputes and the like. But no efforts have been made to understand the genesis of the problem from a historical perspective. The fact that the Galwan incident has gone out of control calls for introspection.

The situation in Ladakh could escalate or de-escalate. India should keep all options open. Of course, the military war option is one that India should be ready for. But attempts should be made to continue with the disengagement process despite the clash on June 15.

—As told to Namrata Biji Ahuja.

Stobdan is a leading strategic thinker and founding president of Ladakh International Centre, Leh.



GUEST COLUMN • BY LT GEN C.A. KRISHNAN

Make China blink first

A

superpower is an imperialist country which everywhere subjects other countries to its aggression, interference, control, subversion or plunder and strives for world hegemony," said Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping in a speech at the United Nations in 1974, when Mao Zedong was still alive. Deng said if China ever turned into a superpower, "the people of the world should identify her social imperialism, expose it, oppose it and work together with the Chinese people to overthrow it". President Xi Jinping, however, seems to have dumped this vision for China. And his vision for the world, it seems, has little or no place for other countries.

China has crossed swords with anyone she has come across in the recent past. Is China testing its capacity to hold out all alone—while dealing with situations in Taiwan, South China Sea, Hong Kong, and allegations of malpractices in international trade, allegations of spreading the Wuhan Virus and the India-China border conflict, all at the same time? It seems to be an ideal time to carry out such an experiment as the rest of the world is reeling under the Covid-19

pandemic. It is possible that China also believes that the domestic politics of most democracies that have the muscle to contest China are in a splintered state, making the situation conducive for such an experiment. Viewed in this context, is the systematic escalation on the Sino-Indian border purely India-centric or is it part of an overall resetting of the world order by China?

The Sino-Indian boundary is classified into eastern, central (middle) and western sectors. China has never committed to a specific alignment in the western sector and has changed its stance a number of times. Border standoffs in the western and eastern sectors have taken place with increasing frequency in the recent years. So far, the dispute-settling mechanism has prevented any exchange of fire.

What explains the violent clash and the choice of Patrolling Point 14 on the Line of Actual Control close to where the Galwan River meets the Shyok River, for the clash on the night of June 15? This segment has not witnessed disputes in the past. The newly-constructed Darbuk-Shyok-Daulat Beg Oldie road on the Indian side runs close to the LAC at this point. The Indian post at DBO is at an aerial distance of just

about 10km from the Karakoram Pass. After making Ladakh a Union territory, voices have been raised about a relook at Gilgit-Baltistan. This changed scenario, combined with the DBO road which runs well inside the Indian territory, has changed the dynamics of threat perception in the areas of Karakoram, Gilgit-Baltistan and even the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. From China's perspective, this area has become very crucial and had to be brought under the ambit of disputed areas and an opportunity was created making it appear as if it presented itself. Regarding the incident itself, while saluting our brave heroes, one finds it difficult not to condemn the apparent urge on the part of some people to treat such incidents like T20 contests. How can there be a tit-for-tat response on the part of the Army or the government just because the electronic media and 'experts' crave it?

An India-China armed conflict, even under the present heightened tension, appears most unlikely. But China can be expected to employ every possible trick, falling just short of war. The most dangerous of such tricks would be for China to do something short of war, for which no 'short of war' counter exists. Occupation of important unoccupied Indian territory falls into this category. Expect China to even activate the Arunachal sector at a suitable time as a subset of the present imbroglio. There is nothing stopping India from taking the initiative of activating the Arunachal border, if any advantage is perceived, by undertaking such an action.

Considering the mood prevailing around the world and our capabilities, India is in a position to hold fast militarily and make China blink first. All that is required is a united domestic approach.

The author is a former deputy chief of Army.



The spectacle that life is

Remember the good old days when you did not have to prove you loved your country by chanting Bharat Mata ki Jai every time somebody asked you to? When standing up for the national anthem was optional? Something you did voluntarily, out of love, and not with one eye on the other people in the movie theatre who may record a video of you sitting it out and report you to the cops? Remember the good old days when chief ministers did not have to recite the Hanuman Chalisa to appease the media and prove they were true believers? When fans did not zoom aggressively into the social media photographs of movie stars, discover a cross in their *pooja ghar*, and immediately call them out for being a 'fake' Hindu?

Remember when you could get married without the whole world wanting to know the price and brand of your lehenga, and the number and quality of hors d'oeuvres you served and to whom? Remember when a national disaster, like a flood or a pandemic, was a time for the nation to unite and hunker down to fight it together, instead of an excuse to extort money from various celebrities, corporates or religious institutions?

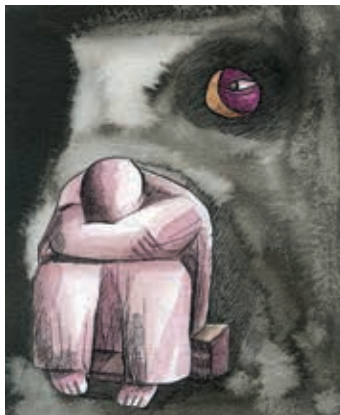
When charity was not some sort of open, vulgar competition? With in-favour celebrities like Akshay Kumar flexing about the ₹25 crore he donated to the (slightly questionable) PM Cares fund and basically throwing down a gauntlet to other celebrities to donate loudly and visibly to the same fund too, or be torn apart by trolls and rabid media with Twitter hashtags like #AjmerSharifPaise-Nikaal and #SRKproveyourlove? Remember a time when the tragic suicide of a handsome young star at the top of his game could be mourned by the people who were close to him in peace and privacy, without photographs of his corpse going viral on social media, and trolls and the press breathing down their necks badgering them to put out a public profession of their grief?

As I write this, people are aggressively bullying and castigating people from the industry for not looking sad enough at the news of Sushant Singh Rajput's death, or looking too hypocritically sad and being two-faced fakers or whatever, while in the same breath speaking glibly about mental health and the importance of kindness and empathy!

Do they not realize that it is precisely this sort of relentless scrutiny that drives people to take such extreme steps in the first place? Grief used to be a private thing. Charity used to be a private thing. Religion used to be a private thing. Love used to be a private thing.

But not any longer. Now, everything is spectacle, everything is a performance, the world is the coliseum and we all spend our lives sometimes hissing from the stands, and sometimes fighting in the ring. When everything is externalised, then inevitably, the core gets hollowed out. When we have one eye on our 'performance' and one eye on our highly judgmental, and mostly hostile 'audience', it is inevitable that we will begin to feel less, and to be less authentic as human beings.

As a writer, I know that a sense of audience kills all spontaneity. The moment somebody stands behind me and starts to read what I am writing on my laptop, I freeze and start worrying about what they will think of me, and have to shut the lid quickly. This is what all of us are doing to ourselves every day. Not just celebrities, but even little teenage girls who have just, very excitedly and hopefully, opened their Insta or TikTok accounts. We are all constantly self-censoring, deleting real bits and pieces of our lives that we think are not good enough, surrendering to the society of the spectacle, and shutting down the lids on our inner living, breathing, authentic selves. It is death by collective suicide, a sort of Johar-of-the-soul, and it has to stop.



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THE FIGHT GOES ON
Protesters at a shopping mall in Hong Kong during the pandemic

Dragon's snare

With China further tightening its grip over Hong Kong, protests in the city are unlikely to cease anytime soon

BY NEHA S. BAJPAI

THE LONG sweltering summer of 2019 will be etched in Hong Kong's history for the city's biggest political crisis in decades. Choked by billowing clouds of teargas, gridlocked traffic, scathing slogans and burning barricades, the streets in Hong Kong

saw a face-off between two million protestors and the police for over six months.

What started on June 9, 2019, as a peaceful mass protest against a now-revoked extradition bill has now evolved into a "fight for inde-

pendence". More than two decades after the end of the British colonial rule in Hong Kong, the Chinese government is all set to impose a new national security law in the city, essentially aimed at criminalising dissent.

As of now, the details of the proposed law have not been made public, but Hong Kongers are getting anxious about losing civil liberties like freedom of expression and an independent judiciary. "It is clear that the manner in which Beijing is going about implementing this law—by going above the heads of Hong Kong's duly elected legislature and imposing the law by fiat—is a serious blow to Hong Kong's rule of law and autonomy under the 'one country, two systems' formula," says Antony Dapiran, a lawyer and author, who has documented the city's protest culture in his two books, *City of Protest* (2017) and *City on Fire* (2020).

Originally from Australia, Dapiran has been living in Hong Kong

for the last 20 years. He feels the biggest change in the city has been an increasing influence of China over everything—be it business, tourism, traffic or simply the number of Mandarin Chinese on the streets. "Everyone expected that the 'two systems' would converge into the 'one country' by 2047, when the 50-year guarantee of Hong Kong's autonomy expires," he says. "I think what has changed is how much more quickly than everyone expected that convergence is coming, and also that the 'one country' Hong Kong is converging with is looking less liberal and more authoritarian than at any time in the past 20 years."

Located at the crossroads of the east and the west, Hong Kong transformed into a truly global city with buzzing financial districts and cultural hotspots over the past five decades. Its special status under the 'one country, two systems' policy promised freedom of speech, independent financial institutions and a fully convertible currency. Since 1997, more than a million people from the mainland have moved to Hong Kong in search of a brighter future in a socially and politically liberated environment. However, China's recent overreach and the growing insecurities of the locals have left a deep impact on the migrants in the city. "I moved here nine years ago because the city really excited me. It was more open, modern and inclusive than China. However, in recent years, I have been seeing tribalism and identity politics taking over the city's inclusive spirit," says Tracey Wong, an entrepreneur and wine writer. "Some of the restaurants in the city have stopped serving people like me who speak Mandarin. The agitation is getting extreme. Hong Kong was never promised independence, it was promised a high degree of autonomy. I think it is very clear that the government would preserve the 'one country, two systems' principle."

The growing identity crisis and unrest among the youth in Hong Kong have been brewing for years now. It all started with some wealthy Chinese investing in the city's real estate business in the 1990s, which propelled Hong Kong's rise as a financial and trade centre. This drove up the cost of living for the educated, white collar professionals in the city and a struggle for jobs, housing and education soon ensued. According to Dapiran, there are clearly deep issues of identity tied up in the protest movement. "Beijing's overreach tends to drive the anxieties which feed into making this identity even more entrenched," he says.

While Hong Kong has had a long tradition of peaceful marches, the newer generation is more confrontational in its approach. They are ready to clash with the police and even set universities on fire. "The 2019 protests had a number of hallmarks—one was the 'leaderless' nature of the protests and their 'be water' philosophy, which made the movement a very fluid, and very resilient, phenomenon," explains Dapiran. "The second was the broad degree of community support, and the solidarity behind the 'no splitting' principle, which meant that people remained unified behind the movement as a whole, notwithstanding the more extreme nature of certain elements within the overall movement."

The most widespread expression of public anger with Beijing in recent years, last year's protests have left a deep impact on the city. While the outbreak of Covid-19 paused the demonstrations for a few months, activists are now planning a full calendar of protests and mass movements. The police, too, is ready for a clampdown under the command of a new chief appointed by Beijing. Armed with water cannons and pepper sprays, anti-riot officers can be seen at most protest assemblies across the city. "Around 9,000 people

have been arrested in the last one year, the youngest one being just 11. The government needs to intervene and stop police brutality. We will not forgive or forget these attacks,” says Daniel Chan, an activist who is majoring in music at one of the leading universities in Hong Kong. “The students are frustrated for various reasons. The government barred our leader, Joshua Wong, from running in the local district council elections last year. And now Beijing wants to force a new national security law upon us. This will be the end of Hong Kong. Our demands are very clear and the protests will go on,” he says.

According to political observers, Beijing’s latest move to tighten its grip on Hong Kong should not come as a surprise. “China has been giving these signals for over five years now. The city’s chief executive has not been able to maintain the law and order situation as desired by the central government, so they are now coming up with the national security law,” says Thomas Abraham, adjunct professor at the University of Hong Kong and former editor, South China

Morning Post.

While Hong Kong’s campaign for democracy was always a long shot, China’s direct intervention is being seen as an attack on not just citizens’ rights, but also on their distinct identity. “China has never been able to reconcile Hong Kong to be Chinese and that is a major sore point. Ironically, it shows that the ‘two systems’ theory works. China’s dilemma now is how far these two systems will diverge and still be one country,” says Abraham. “When Hong Kong questions the national security law, China feels it is going beyond the ‘one country’ notion, whereas Hong Kong is well within its rights to protect its freedom. The next significant moment in the city will be when the university campuses reopen. The protests will get a new momentum then.”

The political deadlock, months of civil unrest and the pandemic have ravaged Hong Kong’s economy. In the first quarter of this year, the city’s economy plunged 8.9 per cent year on year, the steepest quarterly drop in the past four decades. So far, the



QUELLING DISSENT
Riot police detain a protester in Causeway Bay, Hong Kong, on June 12

biggest strain has been felt by retailers, hotels and restaurants. “We cater to hotels and restaurants in the Kowloon and Hong Kong island region, which have been protest hubs. In terms of volume, our flagship brand, Les Janelles, is a leading brand in Hong Kong,” says Olivier Hui-Bon-Hoa, regional director-Asia at wine-makers Badet Clément. “Last year, in Q1, Q2 and Q3 we were at 12 per cent growth, but we closed the year at 7 per cent. We have not seen such a drop in the last 10 years,” he says.

For Sonia Hamera, an Indian expat in Hong Kong, the idea of having ‘no democracy’ does seem scary. “Our business is mainly based out of China, and it has been difficult to keep operations smooth with the travel ban. The notion of one country, two systems is gradually fading,” says Hamera, who has been living in Hong Kong for over 20 years.

The political upheaval in Hong Kong has left an indelible mark on the psyche of even those who are not directly connected to the protests. A heightened sense of helplessness and fear has torn the city’s social

fabric. Many parents, for instance, have kicked out their children over political disagreements. “I work in a university, so I have been in touch with a lot of young people who are frontline protestors. I feel stressed and a bit hopeless about how Hong Kong can still continue to thrive. While the older generation understands the context of the Hong Kong-China relationship and has accepted the constraints, the youth wants to take charge and fight for freedom,” says Wills Li, a manager at one of the leading universities in the city.

The protests in Hong Kong are unlikely to cease anytime soon. Many activists have pinned their hopes on the pressure being exerted by the US, but it has not undermined the strength of the Chinese government in any way. “Several years from now, it may look like our protests failed, but this last year has proved to be a touchstone that feeds the continuous demands for democracy,” says Chan. “It is a long game, and we will never surrender.” *Some names have been changed to protect identities.*

YEAR OF FURY

2019

Feb-May

Hong Kong’s security bureau proposes amendments that would allow extraditions to Mainland China and other countries not covered by existing treaties. Protests begin and start to escalate; concessions to bill deemed insufficient

July

Protesters vandalise legislative council. Lam says extradition bill dead. Attacks on passengers and passersby at a rural train station, after activists surround China’s representative office; triggers backlash against police. 44 charged with rioting

Sept

Lam announces extradition bill will be withdrawn, criticised as being too late. She pledges to hold talks with the community to ease tensions, but protesters trap her in a stadium for hours after her first “open dialogue”

Nov

Protests get more violent. Student gets injured as police disperse protesters; dies a few days later. Live rounds fired at protesters; one wounded. Siege by police at Hong Kong Polytechnic University sees more than 1,000 young activists arrested

April

Police arrest 15 activists, including Democratic Party founder Martin Lee, 81, and millionaire Jimmy Lai, 71, in the biggest crackdown on the pro-democracy movement since protests escalated in June 2019

June

Protest by Hong Kong lawyers. Massive protests on the streets; police fire rubber bullets and tear gas at protesters. Government offices shut. Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam delays extradition law indefinitely

Aug

Hong Kong flag carrier Cathay Pacific complies with Chinese demand and suspends pilot who protested. Police and protesters clash at Hong Kong international airport after flights are disrupted. Alibaba delays its \$15 billion Hong Kong listing

Oct

Lam bans face masks. Police shoots 18-year-old on the shoulder and 14-year-old in the thigh. Activist Jimmy Sham beaten by unknown assailants. Bill withdrawn. Activist Joshua Wong disqualified from contesting district elections

Jan

A march drawing tens of thousands on New Year’s Day spirals into chaos as police use water cannons and fire several rounds of tear gas at crowds, including families, before halting event

May

Multiple clashes between police and protesters over proposed national security law. Beijing set to impose the law. US President Trump begins elimination of special treatment for Hong Kong, but does not end privileges immediately

GRAPHICS SREEMANIKANDAN S., RESEARCH KARTHIK RAVINDRANATH



BHANU PRAKASH CHANDRA

NEW HORIZONS

Yashas Karanam (in green check shirt), director at Bellatrix Aerospace Limited, with his team

Pie in the sky

Private players want to play a bigger role in India's space industry, but they face myriad challenges

BY ABHINAV SINGH

ON MAY 30, human space travel entered a new era when a private company, for the first time, launched two astronauts into orbit. The Falcon 9 rocket and the Crew Dragon capsule that carried them were built and operated by SpaceX, a company founded by the billionaire Elon Musk. The launch, the first on US soil since 2011, was not only a reminder of America's supremacy in technology, but also a prelude to how things might work in the sector in the future.

Space missions are expensive, and they are mostly done using taxpayers' money. The participation of private players not only takes some burden off the public exchequer, but also gives an opportunity for entrepreneurs. This is exactly why India wants increased private participation in the space ecosystem.

Private companies currently play a minuscule role in India's growing space business. The Space Activities Bill, on which comments have been sought, promotes commercial activities in space and suggests a regulatory mechanism for them. Interestingly, all this is proposed to be done through the Indian Space Research Organisation. As ISRO itself is a service provider for commercial launches through its subsidiary, NewSpace India Limited (NSIL), many people see a conflict of interest.

"ISRO has been set up for space research, and is not a regulatory body,

with scientists, project managers and engineers," said Raju Prasad, chief of business development at Satellize, India's first private company in space technology. "It has done a good job of designing and launching satellites and developing launch vehicles. But that makes good resources in one field a wasted choice for another. Regulators need to be more market savvy and have legal minds that are able to throw open industry with least regulation. Intellectual Property (IP) generated shall be deemed to be the property of the central government. So this seems to be largely about private sub contractors willing to handover whatever IP they develop to the government, rather than any real companies out there developing their own IP and keeping it."

Private players are not comfortable with ISRO's opaque nature, either. This leaves limited avenues for private-public partnership, and even the open sectors are limited to contractors acting as outsourced manufacturing units.

While the biggest challenge for private companies in the space segment in India remains getting spectrum allocation and launch permission, there are plenty of other problems as well. "Currently, there are a myriad of problems for satellite builders such as GST, security clearances, orbital slotting, and liability and insurance. Similarly, for downstream companies, there are problems pertaining

to data acquisition (you can buy only from or through the National Remote Sensing Centre, even if the satellite is a foreign-owned private asset), making the whole process slow, opaque and expensive," said Divyanshu Poddar, co-founder of the space startup Rocketeers. "India needs a better map policy and needs to liberalise access to and use of satellite data for private players. In the US, there is a single window clearance for all things and satellite data is freely traded by players like any other commodity. There are no government controls except with data pertaining to national security."

Encouraging private players to invest in original IP creation can go a long way in improving private participation in the sector. This will help them create their own products and IP, and become independent from ISRO's supply chain. This will equip these firms to compete in global markets. "There is a lot of uncertainty on what is allowed for private sector and what is not," said Yashas Karanam, director of Bellatrix Aerospace, a company which works with ISRO. "Since any object sent to space by a nation is governed by International Outer Space Treaty, the liability of a space object would fall on the country that permitted its launch. Hence, there was uncertainty on whether private companies can launch their own satellites and rocket. Now, the space industry hopes to

MARKET OPPORTUNITIES FOR INDIA

Global space industry is worth **\$350 billion**

It is projected to touch **\$1.2 trillion** by 2040

India has less than **1 per cent** of this market

In many other countries, private sector is already making significant contributions

India can be a **\$20 billion** market with the involvement of private players

The nano satellite market is expected to be **\$50 billion** plus in the next few years

India has an advantage because of comparatively lower costs

GRAPHICS **SREEMANIKANDAN S.**,
RESEARCH **ABHINAV SINGH**



SOME PRIVATE INDIAN SPACE COMPANIES

BELLATRIX AEROSPACE, BENGALURU

Involved in the development of advanced propulsion systems. Offers electric and chemical propulsion systems for everything from nano satellites (**<10kg**) to heavy satellites (**>five tonnes**)

SKYROOT AEROSPACE, HYDERABAD

Into space launch services, especially for small satellites (**<500kg**). Could leverage ISRO's testing and launch facilities

SATELLIZE, HYDERABAD

Working with ISRO in the assembly, integration and testing of satellites. It has inquiries from Central Asia, Africa and Asia-Pacific. Set to launch **10** Indian university and school satellites through ISRO in the next few months

ROCKETEERS, BENGALURU

Original equipment manufacturer for model and amateur rocket systems. It makes rocket bodies and components, recovery mechanisms, launch systems, safety gear, fuel cartridges and testing systems

have a predictive policy that would allow companies to operate out of India. With fingers crossed, we are hoping for a business-friendly policy that could ease foreign customers to work with Indian companies."

Unlike India, most space faring countries have clearly defined space laws, and private companies are encouraged to build their capabilities. They get contracts from National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and the European Space Agency (ESA) for technology development (both industrial and R&D). Private companies in the US and Europe have access to NASA and ESA test facilities, patents and research grants. "In the US, the Commercial Space Launch Act facilitated the private enterprise of the commercialisation of space and space technology in 1984 itself. In other countries like China, Japan, Australia and the UK, the sector was opened up only in the past few years. Though we are late, it is good to see the government take

this initiative," said Pawan Kumar Chandana, co-founder and CEO, Skyroot Aerospace Limited.

Private players have all welcomed the Space Activities Bill. "The government's initiative is laudable and in the right direction," said Narayan Prasad, chief operations officer at Satsearch, a marketplace for the space industry. "However, the mechanics of it are still unclear and needs to be spelt out. There is enough room to review the procurement process and change the base of it to incentivise the industry to invest and create products and services of its own. The emerging startups are looking in this direction and getting established industry players to move in this direction will help these companies service both the local economy and get a global market share."

Such a system will help private players move up the supply chain to become system integrators. It would also help ISRO become more agile and competitive, especially in the

international market. "By offloading all the routine satellite making and rocket building activities to the private players, ISRO can focus on developing cutting edge space technology such as optical communication for satellites, robotic space exploration and removal of space debris," said Rachana Reddy, a former ISRO space engineer who is now based in Germany. "It would also be able to focus more of its resources on the Gaganyaan mission and engage with other R&D institutions in the country on various aspects of the human space flight."

Indian space industry is still in the nascent stage, and capital remains a major challenge. "Developing a new product in space industry requires significant investment on test equipment and other infrastructure, which many private players cannot afford," said Karanam. "[Sharing] ISRO's facilities will definitely open doors for the rise of India's name in space, both with ISRO and its private ecosystem." 📌

SOUND BITE |
ANITA PRATAP



Racism? Touch up and rip up

The brutal police killing of George Floyd blew the lid off a global problem. Racism exists in every country and it has nothing to do with race. Science disproves that blacks or any other ethnic groups are inferior, because all humans carry the same genes. Racism is man-made, which explains why it thrives even in Africa that is full of blacks and in India where there are no blacks. This "ism" is a socio-cultural ideology designed to devalue, dominate and discriminate against the vulnerable underclass—blacks, dalits, Muslims, Jews, minorities, migrants or women.

Racism, sexism, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, xenophobia, all sprout from the same cursed root: "the will to exercise power, the need to control", as Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison explains. The tendency that makes some men want to control their wives is not very different from the pathology of a majority community wishing to dominate a minority group.

Humans are not naturally racist, but are evolutionarily programmed to be groupists. In certain situations, the narratives about the "stranger" as a "threat" escalate to demonising the "other" as contemptible, unclean and ignorant. This becomes an existential necessity in order to lionise the dominant group. One needs the "other" to feel privileged, blessed and superior—individually, institutionally and ideologically. From the clay of subjugation, the identity of the oppressor is moulded.

Oppressors subjugated black communities through the centuries. In mid-19th century Ohio, 25-year-old black slave woman Margaret Garner killed her children when they were sold and about to be taken to another plantation. She wanted to spare them the agonies she herself endured. Her case went to trial, but she was not given the death penalty as she was not considered human with human responsibilities such as motherhood. Blacks were useful, not quite like cattle, yet not sufficiently human.

Racists misused both science and religion to justify enslaving the blacks. In 1851, the New Orleans Medical and Surgical Journal published a report on the "Diseases and physical peculiarities of the Negro race". It claimed blacks were prone to drapetomania (a disease that made them run away) and dysaesthesia aethiopica (laziness, due to which their shrunken lungs were chronically oxygen-deficient). Never mind that the first disease contradicts the second.

Such prejudices still fester with popular assumptions that laziness makes blacks obese. Working multiple shifts to make ends meet, impoverished blacks have neither the money nor the energy to go to gyms. They live on cheap and fattening junk food. Job insecurity and stress contribute to ailments ranging from hypertension to diabetes. Not surprisingly, blacks and migrants who suffer these underlying conditions were hardest hit by Covid-19. As a Harvard study reveals, ZIP code is a better predictor of health than genetic code. Where you live matters, and not for snobbish reasons. A poor neighbourhood dooms its inhabitants to shoddy education, scant job opportunities, bad housing, drugs and crime—all of which undermine health.

For decades, books and Hollywood films romanticised or "white-washed" American slavery—the jolly matronly housekeeper, the happy handyman, the joyous children singing in cotton fields. That's all gone now. The solution to the current protests to exorcise racism includes essential police reforms. Equally important is ending the culture of white impunity by enforcing the law and securing convictions. Racism is systemic and can be uprooted only by upgrading the ZIP codes of poor black neighbourhoods by investing in education, health care, job opportunities, safety, sport and leisure activities. Otherwise, as before, blacks will remain banished in the place where they belong, homeless in their home.



ILLUSTRATION **BHASKARAN**

Pratap is an author and journalist.

The man and the plan

The BCCI will field Ganguly as ICC chairman only if it gets enough backing from other members

BY NEERU BHATIA

FORMER SOUTH AFRICA captain Graeme Smith wants Sourav Ganguly to be chairman of the International Cricket Council. But what does the former India captain and current president of the Board of Control for Cricket in India want? Ganguly is maintaining a guarded silence and awaiting the Supreme Court's decision on a petition that would allow him and BCCI secretary Jay Shah to continue in their posts till 2025 by diluting their mandatory cooling-off periods. These periods are set to begin in July.

Ganguly, who became president last October, represents the BCCI at the meeting of the ICC board, whose chairman is Shashank Manohar. As a candidate, he will face a stiff challenge from England's Colin Graves. The other likely candidates are former Singapore Cricket Association president Imran Khawaja and Pakistan Cricket Board chairman Ehsan Mani.

Ganguly's election as BCCI president was power packed. Backed by Home Minister Amit Shah, who himself has been president of Gujarat Cricket Association, Ganguly edged out another former India cricketer and veteran administrator Brijesh Patel. Shah's son, Jay, was elected secretary and Ganguly has played a huge role in showing him the ropes in the BCCI.

Earlier, Ganguly had received

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's support to become Cricket Association of Bengal president after the demise of Jagmohan Dalmiya. So he has been walking a tightrope, handling pressures from various political corners. A move to the ICC would relieve him of these political pressures as well as take care of the cooling-off period.

THE WEEK has learnt that Manohar is backing Ganguly as his successor, but Ganguly's candidature largely depends on who and what the BCCI wants. "We have not discussed this at all," BCCI treasurer Arun Thakur Dhumal told THE WEEK. "First, let the ICC announce the election process and then we will discuss it in the board." The ICC board, which met on May 28, deferred the announcement. When it met again on June 10, the focus was on debating the fate of the October's ICC World T20 in Australia instead.

The BCCI wants a candidate who will pursue and preserve its interests in the ICC board room, having seen them diminished during Manohar's time. Said a senior board member: "We will only put up a candidate if we have the backing of enough ICC members. The BCCI cannot afford to lose—it will be a loss of face for both the candidate and the BCCI."

The ICC made changes to its constitution and structure in 2017. It stated that the chairperson, who must be a current or former direc-

tor, shall be elected by the board of directors by a secret ballot, every two years. Notably, the board would also have one independent female director, a post currently held by former PepsiCo CEO Indra Nooyi. The numbers game is no longer as simple as it was in the days of Jagmohan Dalmiya and N. Srinivasan.

"World cricket needs strong leadership in this time of crisis," said Dhumal. The BCCI is avidly awaiting the details of the election process because as a senior member pointed out, "The board can make changes to the process if it wants."

The election process was deferred in the May 28 meeting as Manohar was reportedly upset over email leaks ahead of the meeting—a spate of nasty email exchanges between the BCCI and the ICC over pending tax issues. The dispute is over tax liabilities during the 2016 World T20 in India, amounting to \$23.7 million, which is pending before the ICC disputes resolution committee. Ganguly has managed to get an extension from the ICC till December to discuss the matter with the Indian government and revert.

In the leaked email, ICC officials have allegedly threatened to revoke India's hosting rights of the 2021 ICC World T20 if the BCCI is unable to solve the tax issue. Many in the BCCI are suspicious of Manohar, accusing him of "deliberately delaying the election process as well as decision

on postponement of the T20 World Cup", but it is understood that the ICC will not take a decision in haste.

Another issue is that if this year's World T20 is moved to 2021, then the one scheduled for India next year could in turn be moved to 2022. But India, which will be hosting the 2023 ODI World Cup, does not find it feasible to host two World Cup events so close to each other. It remains to be seen how Ganguly manages to work

out a solution acceptable to all board members over this dilemma, and it will be a litmus test of his ability to lead world cricket in times of unprecedented crisis.

As for the election, it is learnt that the PCB was keen on backing Ganguly, despite relations between the boards hitting the nadir, until Ehsan Mani's name came up. Mani is a strong candidate as he is a former ICC president and has been the PCB's representative

at the ICC in the past. Three or four ICC members have apparently asked him to fight the election. "He is keen, too, but it could also be that Mani's name may be pushed to split votes especially in Asia and ensure Colin Graves gets an advantage," said a source in Pakistan cricket.

Everything hinges on Ganguly being announced as a candidate. If that happens, he will be a strong favourite. **●**

PRINCE, PONDERING

Ganguly is awaiting the Supreme Court's decision on a petition to allow him to continue as BCCI chief till 2025

SALIL BERA

Rahul Dravid,
head of cricket, National Cricket Academy

Hope we don't lose a lot of the cricket season

BY NEERU BHATIA

APART FROM OVERSEEING cricket activity at the National Cricket Academy, Rahul Dravid's responsibilities include mentoring, coaching and motivating players, coaches and support staff. The former India captain has also been working closely with the coaches of the national men's, women's and developmental teams. Dravid, the go-to man for Indian cricket during his playing days, is now paving the way for emerging cricketers.

The summer months for NCA coaches are usually spent preparing youngsters in training camps for the upcoming season. But with Covid-19 wiping out the entire off-season, Dravid and his team have had to constantly change plans for players across age groups. Even though the government has said that sports activity can resume, cricket has been a non-starter for various reasons. The NCA in Bengaluru is yet to open.

The BCCI is working closely with Dravid's team to bring out a set of guidelines and SOPs once cricket activity gradually resumes. Dravid, however, feels that resumption is still some time away. Speaking to THE WEEK, Dravid spoke about training schedules, bio-secure environments and flexible guidelines. Excerpts:

Q/The NCA is working on a roadmap for return to cricket. What will it entail?

A/To be honest, I think everything is uncertain right now. How much cricket will be played and what it will take to be able to play depends on the guidelines from the government and medical experts. For us at NCA, the busiest time is from April to June. We normally have our zonal, U-16, U-19, U-23 camps happening at this time. [But] we had to keep redrawing plans. I just hope we don't lose a lot of our cricket season, and that we can get some cricket this year.

Q/What are the alternate plans for missing out on crucial off-season training?

A/We have been making plans for all scenarios... but all of it looks very uncertain right now. The monsoon will set in

over the next two months, and cricket will be possible only in few parts of the country. We will have to consider all this.

I was hoping we would resume training at NCA in May, but that did not happen. We cannot rush young boys and girls even [with] bio-secure bubbles.

I don't think we are in a position to resume.... It is better to be patient and wait. We have to take it month by month. One has to look at all options. If the domestic season, which usually starts by August/September, starts in October... one has to see whether the season should be shortened.

Q/The Sports Authority of India has implemented graded resumption with some outdoor training for elite athletes.

A/SAI centres are different. They have athletes staying at the centre and access is limited to those inside the campuses. The NCA will possibly open initially for some local cricketers. Those arriving from other places will have to first quarantine themselves for 14 days. Whether that is possible, we have to see.

For domestic cricket, fortunately, we were able to complete most of our competitions before the lockdown. We have to see whether players are comfortable with inter-state travel. Our training programmes will depend on which domestic tournament will be played first. If it is T20, then we will start the programme accordingly.

In the past few months, our physios and trainers have been in touch with senior men's and women's players and some [India A and India B] players. They have been provided with programmes to follow during the lockdown.

Q/Is your team preparing guidelines for players to start individual outdoor training? And how much of a role will state associations play in that?

A/State academies will probably be the first place for players to train. But these have been closed, too. They will have to follow guidelines given by the BCCI and the NCA.



SAJEESH SANKAR

Our NCA physios can easily manage the fitness programmes of individual players. There will be certain SOPs for all state associations to follow. However, they also will have to react as per their prevailing local situation.

Q/Your thoughts on creating a bio-secure environment for players. Is it possible in India?

A/In international cricket, it is possible. I believe the England-West Indies series [played in a bio-secure environment] will be a lesson for all. It has its own challenges. It is not as easy at the domestic level.

There were certain things we were not doing a month ago, but now those activities are allowed. Maybe by the time we start our cricket, a need for a bio-secure environment will not be there.

Q/Are sub-junior and junior cricketers going to be hit this season, given how parents and coaches would be concerned for their safety?

A/The boys and girls have not had any cricket tournaments as they usually happen after the exams. But it is OK as safety comes first. We will have to try and ensure we can get some cricket for them. Club cricket has not resumed. That is the real grassroots-level cricket for us, as each state conducts their own tournaments for all age groups.

The best-case scenario is that we will be able to hold some camps once cricket activity is allowed. The worst-case scenario is the season is totally washed out (for age-group cricket). Missing a few months of cricket is nothing compared with ensuring we are safe.



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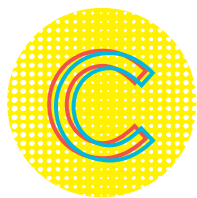
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GAME OF PHONES

The pandemic has been a tipping point
in the rise of eSports in India

BY VARUN RAMESH





ompetitive video gaming and competitive Indian parenting seldom mix well. For many parents, a child is wasting time if he is hunched over a computer or lounging on a couch playing PUBG. Would not his attention be better spent on an entrance exam, or two?

The dedicated gamer could rightfully object that it is not just a game, but a sport. There are tournaments to be won with purses running into crores, and excellence demands practice. "Sachin [Tendulkar] once said he hit a ball one lakh times," says Akshat Rathee, cofounder and managing director of NODWIN Gaming, a leading eSports solutions company.

The eSports professional is leagues above the casual gamer. "For the first 0-200 hours of play, you just love the game; 100-500 hours in, you build game skills; 500-1,000 hours in game, you are building team skills," he says. "Beyond 1,000 hours is when you become an eSports athlete."

Rathee can confirm that eSports pays off in India. His company is in the B2B side of the industry, acquiring streaming rights and distribution for the growing number of eSports tournaments. NODWIN Gaming partnered with Disney+ Hotstar to stream the ESL India Premiership 2020, "India's flagship eSports tournament"; NODWIN also runs a show called eSports Mania on MTV India. Like any sport, eSports has hundreds of people working to make the scene happen—from players and organisers to content creators, marketers and influencers.

The Indian eSports scene had multiple tipping points for its growth: The 4G revolution, the explosive accessibility of PUBG (with over 116 million installs in India by the end of 2019, according to data company Sensor Tower), and now, a lockdown.

"The Indian video game industry is thriving, despite the widespread economic disruption caused by the coronavirus," says Yash Pariani, founder and director, Indian Gaming League (IGL), which hosts tournaments online. "Initial data shows huge growth in playing time by up to 10 to 12 hours a day along with a 100 per cent increase in new user registrations and up to 150 per cent [increase in] sales since the lockdown began."

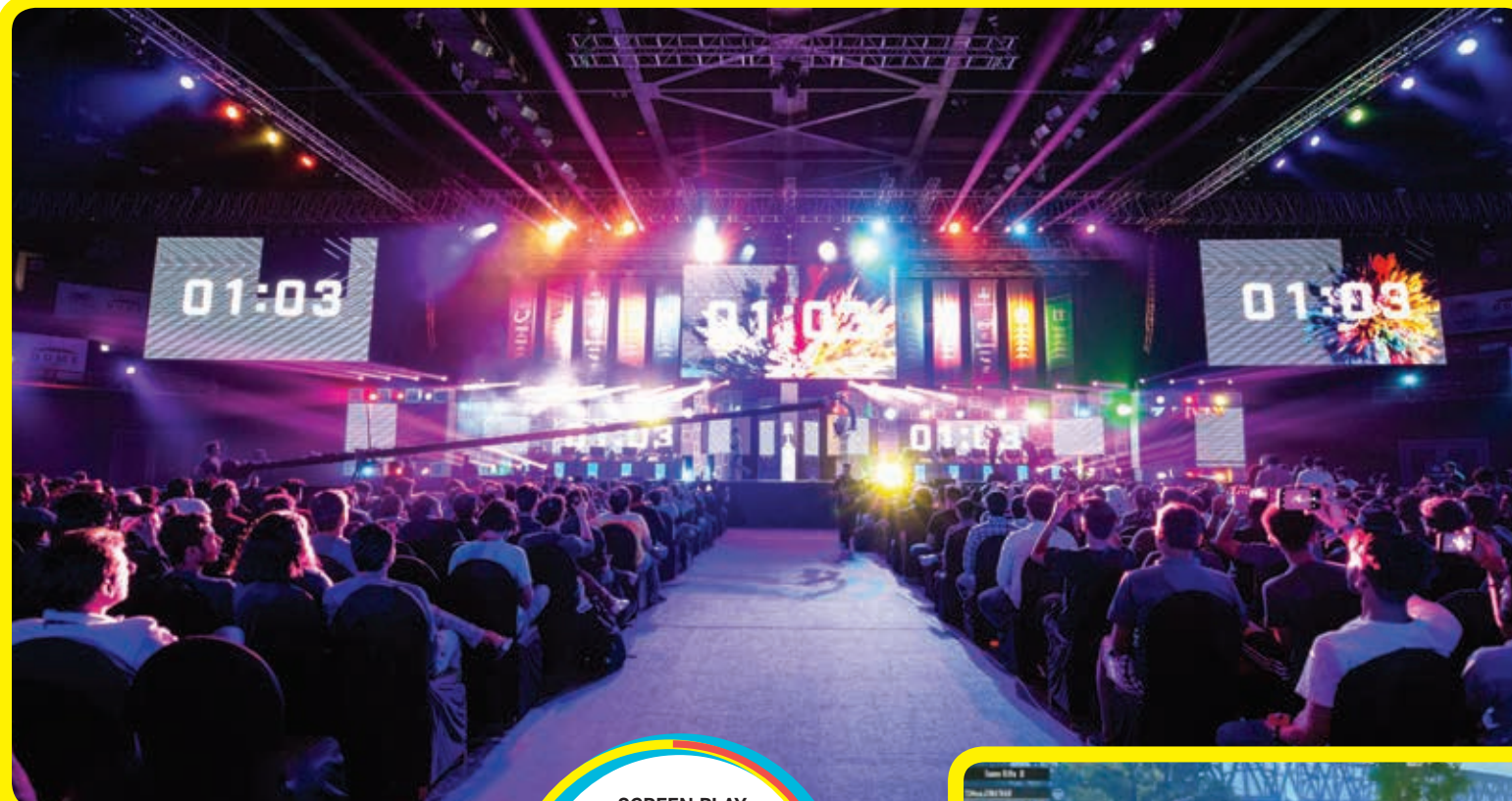


PHOTO COURTESY NODWIN GAMING

SCREEN PLAY

The ESL One Mumbai, a major Dota 2 event, in 2019; (right) a screenshot from the recent OnePlus Domin8 PUBG tournament, featuring cricketer K.L. Rahul

Amid lockdown, OnePlus organised the Domin8 tournament, pitting pro-gamers like Tanmay 'Scout' Singh against national cricketers, including K.L. Rahul and Smriti Mandhana. The company says live-streamers on platforms such as YouTube and Twitch reported a fourfold increase in viewership during the lockdown. As for eSports events, Rathee says he saw a triple-digit percentage increase in viewership in this period.

For the Indian gamer, lockdown may have created a conducive environment. "Earlier, when a kid used to play games all the time, he would be reprimanded," Rathee says. "In a hostile environment, people do not listen to you. 'I do not care whether it makes you intelligent, I do not care whether it is in the Olympics or not,' he would be told. Now, he is no longer reprimanded because parents are telling him to stay indoors."

The challenge with eSports is that games like Counter-Strike: Global Offensive (CS:GO), PUBG and Defense of the Ancients (Dota) cannot be equated to football or cricket—videogames are publisher-owned and copyrighted. For example, were the Olympics to have a first-person shooter



PHOTO COURTESY ONEPLUS

In April, just 10 days after the Australian Grand Prix was cancelled after an engineer tested positive for the virus, the Virtual Grand Prix was announced. While virtual F1 has been around since 2017, the 2020 series was marked by the absence of the physical sport. According to eSports Charts, the six virtual Grand Prix Series in Monaco, Spain, the Netherlands, China, Vietnam and Bahrain had nearly 18 million viewers put together—and that is only on Facebook, Twitch and YouTube.

Training game

For players, life under lockdown has been a mix of training to get better and training to relieve monotony.

Says Samir 'Kratos' Choubey of TeamIND: "For the [PUBG Mobile Pro League], we have cut practice sessions. Our schedule is to wake up by 11am, freshen up and eat by 12:30pm. By 1pm, we start with warm-up sessions and drills."

"In this current lockdown, we have decided to have more breaks as it is really unhealthy for our players to stick with their devices all the time and not go out," he adds.

The stakes grow larger with each event. The recently-concluded PMPL South Asia had a \$138,500 prize pool. The ESL India Premiership 2020's sponsors include Mercedes-Benz and Red Bull. Professional PUBG Mobile players in India can make up to ₹50 lakh a year, says Rathee.

The signs are promising. More people watched the League of Legends World Championship Finals than the Oscars. The prize pool for Dota 2's The International 2019 tournament, at more than \$34 million, was more than thrice that of the 2019 ICC ODI World Cup. And now, Fnatic, one of the world's most renowned eSports organisations competing across titles (sort of like if Manchester United fielded teams in multiple sports), maintains an all-Indian roster for its PUBG Mobile team.

When Samir 'Kratos' Choubey started gaming professionally, he did not tell his parents about it. Now, he says his dad watches all his matches, and probably knows more about the game than him! The future of eSports, at this pace, is bright. ●

ONE-WOMAN ARMY

National award winner Keerthy Suresh is all set to wow you with an emotional thriller

BY PRIYANKA BHADANI

Ever since she won applause in the Telugu industry for her performance in *Mahanati* (2018), a biopic of yesteryear actor Savitri, Keerthy Suresh has wanted to do a Tamil film that could do for her what *Mahanati* did for her in Telugu. *Penguin*, simultaneously shot in Tamil and Telugu, could be that film, she feels. It is set to release on June 19 on Amazon Prime Video. In it, she plays a pregnant woman in search of her missing child. “This is an emotional thriller,” she says. “I am happy to be part of a genre I have not tried before.”

Having mostly worked with established directors, working with debutant Eashvar Karthic might have been challenging. “But it never seemed like I was working with someone new,” she says. “It seemed like he had done a lot of movies. From the way he narrated the script to the way he executed it, it was beautiful. I am not sure if a lot of debutant directors are like that.”

The film deals a lot with motherhood, so it was natural that the first person she called to prepare for the role was her mother, actor Menaka. “But then, I relied mostly on Eashvar’s brief,” she says. “His script was inspired by his wife’s pregnancy. I used to ask him a lot of questions.”

Except for *Mahanati*, which, as a biopic, required a lot of research, her preparation for roles has been fairly simple. “Before the film begins, I mostly try to crack the look. Moving on to the finer nuances of the character happens only when I go on the set,” she says.

Born to Suresh Kumar, a Malayalam film producer whose movies include *Coolie* (1983), *Charithram* (1989) and *Vishnulokam* (1991), and Menaka Suresh, a prominent south Indian actor of the 1980s, Keerthy and her elder sister Revathy always dreamed of associating with films in some way. They wanted to be like their parents, says Keerthy. School vacations were spent on their father’s film sets, something that she enjoyed a lot. So, when an opportunity came to act in one of his films when she was seven years old, she grabbed it. She was cast in *Pilots* (2000), followed by *Achaneyanenikkishtam* (2001) and *Kuberan* (2002), all produced by her father. “Our family background has influenced us a lot,” she says. “That is the reason why my sister works behind the camera [as a costume designer], and I in front of it.”

She considers it a boon that she grew up in two different states. Born in Thiruvananthapuram, the family moved to Chennai when she was very young, and then moved back when she was in the fourth stand-



ROLE PLAY
Stills from
Mahanati and
(left) *Penguin*

ard. After completing her schooling, she went to Chennai once again to study fashion designing. Although initially she toyed with the idea of becoming a fashion designer, fate had other plans when filmmaker Priyadarshan, a friend of her father, offered her a role in *Geethanjali* (2013), alongside Malayalam superstar Mohanlal. She could not be happier to accept the role.

The film, in which she had a double role, did not perform well at the box-office, but her performance was applauded. She took up a more challenging role as a blind girl in *Ring Master* (2014), which was a hit, followed by many films in Tamil and Telugu. But none of them gave her the recognition that *Mahanati* did, for which she won a national award.

The award, of course, made a big

difference to the way people saw her as an actor. But even before it, she knew that something had changed after *Mahanati*. “Including *Penguin*, all the women-centric films that I am doing today are because of *Mahanati*,” she says. “The film [gave a huge boost] to my career. It opened up a lot of opportunities.”

About *Penguin*, producer Karthik Subbaraj says: “Eashvar felt that the artiste who performs the lead role would have to be very strong, and so we chose Keerthy. A typical heroine could not have played the protagonist—a pregnant mother who has lost her child.”

That the film is releasing on a digital platform hardly makes a difference to Keerthy. She needed this film as her last two releases in Telugu and Tamil were two years and one-and-a-half years ago respectively. Her Malayalam film, *Marakkar: Arabikadalinte Simham*, that reunites her with Priyadarshan and Mohanlal, was to hit the theatres on March 26, but got

delayed because of the lockdown.

“At this point, a release was very important for me because it has been a while now,” she says. Although she feels that a theatrical release would have been better for a thriller like *Penguin*, she does not mind the film premiering on a digital platform, as it has the advantage of being released in many countries simultaneously.

Keerthy was initially roped in for

Maidaan, a Hindi sports film produced by Boney Kapoor, but because of unavailability of dates, she had to pull out. To make a mark in Bollywood is a cherished dream of most actors, but Keerthy is not actively chasing it. “I want to explore a different language and a different culture,” she says. “It gives you a lot more exposure as a performer. But I will wait for the [right] time.”

—with Lakshmi Subramanian



Blood begets blood

BY NAVIN J. ANTONY

George Floyd was alive when Spike Lee began filming *Da 5 Bloods*, an ambitious film about four black war veterans who call themselves the Bloods, hunting for the remains of the fifth Blood—their prophet-like platoon leader “Storming” Norman, killed in action in Vietnam.

The evening Floyd walked into a grocery store in Minneapolis to buy cigarettes, Lee was at home, readying the film for release on Netflix. It was Memorial Day, a public holiday in the US for honouring and mourning military personnel who had died while serving.

In Lee’s film, the Bloods go into a Vietnam that has drastically changed. “Wow, look at all this!” exclaims one of them as a young Vietnamese guide leads them through a crowded market square surrounded by high-rises and burger outlets. “They didn’t need us. They should’ve just sent Mickey Ds, Pizza Hut and The Colonel, and we would have defeated the Viet Cong in one week!”

Floyd, too, could have found himself in a place that was both familiar and strange. The owner of the grocery store, a 35-year-old Palestinian American called Mahmoud Abumayyaleh, knew Floyd as the “big teddy bear” who would drop in occasionally to pay phone bills. That evening, because it was Memorial Day, Abumayyaleh was away and Floyd had to deal with one of his young, inexperienced attendants.

In *Da 5 Bloods*, the motives of the veterans are not entirely honourable. Their reverence for their fallen leader is not the only factor that prompts them

to return to Vietnam; they also want to recover a pile of gold bricks that was buried with him. The gold was the US government’s bribe to the native people for their help in fighting the Viet Cong. The Bloods get hold of it during the war and bury it. “If they ask, we say the VC got it,” Storming Norman tells the Bloods shortly before he dies. “Later on, we come back and collect.”

Floyd’s intentions, too, much like the Bloods’s, may have been less than honourable. He was inebriated, and he allegedly bought cigarettes with a fake \$20 note, the ink on which was reportedly still drying. To the shop assistant, Abumayyaleh’s teddy bear looked threat-

eningly big enough to call the cops.

In the film, one of the Bloods, Paul, deserts his friends after obtaining his share of gold bricks. “You made me malignant,” he says. As he escapes with the lucre, Paul looks down the camera, at the audience, and delivers a long monologue. The war, he says, polluted “my bloodstream, my cells, my DNA and my... soul”. “But I ain’t dying from that shit,” he says defiantly. “You hear me: You will not kill Paul. The US government will not take me out. I will choose when and how I die!”

Paul, it turns out, meets a fate that is not very different from Floyd’s. And both the deaths lead to violent confrontations. “Bloods don’t die; we just multiply,” goes one prophetic line, early in the film.

Spike Lee’s films are usually dense, topical and resonant, but never has he directed a film as eerily fitting and grandiloquent as *Da 5 Bloods*. Watching the film is quite like feeling the reel and the real converging and collapsing. It is never a comfortable watch.

The topicality can also be off-putting

at times. There are indeed powerfully subversive moments (in a nod to *Apocalypse Now*, Wagner’s Ride of the Valkyries blares as the Bloods set off on a boat to the jungle) and thematic stresses (Paul is a Trump supporter who wears a MAGA cap that ends up being worn by a murdering Frenchman). But, all these elements never quite come together to make a great film. Like most Spike Lee movies, *Da 5 Bloods* is less than the sum of its parts.

But then, Lee is not a filmmaker in the conventional sense of the word. Each of his movies (except the horrible *Oldboy*) is labelled as “a Spike Lee joint”. That is how he ‘signs’ his movies. A Spike Lee joint, he once explained, was “really all the ingredients that I put into my film. Whatever film it is, whatever subject matter is. The connective tissue is that it’s coming through me.”

Da 5 Bloods is as messy and unsophisticated as anything Lee has rolled in film. But he may well want you to savour and experience it in parts, rather than devour and understand it in whole. **1**



DA 5 BLOODS

Available on Netflix

Rating ★ ★ ★ ★ ★



oogle has made the public beta of Android 11 available for its Pixel phones.

A few more devices from other manufacturers will get it soon. While there are numerous subtle and not-so-subtle changes and improvements, some of them stand out and make a strong case for upgrading to the new version.

Notifications

Google makes it a point to refine the notifications panel in every iteration of Android. In Android 11, the notifications are separated into three sections—conversations, alert notifications and silent notification. Conversations is where all your chat notifications are displayed. An interesting new feature here is that any chat can be turned into bubbles, just like the Facebook Messenger chat heads. The media playback has been moved from the notification panel to quick settings.

Power menu

The power menu has been redesigned to accommodate smart home control buttons that had been buried in the Google Home app.

Home screen

When you swipe up on the home screen, you get three options—screenshot, select or share.

Location permissions

Now you have the option of using four settings for location identification: one time, allow for an app, ask every time, or deny.

Other things

Among the many other tweaks are scrolling screenshots that can grab an entire web page, picture-in picture (mostly used by video streaming apps) that can be resized, and an updated keyboard. **1**



GEEK
SPEAK

ANDROID 11 BETA: MORE FEATURES, MORE POWER

BY MAIJO ABRAHAM



The Boy from Bihar....

When people say Bollywood is a cruel place, I reply, "Yes, it is! The beast we call 'Showbiz', spares no one". This hungry beast took one more victim last week, when 34-year-old Sushant Singh Rajput took his own life in Mumbai. I had once met him briefly at an awards function a few years ago. He was there as the boyfriend of one of the ladies, who was being felicitated as a 'Woman Achiever'. He arrived late, kept his head down throughout, and left early. I remember thinking to myself that this young man lacked hustling skills and was not at all socially adept. Or else, he would have worked the room full of influential producers and directors, and sweet-talked a few. But this young man was made of some other stuff. He had a sense of self and a sense of pride—the very attributes that may have contributed to the tragedy that left the nation shocked.

Forget *Gangs of Wasseypur* and think 'Gangs of Bollywood'. The deeply incestuous world of movie-making in Mumbai works in such insidious ways that young actors hoping to make it big on the basis of their talent alone are given a harsh reality check by the Big Boys, who run the show on their own terms. Unless these 'outsiders' agree to play ball and kowtow to their rules. Sushant may have been a bit too intense, too cerebral and too sensitive for this lot. His amazing trajectory in films speaks for itself. The directors who worked with him have mentioned the rigour he invested in each role during his seven short but impactful years in Bollywood. I have watched five of his 10 films, so I can say this confidently: as a nuanced and polished actor, Sushant was streets ahead of most of the current lot of propped up 'stars' favoured by the Big Boys. I watched *M.S. Dhoni: The Untold Story* twice within the span of a week, just to catch what I may have missed the first time. And to

think that Sushant spent months training with Kiran More to perfect Dhoni's famous 'helicopter shot' and get the cricket captain's body language right. That is called admirable dedication to one's craft.

Yes, all this was noted by Sushant's growing legion of fans. It was also noted by the Big Boys who had shoved him out of major productions earlier. Undeterred, Sushant gave two hit movies made on comparatively smaller budgets (*Kedarnath* and *Chhichhore*), even as his personal life may have been coming apart. There was a great deal of chatter around the social ostracism he was being subjected to by this

same lobby. It was said that he was not invited to major Bollywood parties and was snubbed by prominent filmmakers.

The Boy from Bihar preferred to gaze at real stars through his prized possession—a Meade LX600 telescope with a spectrometer that 'gave a feel of a time machine'. The Boy from Bihar, who wanted to be an astronaut, had won the National Olympiad in Physics, and remained an astronomy buff till the end. One can safely say, Sushant was not the average Bollywood actor, even though he did have that six-pack and could out-dance any of

his contemporaries.

Something slipped somewhere. And even though he was under treatment for clinical depression for the past few months, when the end came, his emotional reserve was not sufficient to save him. The issue of mental health is the elephant in the room which very few people are ready to confront. The lockdown has taken its toll on countless individuals. Going forward, the feeling of being trapped, alone and without support will claim more victims. Let Sushant Singh Rajput's untimely death serve as a wake up call to all of us struggling with mental demons, big and small. It takes nothing to reach out and respond to a cry for help—you could save someone's life.



ILLUSTRATION BHASKARAN

www.shobaade.blogspot.com

Reaching for the stars

Sushant Singh Rajput spent his life in search of a higher purpose

BY K. SUNIL THOMAS

Hindsight can sometimes be quite eerie. The last question I asked Sushant Singh Rajput after a day of working together on a photo-shoot and interview for THE MAN magazine in Mumbai a couple of years ago, was whether he would give it all up.

The actor replied that he may just go and do anything, and always has, throughout his life. He pointed out how he gave up engineering a few months before getting his degree, and the

TV show he was headlining (*Pavitra Rishta*) when it was getting good TRPs. "I [will] do [anything] when I feel like doing it," he said. "As long as I enjoy the process and have different methods to try, I will keep doing it."

At what point did Sushant run out of that joie de vivre and all the glorious uncertainties that life could throw his way? For, a little earlier, he had stated with self-assurance, "I like not knowing, not being careful at times and trying out different things." He had his reason, too. "[Only then] will you stumble onto something that is absolutely new."

Sushant's might have been a life gone too soon, but it was certainly spent in search of a higher purpose beyond a stereotypical starry existence. Born in the dusty plains of Bihar, he was brilliant at everything he did. A National Olympiad winner in Physics, he cleared all 11 entrance exams he appeared for, finally choosing to study mechanical engineering at the then Delhi College of Engineering.

However, music and dance soon beckoned, and he abandoned engineering to move to Mumbai, joined a dance school and started looking for acting gigs. After taking acting classes, going for several auditions and generally roughing it out—things that every outsider in Bollywood has to go through—Sushant hopped onto his way through dance and television soaps to the big league in Bollywood. His first film *Kai Po Che* (2013) was a rage, followed by seven years of delivering mostly hits like *PK* (2014) and *M.S. Dhoni: The Untold Story* (2016). His last release *Chhichhore* (2019), in which he played a father who nurses a suicidal son back to life, grossed more than ₹200 crore at the box office.

But satisfaction never comes easy to a thirsty soul. His financial issues may have been solved, but the mind was still restless. Nothing illustrated it better than how he got his first luxury car, a blue Maserati. As a child, from the time he got a blue toy Maserati from an instant noodle pack, young Sushant always dreamt of owning one once he grew up. After becoming a star, he went to order one, only to be told they did not have it in blue. "I waited for seven months and got myself a blue Maserati only to realise two days later that [the high was gone]," he had said. "I got used to it very quickly. Now, I needed another high."

What he perhaps did not find on terra firma, he looked for in the infinite skies. His fascination with space was well known. He regularly posted on social media what he saw from his high-end telescope. He also did a certification course at NASA to prepare for his dream project of making India's first space film. He had even installed a VR-set in his home, which let him virtually fly Apollo 11. "After you do that... you feel something is missing, after that complete immersion of looking at the moon, the earth, and being in space," he had said. In hindsight, Sushant was probably meant to be a wandering star up above, not a shooting star down below. ☾

ROHAN SHRESTHA / THE MAN



Cheering for mom

Dimple Kapadia has impressed filmmaker Christopher Nolan and actor-filmmaker Kenneth Branagh with her performance in Nolan's latest film, *Tenet*. And no one is more thrilled about it than daughter **Twinkle Khanna**. "Mother hits it out of the park once again," she tweeted. Branagh had earlier said that Nolan was "thrilled" with Dimple and that actor John David Washington "was completely in love with her" by the time they completed shooting. *Tenet*, a spy thriller, is set to release on July 17.



AFP



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GETTY IMAGES

That's a sixer!

As **Kiara Advani's** first film, *Fugly*, completed six years, she shared several stills from the film on Instagram. "Throwback to six years ago where it all began," she posted. "My very first film will always be so special." She also thanked the *Fugly* team, including Akshay Kumar, Jimmy Shergill and a few others. From *Fugly* to *Good Newwz*, the actor has come a long way. She will be seen next in *Laxmmi Bomb*, opposite Akshay Kumar, and *Bhool Bhulaiyaa 2*, opposite Kartik Aaryan.

CONTRIBUTOR / PRIYANKA BHADANI
COMPILED BY ANJULY MATHAI



FOTOCORP

Blood is thicker

In a series of tweets, actor **Ranvir Shorey** recounted an incident exposing nepotism in Bollywood. He was at an awards show co-hosted by a star kid, who went on to win an award presented to him by his parents. "The star kid walks from the host's dais to accept the award and makes a short thank you speech and heads back to hosting the rest of the show like business as usual," Shorey tweeted. "This is how mainstream Bollywood is a family." His tweets assume importance in the wake of the death of Bollywood 'outsider' Sushant Singh Rajput.

Spilling the beans

Actor-activist **Rajshri Deshpande**, who was recently seen in Anurag Kashyap's *Choked: Paisa Bolha Hai*, has been opening her heart on social media in a series of posts. She spoke about how she was "choking within" before a dance sequence in the film and how, after the success of *Sacred Games*, a filmmaker told her to stop her social work "or people will forget you and you will have no career in the film industry". Deshpande rose to prominence with her role in Pan Nalin's *Angry Indian Goddesses* (2015), which won her much acclaim.

The prince and I

In a new book, *Meghan and Harry: The Real Story*, author Lady Colin Campbell reveals juicy details of the lives of **Prince Harry** and **Meghan Markle**. Like how Markle's rift with the royal family began just four days after her wedding, at Prince Charles' 70th birthday party. The book, set to release next month, "exposes how the royal couple tried and failed to change the royal system...." Campbell has previously written biographies on Princess Diana and Queen Elizabeth.



GETTY IMAGES



An era of deglobalisation?

Though it is too early to assert this with any certitude, it seems increasingly likely that Covid-19 will inaugurate an era of deglobalisation. The signs are mounting that the world may embrace isolationism and protectionism in a far more enthusiastic way than prior to the outbreak, including in India.

The indications are evident. The pandemic has confirmed, for many, that in times of crisis, people rely on their governments to shield them; that global supply chains are vulnerable to disruption and are therefore unsustainable; and that dependence on foreign countries for essential goods (such as pharmaceuticals) could be fatal.

There is a rush to reset global supply chains and raise trade barriers. The demand for more protectionism and “self-reliance” (echoed in Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s call for “aatmanirbharta”), for bringing manufacturing and production value chains back home or at least closer to home, is mounting. Along with the global flow of capital and investments, multi-border pipelines and energy grids, as well as international travel across free and open borders, all seem vulnerable in the post-Covid-19 era.

The world economy had thrived since globalisation began in 1980 on an open system of free trade. That had already been shaken by the financial crash of 2008-2009 and the American trade war with China. With Covid-19, exports are falling everywhere, and indications are that world goods trade may shrink by 10 to 30 per cent this year, if not more. Meanwhile, the increasing pressure to “decouple” from China means that without inexpensive Chinese labour and subsidised inputs, the era of cheap, globalised goods may be over.

Covid-19 has also convinced many that strict border and immigration controls are essential, and that national interests should trump international

cooperation. To many, including those around Modi, the answer lies in strong government, in putting the nation’s needs over individual citizens’ freedoms, and in dispensing with democratic niceties, from federalism to parliamentary oversight, in what the government deems to be the national interest.

Those of us who had begun to imagine the globe as “one world” will have to revise our thinking. Support for nationalist strongmen may increase exponentially. Unfounded rumours and accusations against people blamed on the basis of their national, religious, ethnic or regional identity have had a field day in many countries. In India, citizens from northeast have suffered racial discrimination because of their supposedly “Chinese” features. Social media

and nativist populism have amplified prejudices; the fact that the Tablighi Jamaat gathering just before the lockdown—whose attendees spread the infection to many states when they returned home—was used to justify open bigotry and discrimination against Muslims. The current atmosphere has empowered those who seek to spread communal hatred and bigotry.

Similar things have happened elsewhere in the world.

There is no doubt that the Covid-19 pandemic was a “mega-shock” to the global system—one that is likely to disrupt the existing world order. As sovereignties are reasserted across the world, and treaties and trade agreements increasingly questioned, multilateralism could be the next casualty. President Trump’s announcement of the withdrawal of the United States from the World Health Organisation may be a harbinger of a greater unravelling to follow—of the international system so painstakingly constructed after World War II. Instead of strengthening the capacity of our global institutions to cope with a future crisis, the world’s reaction to Covid-19 may well end up destroying the most fundamental feature it has exposed—the idea of our common humanity.





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