

SPECIAL REPORT **HATHRAS**
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**US ELECTION & THE
INDIAN-AMERICAN VOTE**

**FOREIGN WEED THREATENS
WHEAT CROPS**

**McKINSEY (INDIA) CHIEF:
MOST SEVERE GDP DECLINE
IN FOUR DECADES**

OCTOBER 18, 2020

THEWEEK



HUNTING DIRTY MONEY

How Enforcement Directorate used anti-money-laundering operations to become India's top crime-fighting agency, even surpassing the CBI

PLUS

Government indulging in smear campaign

DAVID GRIFFITHS,
AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

ED has become Modi government's puppet

V. NARAYANASAMY,
CHIEF MINISTER,
PUDUCHERRY



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contents

FOR THE WEEK OCTOBER 12 - OCTOBER 18

16



US ELECTION

Joe Biden and Kamala Harris are pulling out all stops to woo the Indian-American community

42



SPECIAL REPORT

There are many offshoots of the Hathras crime, but in its root lies fear

63



@LEISURE

Most circus companies in India are reluctant to go online despite taking multiple hits

30 COVER STORY



TARGET LOCKED
ED personnel after raiding jewellery shops in Viviana Mall, Thane, in connection with the Nirav Modi case

OLD HOUND, NEW TEETH

With wider functional freedom, the Enforcement Directorate has been transformed into a crime-fighting juggernaut of the Union government. In fact, the agency has surpassed the Central Bureau of Investigation as the country's most prominent investigative agency.

- ♦ ED, CBI have become puppets of Modi government: V. Narayanasamy, chief minister, Puducherry
- ♦ ED has a better conviction rate than other agencies: Karnal Singh, former director, Enforcement Directorate
- ♦ Indian government is silencing all critical voices: David Griffiths, director, office of the secretary general, Amnesty International

26 MADHYA PRADESH

We will win all bypoll seats: Shivraj Singh Chouhan, chief minister, Madhya Pradesh

28 COMMUNISM IN INDIA @100

India's first woman comrade, Suhasini Chattopadhyay, remains largely uncelebrated in the country's political 'his'tory.

54 THE WEEK VIP

India's GDP could contract between 9 and 12 per cent in the current year: Gautam Kumra, managing partner, McKinsey & Company (India)

56 KARNATAKA

B.S. Yediyurappa's new land reforms are meant to modernise

COLUMNS

- 13 **POWER POINT**
Sachidananda Murthy
- 19 **SOUND BITE**
Anita Pratap
- 25 **FORTHWRITE**
Meenakshi Lekhi
- 52 **SCHIZO-NATION**
Anuja Chauhan
- 59 **DETOUR**
Shobhaa De
- 74 **LAST WORD**
Shashi Tharoor

agriculture. But how good is the plan?

60 CURRENT EVENTS

A highly invasive weed of foreign origin is spreading across north India and it could threaten the country's food security

COVER ILLUSTRATION **BINESH SREEDHARAN**

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Excellent research

Without following the beaten track of black or white binary, your cover story did a commendable job in unscrambling Syama Prasad Mookerjee, the man, and the myths surrounding him (“The man, the melange”, October 4).

That he was a champion of civil liberties and kept himself above the narrowness of communal chauvinism clears the cobwebs around his persona. Your story, hopefully, will be an impetus to look deep into Mookerjee’s life, separating the grain from the chaff.

Raveendranath A.,
On email.

Your cover story was a waste of precious pages. What were you going to achieve with this story? Who is your target? By revealing everything about Mookerjee, can anything in the BJP or the RSS change?

When the country is facing so many other issues, your interest in Mookerjee is indigestible. Hope you will bring us the pulse of the country through other cover stories.

Jayaprakash Reddy,
On email.

Why blame Army?

I went through your report on the Shopian encounter. I feel such a report, on a case of mistaken identity, will only help in tarnishing the image of our security forces (‘Innocent dead’, October 4). What do the so-called human rights activists have to say about the cold-blooded killing of a sarpanch, some months ago, in Jammu and Kashmir?

Do you think highlighting such incidents will boost the morale of the Army, huge battalions of which are presently deployed in the inhospitable

mountains of eastern Ladakh, face to face with a belligerent Chinese army?

The Army believes in the highest traditions of the country, and will not condone any wrongdoings on its part.

K.V. Chandrasekharan,
Bengaluru.

It is good that the Army has admitted that three men from Shopian were killed mistakenly. A hefty compensation should be paid to their families at the earliest. The Army, the CRPF and the Jammu and Kashmir Police should make sure that such incidents do not happen.

Sukhbir Singh,
On email.

More awareness needed

I am sure that the Narendra Modi government will not alienate the farmers (‘Sowing anger’, October 4). It will never take that risk. The Union government needs to create an awareness campaign to convince the farmers that the bills would help them. There is so much of misinformation regarding the bill. Farmers in India have poor bargaining power. It will help the farmers

the first Indian to sacrifice his life for Jammu and Kashmir.

The BJP, today, is harping in on Mookerjee’s legacy, and why not! As part of the Union government’s re-naming spree, many social schemes carry Mookerjee’s name.

Tapesh Nagpal,
On email.

Your cover story on Mookerjee was outstanding, and it gave us so much of information. I was surprised to read that Mookerjee was never influenced by religious considerations. But, then, he could foresee the separatist tendencies in Jammu and Kashmir. It is not an exaggeration if I say that Mookerjee was

HOW TO REACH US

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big time if they are able to sign contracts with private companies.

Devender Tokas,
On email.

The leaders of the Akali Dal know well that the farm reform bill will only benefit farmers. To say that the state mandis will be destroyed in the process is not a wise argument. Why should there be an infrastructure created to procure food grains? Why are we underestimating the farmer? Let them decide for themselves and be competitive.

Nandu Kishore,
On email.

Good job, India

Meenakshi Lekhi makes a very valid point when she said that no country has been 100 per cent successful in containing the virus, while also saying that there have been more hits than misses in the management of Covid-19 ('Forthwrite', October 4). One needs to realise that Covid-19 has affected almost everyone in the world in some manner or the other. It is unfortunate that there have been so many deaths in India. But, one also needs to realise that by and large the government of India has handled this crisis well.

I agree with Lekhi who said India will do well only when all states perform well.

Vyom Prakash,
On email.

India is one of those few countries in the world that

has handled the pandemic well. We have one of the highest recovery rates in the world. So what if the number of positive cases is rising. At least we do not hide the figures, in the manner that some of our neighbouring countries do it. We are on the right path. I also appreciate Lekhi for having written the column after she tested positive. Let us hope that the majority of us will not get affected with the virus. But, just in case we test positive, let us put a brave face.

Gaurav Mitra,
On email.

And, into that trap

What Richard Nixon thought of Indian women half a century ago has lost relevance. Let the Watergate disgraced president rest in his grave ('Last Word', October 4).

His secretary of state, Henry Kissinger, is now 97, and out of sight and out of mind, and on wheelchair. He has no role to play in politics and his past speaks a lot about his anti-India rhetoric.

Navtej Sarna reiterated the established truth that Kissinger is not needed for India to influence American system. Sarna was, subconsciously, guilty of slipping into the Nobel Peace Prize winner's trap by allowing him to have an entire page, knowing fully well Dr K turned redundant everywhere, several decades ago.

Parthasarathy Mandadi,
On email.

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BPH: BENIGN PROSTATIC HYPERPLASIA

What is Prostate?

The prostate gland, part of the male reproductive system, is about the same size and shape as a walnut. It is located below the bladder and in front of the rectum and surrounds the urethra, the tube-like structure that carries urine from the bladder out through the penis. The main function of the prostate is to produce ejaculatory fluid.

What are the common disease conditions of Prostate?

- ❖ Prostatitis (Prostate Gland infection or inflammation)
- ❖ Benign prostatic hyperplasia or BPH (Enlargement of the Gland)
- ❖ Benign Prostatic Obstruction
- ❖ Prostate cancer

What is BPH?

Benign Prostatic Hyperplasia (BPH) is the non-cancerous enlargement of the prostate; usually begins in the fifth decade of life in men and which in many men may cause obstruction to urine flow.

What causes BPH?

Although the cause of BPH is poorly understood, the two major factors necessary for the onset of BPH in men are age and normal testicular function.

What are some of the symptoms associated with BPH?

Since the prostate surrounds the urethra just below the bladder, its enlargement can result in symptoms that irritate or obstruct the bladder. A common symptom is the need to frequently empty the bladder, especially at night. Other symptoms include difficulty in starting the urine flow or dribbling after urination ends. Also, size and strength of the urine stream may decrease.

Which are the most troublesome symptoms?

Many men find that having to get up and go to the toilet at night is the most troublesome aspect of this condition, as it makes them tired during the day. Having to urinate frequently during

the day, sometimes with a sense of urgency, can also be trying for patients, and can make travelling or attending events, such as the theatre or cinema, rather difficult.

Incomplete emptying of the bladder can be progressive and eventually result in complete retention of urine. If this occurs a catheter (tube into the bladder) will be necessary as the bladder rapidly becomes over distended and painful. However, there can be other causes of the above symptoms and the terminology used is Lower Urinary Tract Symptoms (LUTS). LUTS may not always be due to BPH and proper evaluation by the specialist is important.

Is BPH a sign of cancer?

No, it is possible to have both BPH and Prostate Cancer together. Having BPH does not increase your risk of having prostate cancer. However, because early symptoms of both conditions are similar and it is important to see your doctor if you are experiencing any symptoms associated with a urinary condition.

Is BPH a rare condition?

No, it is a common condition and that can affect approximately 50 percent of men between the ages of 51 and 60 and up to 90 percent of men over the age of 80. But remember every patient with BPH does not necessarily require treatment.

How is BPH diagnosed?

- ❖ Assessing the Lower Urinary Tract Symptoms.

In order to help assess the severity of such symptoms, the American Urological Association (AUA) BPH Symptom Score Index was developed. The AUA Symptom score system includes a series of questions that helps in identifying the severity of the problem ranging from mild to severe.

There are other tests that can be used to evaluate the effect of BPH. The tests vary from patient to patient, but the



Dr Umesh Oza

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following are the most common:

- ❖ Physical examination
- ❖ Laboratory Investigations
- ❖ Sonography of the Urinary Tract
- ❖ Urodynamic Studies in select patients

What are some of the treatments available for BPH?

Watchful waiting: Is recommended as an important option for men who have mild symptoms and do not find them particularly bothersome

Medical therapy: Today's most common method for controlling moderate symptoms of BPH. Several medications are available to control moderate symptoms of BPH.

Minimally invasive treatments: Several minimally invasive therapies are available that allows the doctor to access the prostate through urethra and reduce the size of the prostate or decrease obstruction of the urethra.

Surgical treatment: Surgical intervention is necessary in patients in whom benign prostatic obstruction causes renal insufficiency, urinary retention, recurrent urinary infection, bladder calculi, hydronephrosis, or large postvoid residual volume due to obstruction. Surgical options for such patients include transurethral resection of the prostate, transurethral laser prostatectomy (which consists of enucleation, ablation or vaporization), transurethral incision of the prostate, and open prostatectomy in select patients.




Growth with a vision for a POWERful nation



CHAIRMAN'S ADDRESS TO THE SHAREHOLDERS

NAND LAL SHARMA CHAIRMAN & MANAGING DIRECTOR

Dear Shareholders,

It gives me immense pleasure to welcome you to the 32nd Annual General Meeting and to present the Annual Report of your Company for the financial year 2019-20. Your continued interest and support for SJVN is one of our greatest motivations to rise to high standards you expect from us. I consider it my privilege to be associated with this esteemed organization for over 12 Years in different capacities.

The Audited Financial Statements of the Company along with the Reports of the Auditors and Directors for the year 2019-20 are presented for your approval and I take this opportunity to share your Company's performance, position and prospects with you.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE YEAR 2019-20

As head of Team SJVN, my heart is filled with pride, to see the growth of our organization with a rich legacy of hard work & dedication.

It is a matter of immense pride for all of us that living up to its promise of 24 x 7 power supply to the Nation in these testing times, SJVN has achieved the Highest ever cumulative generation of 9678 Million Units in the financial year 2019-20 against the MoU Target of 9100 Million Units, beating its own past record of generating 9346 Million Units. The achievement bears testimony to the competence and unrelenting efforts of our operations and maintenance teams.

The Financial position and performance of the Company during FY 2019-20 has been one of the best. Revenue from operations stood at ₹2701.52 crores and Profit After Tax at ₹1651.89 crores. An interim dividend of ₹1.70 per share was paid in the month of February 2020. In addition, your Board has recommended a final dividend of ₹0.50 per share. Thus, subject to your approval, a total dividend of ₹2.20 per share (₹864.55 crore) is proposed to be paid for FY 2019-20.

Presently, your Company is poised at very crucial juncture of its journey, as it enters the threshold of a new wave of expansion and growth. Marching ahead towards the **Shared vision of 5000 MW by 2023, 12000 MW by 2030 & 25000 MW by 2040**, the Company is propelled forward by energetic aura reflecting flurry of activities at all the Projects that are under various stages of development.

The year under review would be remembered in the history as an year in which your Company not only laid the foundations for it's own long term growth prospects but also pioneered innovative solutions which have the potential of reviving and revolutionizing the entire Hydro Power landscape of our Country.

Dear Shareholders, over the past many years Hydro Power Industry has been subjected to a plethora of legislative and administrative hurdles which cause delays in execution and increased costs and ultimately render the Hydro Projects economically unviable. The problem is compounded by the rock bottom costs of power from renewable energy sources like wind and solar, coupled with stringent environmental laws and high land acquisition costs. The entire Hydro Power Industry has been paralyzed by these systemic impediments, so much so that only a few projects have seen the light of day in the past decade or so.

When confronted with similar problem for our projects in the State of Himachal Pradesh, your Company's Management was absolutely resolute that, it will neither abandon its unviable projects nor push them on backburner. Founded on this sentiment of firm determination and reinforced by innovative thinking and proactive action, we have managed to discover a way out of this stalemate which would serve as a model for the entire Hydro Power Industry to replicate in the times to come. SJVN took the initiative and after multiple rounds of deliberations, it succeeded to convince the Himachal Pradesh Government to provide concessions like deferment of free power, reimbursement of 50% of State GST and booking of 1.5% LADP to any head other than project cost, BOOT/BOOM for 70 years etc, with an objective to bring down hydro tariff around ₹4.5 per unit. We were able to convince and establish before the State Government, that this would be a win-win situation for the Power Producers as well the State concerned. Our efforts were fruitful and on these lines, Govt. of Himachal Pradesh signed MoUs with 3 CPSUs viz. NTPC, NHPC and SJVN for setting up 10 hydropower projects of 2917 MW on Chenab river entailing an investment of about ₹ 28,000 crore. SJVN's initiatives have also received support and endorsement of Ministry of Power which is now urging other States to replicate this model for Projects.

On business expansion front, the **Company has secured three more Hydro Electric Projects namely Bardang HEP (138MW), Puthri HEP (210MW), Reoli Dugli HEP(430MW) in the Chenab river basin in State of Himachal Pradesh** adding 778 MW to Company's Project Portfolio. We have already established Project Offices to expedite works related to these newly allotted projects. Six pre-DPR chapters for Jangri Thopan Powari HEP have been submitted to CEA, Survey work has been completed and finalization of project layout is under progress.

Your Company has also entered into a series of MoUs this year, as a part of its **expansion spree for maximizing its reach to achieve the Vision of New India 2022** as outlined by Hon'ble Prime Minister of India, Shri Narendra Modi in CPSE Conclave 2018.

In the series of domestic roadshows for attracting investment and for ensuring economic activities, Govt. of Himachal Pradesh, organized the 'Power Conclave' and 'Rising Himachal Global Summit' in the month of November 2019. During the course of these events, **SJVN signed MoUs for eight hydro projects totalling 2388 MW**. These projects are located in Satluj, Beas and Chenab river basins in Himachal Pradesh. The development of these projects will usher in an investment of ₹24000 crores and will also result in employment opportunities. We are overwhelmed by the unrelenting support and trust posed by GoHP on our Company.

Another, MoU was signed with NEEPCO to Collaborate & Co-operate for development of Power Projects in India & Abroad with an immediate focus of Northeast and Eastern States of India. SJVN & NEEPCO have agreed to work in alliance in the forms of Joint Ventures (JVs), Special Purpose Vehicles (SPVs) and consortiums.

SJVN & BHEL also entered into an MoU for development of Solar Power projects in India. This MoU aims at building a closer strategic partnership between the parties for jointly pursuing commercial solar power projects through participation in tariff/viability gap funding based competitive bidding

process.

Dear Friends, you all would be glad to know that your **Company has become the first PSU in the country to achieve Level-3 of People Capability Maturity Model (PCMM) Integration**. Committed to continuous improvement and closing the capability gap, SJVN achieved Level-2 certification in April, 2018. This achievement is a testimony to SJVN's commitment to excellence in HR practices and its belief in its human capital capability as a key lever to the realization of its Shared Vision.

Amongst other major accomplishments, Financial Closure for 900 MW Arun-3 HEP was achieved in February 2020. Ground breaking ceremony of 210 MW Luhri Stage - I HEP & 66 MW Dhaulasidh HEP was done in an event presided over by Hon'ble Union Minister of Home Affairs, Shri Amit Shah.

Government of India has selected SJVN as Nodal PSU for execution of 1000 MW Solar Energy Development in Himachal Pradesh. This will further add to the installed capacity of the company and SJVN will contribute in achieving the renewable energy capacity addition targets set by GoI.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE YEAR 2020-21

Dear Shareholders, after an unprecedented and historic Nationwide Lockdown due to COVID - 19, the month of June 2020 saw unrolling of UNLOCK-1 in India with every citizen getting back stronger on his feet with each passing day. The activities of our projects in Construction and Pre-Construction stage had slowed down due to global pandemic crisis. However, the dedication of our employees has once again seen steady progress in the works. We are striving hard with Acceleration Plans to recover the setback of progress suffered by the projects under development during COVID Lockdown.

I am indeed delighted to inform our Members that, during the month of August 2020, **SJVN has bagged quoted capacity of 100 MW in Dholera Solar Park, Gujarat** through open bidding process @ ₹ 2.80 /Unit on Build Own and Operate basis. The tentative cost of the project is ₹450 crore. The project is expected to be commissioned by March 2022 and shall generate 244 million units in a year. The power purchase agreement will be signed for 25 years.

In another major development, R&R plan for Dhaulasidh HEP was approved by Himachal Pradesh Government on 29th July 2020 and Stage - 2 Forest Clearance has been accorded by MoEF & CC on 11.08.2020.

During the month of July 2020, **highest ever record monthly generation 1213 MU & 334 MU was achieved by NJHPS and RHPS** as against previous high of 1191 MU and 327 MU respectively.

In a major breakthrough, SJVN's Joint Venture - Kholongchhu Hydro Electric Limited (KHEL) signed a Concession Agreement (CA) with Royal Government of Bhutan. With signing of this agreement, issue of Power sale, pending since 2016, stands resolved and also bears the consent of both the Governments (India & Bhutan). Kholongchhu HEP is the first Joint Venture Hydro Project in Bhutan and symbolizes prospering Indo-Bhutan Economic co-operation.

In the first quarter of the Financial Year 2020-21, 2780 MU of power has already been generated. Out of this, NJHPS generated 2140MUs, RHPS generated 602 MU, Renewable Power Projects have generated a total of 38 MUs till 30th June 2020.

MACRO ECONOMIC SCENARIO AND GOVERNMENT POLICY

Dear Shareholders, the world economy, which was already slipping into a phase of economic slowdown in FY 2019-20 was hit by COVID-19 pandemic in the earlier part of this year, resulting in a massive global economic upheaval. No Country, no Industry, no Business has remained untouched by this cataclysmic event of epic proportion. These are tough and testing times not only for businesses but also for the Nations and Societies at large, rather I would say the entire Human Race. Against the ferocity of this pandemic, even the most developed Nations have been brought to their knees. The only way, that we knew, to control the pandemic was through lockdowns and isolation. Therefore, most economies came to a grinding halt, manifesting what IMF calls 'The Great Lockdown'. Owing to which, experts predict a 3% contraction of global GDP, meaning over \$9 trillion slash in the global growth over the next 20 months following lockdown. The Indian economy is likely to witness tough times ahead as compulsory lockdown takes a toll on discretionary consumption. The situation might even prevail for quarters after the lockdown eases. The Economy has suffered a big jolt, especially sectors such as MSMEs, Tourism & Hospitality, Aviation, Automobile and Real Estate. The situation has caused deep financial stress in all sections of society, especially the down trodden.

Thankfully, owing to its typical business structure, operational and financial performance of your Company has largely remained unaffected from any direct impact to a large extent. However, the Company may face indirect impact from overall economic damage caused to the world economy by COVID-19 Pandemic. Thus, the impact on Company's Operational Projects is expected to be minimal whereas that on Projects under Development is likely to be moderate to severe.

On Government Policy front, availability of reliable and affordable energy is the key for development of any country. Several steps have been taken by the Government to reform and strengthen the power sector as a whole including power generation, transmission & distribution.

Government has continued its thrust on its flagship Power Sector reform schemes like - Pradhan Mantri Sahaj Bijli Har Ghar Yojana (SAUBHAGYA), Deendayal Upadhyaya Gram JyotiYojana (DDUGJY), Integrated Power Development Scheme (IPDS), Smart Metering, Ujwal DISCOM Assurance Yojana (UDAY), One Nation - One Grid - One Frequency etc.

During the year, Union Cabinet approved Guidelines for operationalizing the various measures to promote Hydropower Sector which include - Declaring Large Hydropower Projects (>25 MW) as Renewable Energy; Hydropower Purchase Obligation(HPO); Tariff rationalization measures; Budgetary support for flood moderation component; Budgetary support for enabling infrastructure like bridges, roads etc.

The Central Government has taken a major step to address the problem of mounting outstanding dues towards Generating Companies by the Distribution Companies by issuing an Order on 28th June, 2019 regarding Opening and maintaining of adequate Letter of Credit (LC) as Payment

Security Mechanism under Power Purchase Agreements by Distribution Licensees. This mechanism has been made effective w.e.f 1st August, 2019. The measure is expected to improve payments to the power generators and improve sustainability in the Power Sector.

Eight Regional Energy Management Centers (REMS) have been commissioned during 2019. These REMCs would help in Grid integration of Renewable Energy by taking care of intermittency of RE generation and, facilitating real time forecasting, scheduling and real time tracking of Renewable Energy Generation.

In Order to promote the capacity addition of Solar and Wind Power Projects, the waiver available for use of Inter State Transmission System (ISTS transmission charges and losses) has been extended for use of Inter State Transmission System (ISTS) for transmission of electricity by Solar or Wind power projects commissioned till December 2022. The waiver shall be applicable for the twenty five years from the commissioning of such projects

Ministry of Power has formally launched a pan-India real-time market in electricity, which allows consumers to buy power just one hour before delivery. Real-time market (RTM) enables consumers, including distribution companies (discoms) and captive users, to buy power on exchanges just an hour before delivery. Real-time market will make the power market dynamic as auctions will be conducted every 30 minutes. There will be 48 auction sessions during the day. The real time market would provide an alternate mechanism for Discoms to access larger market at competitive price.

FUTURE PROSPECTS

My dear friends, SJVN has already set foot on the path of becoming a transnational diversified world class power company. To sustain this performance and transform SJVN, your Management has identified four focus areas. First, speeding up the process of Survey & Investigation and obtaining various clearances in timely manner to bring the projects into construction stage, Second, completion of Projects Under Construction without time and cost overruns. Third, contract management and learning from the experiences of the past to minimize contracts related disputes. Fourth and very importantly, expansion by acquiring new projects and diversification of business across verticals.

However, the upcoming year is going to be replete with challenges. Our construction and pre-construction activities suffered due to this unforeseen pandemic. This loss in time if not compensated will translate into loss of revenue. Further, the Overall scenario in the sector as well appears gloomy. Within 10 days of the lockdown, India was already consuming 20% less power than usual. The expected shrinkage in power demand has been estimated to decline by 20-25%. With economies and industry coming to a halt, various states are likely to be under financial stress. This entire scenario will adversely impact the revenues and cash collections for us and other power utilities.

We will continue in our journey to pursue our long term Shared Vision of 25000 MW by 2040. Right now: our biggest challenge is to continue to enhance the skills of the employees. We are utilizing the services of country's premier institutions like IITs and IIMs to upgrade technical, managerial and personal knowledge and skills of our employees. The goal is to give them an opportunity to develop their skills with the aim to enhance not only their ability but that of the company as a whole. Your Management's highest priority would be to execute the projects in hand, with special focus on projects under construction, within the planned schedule.

Keeping in view country's commitment to a healthy planet as per the Paris Accord on Climate Change, Govt. of India has set a target for installing 175 GW of renewable energy capacity by 2022. This includes 100 GW from solar, 60 GW from wind, 10 GW from bio-power and 5 GW from small hydro power. Your Company is exploring various possibilities including setting up Solar power projects in Major Solar parks through competitive bidding process or otherwise through state Nodal Agencies to make inroads into the Renewables segment. We have already identified Solar Projects / Solar Parks for bidding or allotment on nomination basis. We are targeting to add 500 MW to 700 MW of Solar capacity in next couple of years. We are also following up with Government of Himachal Pradesh for expeditious development of 880 MW Kaza Solar Park in Spiti Valley and with Govt. of Maharashtra for allotment in 1,000 MW floating solar power project on Ujani dam

For bringing 252 MW Devsari HEP & 44 MW Jakhol Sankri HEP into construction stage, we are taking up the matter with Government of Uttarakhand to grant concessions on similar lines as provided by Government of HP to make the projects economically viable. Obtaining necessary approvals for Luhri Stage I, Sunni Dam, Devsari HEP and Jakhol Sankri HEP is targeted in this year. Similarly, in Nepal we are striving to convince Government of Nepal to allocate more projects to SJVN on Arun river basin & elsewhere. With appropriate utilization of infrastructure, we shall develop these projects more efficiently and economically.

The north-eastern region of India-particularly states of Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram have abundant, untapped hydropower potential. The estimated potential is approximately 50,000 MW in Arunachal Pradesh and 4,500 MW in Mizoram. North east has the potential transformed into an economic hub and gateway connecting India to South-East Asian (ASEAN) countries which can be utilized for export of Power amongst other things. **Accordingly, North East will be one of the high priority areas in Company's Hydro Power expansion strategies.** We are in touch with State Governments of Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim for any investment opportunities..

The Company is already charting out expansion strategies like acquisition of stressed companies through NCLT or otherwise, formation of consortiums & strategic partnerships with peer group CPSEs / established players for bidding of power projects in India and South East Asia, acquisition of existing projects in various stages of survey & investigation or construction or O&M, new hydro projects in portfolio via MoU route etc.

Going forward, in the long term I foresee that, fossil fuel based Power does not have a very long future. **Considering, worldwide focus on pressing issues like Climate change, Sustainable Development and Environmental Protection, sooner or later, every country will be compelled to switch over to cleaner and greener sources of energy.** Electric Vehicles will become a norm rather than an exception. As on date, India has more than 2,30,000 MW of installed capacity from Thermal sources like Coal, Lignite, Gas and Diesel. Eventually, as and when the Country shifts this capacity to alternative sources over next 20-30 years, a massive window of opportunity would be opened for Companies engaged in Hydro and Renewable Power Generation. We at SJVN are bracing ourselves to seize this opportunity.

We have already engaged renowned Consultants from the Industry to aid the Management to draw

up long term Corporate Plan for the Company in line with our Vision. As a logical progression of this step, we plan to supplement our Corporate Plan with dynamic and elaborate Corporate Strategy. It is vital that Corporate Strategy is continuously adapted, evolved and fine-tuned in accordance with the ever changing business environment. I am of the firm view that, we need to radically change our work culture and adopt global best practices to survive and thrive amidst cut throat competition. Therefore, we are in the process of hiring the best Professional firms with requisite expertise and experience to assist the Management on continuous basis to formulate and calibrate dynamic Strategies for accomplishing our Corporate Plan. Simultaneously, I intend to elevate the professional skills and competencies of our workforce to a Global Level. I have made extensive efforts at my personal level to ensure that the Company's long term Vision, Corporate Plan and Strategy do not remain confined to higher echelons of hierarchy but permeate to the lowest levels of employees so that each and every person in the organization makes a concerted and harmonized effort to achieve these goals.

The Status of Operational Plants and other ongoing Projects has been amply covered in the Directors' Report and hence, I would only like to mention that in addition to the Operational Plants having combined installed capacity of more than 2015 MW and other projects, totalling up to more than 5574 MW of capacity, are at different stages of construction and development. **I on behalf of Management and Employees of SJVN would like to assure our Shareholders of our sincere and unrelenting efforts to the best of our abilities.**

BEYOND CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Dear Shareholders, your Company's resolve towards its social and environmental obligations is amply displayed, in the way it functions and operates. We believe in optimum utilization of resources, for environment friendly socio-economic development resulting in growth with sustainability. The challenges ahead are big, but I am sure that the expertise and drive of our employees will see us vanquishing them.

Your Company has formulated and adopted a well perceived Corporate Social Responsibility and Sustainability Policy, which is in consonance with the Companies Act, 2013 and CSR guidelines issued by DPE. The company's CSR Policy statement embeds the concerns of its stakeholders and strives to maintain a good standard of CSR and Sustainability in its business activities. To meet this commitment, SJVN will continue to respect the rule of law, local communities and societies at large, and make conscious efforts to enhance the quality of life as well as environmental sustainability through its CSR and Sustainability programs.

The focus areas of CSR and Sustainability programs encompass the activities as laid down under schedule VII of the Companies Act, 2013 which includes healthcare & hygiene; education & skill development; empowerment of vulnerable sections of society; promoting gender equality; infrastructure & community development; promotion & preservation of culture, heritage and sports; sustainable development; and assistance during natural disasters.

Your Company spent a total amount of ₹36.35 crore on CSR and Sustainability activities during FY 2019-20 which is more than 2.00% of the average net profit during last three years. This demonstrates your Company's firm commitment towards its social obligations in letter and spirit.

It gives me great satisfaction to share that CSR initiatives of your company have stood the test of time and have been widely acclaimed at various national and international forums.

Here I would also like to add that, being a socially responsive organization with conscience, SJVN stood by the Nation and its people in the dire situation emerging due to worldwide COVID-19 pandemic, going beyond obligatory CSR Mandate. The Organization contributed ₹25 Crores to the PM CARES Fund. In addition, SJVN Employees have also voluntarily contributed a sum of ₹32 Lakhs to the fund from their salaries. A financial support of ₹2 Cr. was also provided to GoHP for procuring ventilators, PPEs, masks, Sanitizers etc. Further, a provision of ₹2.95 Crores has also been made by the Organization for assisting in fight against the pandemic. SJVN has also taken a major step to provide relief to the Power DISCOMS of our beneficiary States by extending a rebate of ₹58 crores for the lockdown period in the energy bills of May 2020. **I assure our stakeholders and countrymen that we will continue to contribute to the fight against COVID-19 by our Nation by all means available at our disposal.**

CORPORATE GOVERNANCE

Dear friends, as a listed company, SJVN has been complying with the requirements of Corporate Governance under the SEBI LODR Regulations and also Guidelines issued by Department of Public Enterprises, Government of India. In this regard, your company has been constantly achieving "Excellent" rating for compliance with 'DPE Guidelines on Corporate Governance' under the 'Corporate Governance Grading System' prescribed by DPE.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I take this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude for the continued and immense support and co-operation received from the Government of India, State Governments of Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Bihar, Maharashtra and Gujarat, the Governments of Nepal and Bhutan, other Governmental and Non-Governmental agencies; Statutory, Cost, Secretarial and Internal Auditors; our Customers; Business associates who have supported the Company; various Financial Institutions & Bankers and Regulatory authorities. Above all, I acknowledge the unstinted support received from the Shareholders, Investors and Partners in the growth of the Company and thank them for their continued confidence and trust in the Management.

I also convey my thanks and appreciation to my esteemed colleagues on the Board for their valuable support and guidance and finally, to my team of dedicated and hardworking employees for their unflinching commitment to deliver despite all odds and look forward to their continued support.

Thanking you.

Your's Sincerely



Nand Lal Sharma
Chairman & Managing Director
DIN: 03495554

Date: 29th September, 2020
Place: Shimla

(This does not purport to be a record of the proceedings of the Annual General Meeting)



एसजेवीएन लिमिटेड

(भारत सरकार एवं हिमाचल प्रदेश सरकार का संयुक्त उपक्रम)

मिनी रत्न एवं शेड्यूल 'ए' पीएसयू

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SJVN LIMITED

(A Joint Venture of Govt. of India & Govt. of Himachal Pradesh)

A Mini Ratna & Schedule "A" PSU

CIN : L40101HP1988GOI008409

Regd. Off.: Shakti Sadan, SJVN Corporate Office Complex, Shanan, Shimla - 171006, Himachal Pradesh (India)

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■ APERITIF ■
THE BIG PICTURE

LOO AND BEHOLD!

An elderly man alights from a government-owned luxury bus that has been converted into a mobile public toilet in Hyderabad. The toilets, inaugurated on Gandhi Jayanti, will be available at crowded places like markets and public parks in the city.

PHOTO BY AFP

POINT BLANK



You see how Prime Minister Narendra Modi functions and performs. He is the role model for governance. It is because of him that we have been with the NDA since 2014—unlike Nitish Kumar, who walked out and challenged the prime minister.

Chirag Paswan,
leader, Lok Janshakti Party

The tearing hurry in which ordinances were promulgated and replaced by Acts without prior consultation or proper debate—and without a voting by division as demanded—deserves a deeper probe.

P. Chidambaram,
Congress leader, on the agri reforms passed by Parliament

How dare a male police officer lay his hand on the clothes of a woman political leader! Yogi Adityanath ji, who believes in the Indian culture, should take strict action against such police officers.

Chitra Wagh,
BJP leader, on Congress general secretary Priyanka Gandhi Vadra being roughed up at the Delhi-Uttar Pradesh border

Our prime minister has three-and-a-half years of his current term to run. There is still time to learn from the example of his great predecessor, to put into practice Lal Bahadur Shastri's absolute lack of sectarianism, his desire to work with and empower cabinet colleagues, his readiness to acknowledge and amend for his mistakes.

Ramachandra Guha,
historian



I have always worried about how I looked. I have always worried my hips are too wide, my thighs are too wobbly, my waist not narrow enough, my tummy not flat enough, my boobs not big enough, my butt too big, my arms too jiggly, nose not straight enough, lips not full enough....

Ileana D'Cruz,
actor, on Instagram, tagging herself as "beautifully flawed"

WORD PLAY

Adaptability quotient (AQ) has become a buzzword in the business world. It refers to the ability of a person or a company to adapt to unanticipated changes in the professional environment or the market. Those with high AQ have a forward-thinking mindset, remain open to new possibilities and seek out diverse skill sets. Apparently, AQ is becoming an important measure for companies looking for prospective employees.

MILESTONES

MORE POWER

The Defence Research and Development Organisation successfully flight-tested a new weapon system—the supersonic missile-assisted release of torpedo (SMART)—on October 5. The launch will strengthen India's anti-submarine warfare capabilities.



NOBEL TRIO

The 2020 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine was awarded jointly to Harvey J. Alter, Charles M. Rice and Michael Houghton for their discovery of hepatitis C virus. Their discovery paved the way for the rapid development of antiviral drugs for hepatitis C, a global health problem.



PASSAGE TO PROGRESS

Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated the 9.02km long Atal Tunnel—the longest highway tunnel in the world—that connects Manali to Lahaul-Spiti valley, on October 3. The tunnel reduced the road distance between Manali and Leh by 46 kilometres.



POWER POINT

SACHIDANANDA MURTHY



Money for the masses

A teaser announcement by the State Bank of India has raised speculation among bankers on whether the Reserve Bank of India and the finance ministry are allowing the “elephant to dance again”, after nearly a decade. In 2011, the banking regulator had frowned on the hugely successful home loans scheme launched by the SBI's rock star chairman O.P. Bhatt, who took the largest public sector bank to dizzying heights of financial performance.

Now, as the country is faced with the twin crisis of existing borrowers facing repayment burdens and the banks being flush with funds, the banks are asking for innovative solutions. Groups of large borrowers have asked for relief from all kinds of interest. The two government committees, headed by former ICICI Bank chairman K.V. Kamath and the just-retired comptroller and auditor general Rajiv Mehrishi, have been tasked with giving recommendations which would ensure the stability of banks and help borrowers.

The Supreme Court, which is monitoring the demand for total interest relief, has heard from the government that banks can only waive off the interest burden of small borrowers. The economic slowdown has also affected loan off take and the banks are looking at the salaried class to take loans.

Bhatt, who disliked the phrase “teaser loans”, had shaken up the staid world of banking by offering concessional interest rates for housing loans to middle- and lower-income groups in February 2009, soon after the global banking crisis caused by the collapse of American investment firm Lehman Brothers. He said that the bank would charge lower interests for housing loans for the first three years and then allow normal banking rates. The prevailing interest rate was 11 per cent; SBI charged only eight per cent in the first year followed by nine per cent in the second and third years. SBI branches in the country were besieged by loan seekers and Bhatt

had the satisfaction of overtaking the country's largest housing lender, HDFC.

Apart from the lower interest rates, the bank also cut much of the red tape in the process of loan applications; branches were decorated with buntings and customers were welcomed with soft drinks. Soon, there was a scramble among other banks to offer similar schemes. Bhatt told an interviewer that he had made the elephant (SBI) dance.

But, the RBI, under governor D. Subbarao was not amused with Bhatt, who had had many run-ins with the apex bank. Bhatt insisted that his loan scheme should not be compared with the subprime loan pyramids, which had caused the crash of big housing banks in the US, and said he would not use the term “teaser loan” at all.

He said the loans were more secure because the middle and lower classes were prompt in repayment and the bank had enough mortgages. But, the RBI feared that once the higher rates were implemented in the fourth year the risks would be unmanageable. Bhatt's exit from SBI also meant that the RBI could ensure that the concessional interest schemes were phased out by the banks

even as Bhatt's supporters argued that repayment success rates were better for teaser loans.

The real estate sector has been lobbying for concessional loans to boost demand for housing. But, banks have been wary of overreach, as conservative chairpersons focused on the big customers. The Bank of Baroda, into which Dena Bank and Vijaya Bank were merged this year, has offered a 0.25 per cent interest discount for existing and new home and car loan borrowers of the merged banks, as well as the car loans from the mother bank. Other public sector banks are discussing incentivising their home and car loans during the festive season, which would bring a big smile to the face of Bhatt, who had argued strongly for catering to the smaller customers.



ILLUSTRATION BHASKARAN

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MISTAKEN IDENTITY

Shooter Shreyasi Singh from Bihar recently joined the BJP in New Delhi. It, however, created ripples in Madhya Pradesh. This, because some national media platforms reported that the Commonwealth gold medallist was the daughter of former Madhya Pradesh chief minister Digvijaya Singh. Shreyasi is the daughter of a former Union minister from Bihar, the late Digvijay Singh (of the Samata Party and later the Janata Dal (United)). When Digvijaya threatened to sue one of the media houses, corrections were hurriedly made in the news reports.

ENTRANCE EXAM

There seems to be no end to the rumblings in the Kerala unit of the BJP regarding the elevation of A.P. Abdullakutty and Tom Vadakkan to national posts. While some leaders are cribbing in private, more senior leaders are openly raising their voices against the decision—the latest being P.P. Mukundan. The main grouse against the two leaders is that they will not be able to answer a single question on the party programme. It is learnt that the grumblers are planning to send the duo a questionnaire on BJP's basic tenets. Testing times for the two?

LISTENING AIDE

The image of Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath has taken a severe beating in the aftermath of the Hathras crime. It is said that this ruin was long in the making as the state's top information officers not only controlled the media access to the chief minister, but also excluded certain journalists, often women, from meeting him.

The information department—till recently headed by bureaucrat Awanish Kumar Awasthi, whose proximity to Adityanath was cultivated when he served as district magistrate of Gorakhpur—has a new appointee, Navneet Sehgal. With a track record of endearing chief ministers of different parties to the media, Sehgal will hopefully help the chief minister pay attention to more than just effusive praise from pliant mediapersons.

BUMPY RIDE

In the rally organised by the Congress through Punjab to protest against the new farm laws, the tractor that carried former party chief Rahul Gandhi was a 'Hindustan Super 80' model. It was remodelled with cushioned seats, foot rests and safety rods. And it caught the attention of Congress critics. While trolls had a gala time, some even comparing Rahul with Mr Bean, Union Minister Hardeep Singh Puri tweeted, "Cushioned sofas on tractors is not a protest." Following the flak, the tractor was replaced with one with more austere seating.

AN APPLE A DAY....

Even as he is embroiled in controversies involving his sons, CPI(M) state secretary Kodyeri Balakrishnan has accused Kerala opposition leader Ramesh Chennithala of violating protocol norms by receiving an iPhone from the UAE embassy. Meanwhile, *Chandrika*, the mouthpiece of the Indian Union Muslim League, carried a detailed article on points to remember while using an iPhone. That the IUML has no love lost for Chennithala is no secret, and rumour mills in the state capital attribute the appearance of the article to IUML's preference for Oommen Chandy as the Congress's chief ministerial candidate.



WHO'S THE PARTY POOPER?

No one likes to miss their birthday party, not even political leaders. But Covid-19 restrictions played spoilsport for YSR Congress Party leader Y. Venkat Rao. His convoy was stopped by the police while he was on his way to meet supporters who had gathered at a busy junction in rural Vijayawada in Andhra Pradesh. A miffed Rao then decided to walk for more than a kilometre, leaving his vehicle behind—all this to meet his followers, accept garlands and violate physical distancing norms.

ILLUSTRATIONS JAIRAJ T.G.

‘Desi’ding factor

In the run-up to the US elections, Joe Biden and Kamala Harris are pulling out all stops to woo the Indian-American community

BY FARWA IMAM ALI / San Francisco

Last week as US President Donald Trump was convalescing from Covid-19 at the Walter Reed hospital, Bethesda, Maryland, the battle for the US presidential election 2020 continued nationwide. Even as she wished the president and First Lady Melania Trump a speedy recovery, democratic vice president nominee Senator Kamala Harris was all business at a fundraiser Q&A attended by THE WEEK. “The stakes in this election couldn’t be higher,” she stressed.

With early voting already under way, Harris brought the star power of former president Barack Obama to draw out the democratic vote. Obama, too, issued this serious reminder: “There are very concrete issues that are going to impact the well-being, the health, the welfare of millions of people determined in this election.” Learning from the loss of 2016, the Democrats are leaving no stone unturned to woo voters from every community, including the 1.3 million-strong Indian American electorate.

Those expecting a Joe Biden-Harris juggernaut, powered by the Indian-American vote, to overtake Trump by virtue of Harris’s Indian lineage need to hold off celebrations. The Democratic Party’s stand on Kashmir and the abrogation of Article 370 and calling out India on human rights and other issues could hurt them at the polls.

Trump, on the other hand, has

made overt efforts to showcase his outreach. Be it the Howdy, Modi! event in Houston last November, visiting India this February despite no major trade deal being inked, observing an indifferent silence on the Kashmir issue and the Citizenship (Amendment) Act and Modi’s endorsement of Trump itself has touched a chord with groups like ‘Hindus for Trump’, ‘Sikhs for Trump’ and ‘Indians for Trump’.

While Indian Americans lauded Harris’s meteoric rise as a big moment for the diaspora and Trump bragged, “I have more Indians than she has,” Harris focused on acts of voter suppression. At the fundraiser Q&A, she urged: “Ask the question, ‘why are so many powerful people trying to make it so difficult for us to vote?’ Because, when we vote, things change.”

Where Indians are concerned, the Biden-Harris ticket is already committed to change on a key issue, that of overturning the Trump curbs on H1-B visas. Biden also acknowledged the contribution of Indian Americans at a fundraiser end September, saying: “You have helped forge an economic and cultural dynamism in this country.” Interestingly, the Asian American Voter Survey, released mid-September, indicates 54 per cent of Indian Americans were pro-Democratic and most inclined to vote for Biden-Harris while 16 per cent identified as pro-Republicans, rallying behind Trump.

The Democratic Party is not taking the poll numbers for granted though. Harris, who has been faulted for acknowledging her black identity over her Indianness, finally appears to be addressing Indian-American voters head on. The duo has been attending virtual campaign events. The grass-root network has been feverishly working phone and texting banks to reach Indian-American voters. Such is the seriousness that in the swing state of Pennsylvania, on October 2, Democrats held a phonebank with former US ambassador to India Richard Verma, who attended the event as a private citizen.

If Biden has his admirers in the Indian American community, so does Trump. His handling of the economy, jobs, tax reforms and China has resonated with them. As per the AAPI survey, men are driving up the pro-Republican vote among Indian Americans. In 2016, 71 per cent of Indian-American men had voted Democrat, and 21 per cent Republican. In 2020, 41 per cent of the men are estimated to vote Republican and 57 per cent Democrat. Whether this translates into actual votes remains to be seen. In 2016, the Republican vision appealed to corporate executive Raj Bandekar, 51, of Pennsylvania. Today, he is undecided if he will vote Trump again. His minor gripe is that “Trump did not successfully merge corporate thinking and government stability”.

When Trump won in 2016, he did

so on the promise that he would “drain the swamp”. Many agree that Trump has shaken things up, perhaps a bit much. What has not gone down well with many Indian-American voters is this administration’s tendency to play Russian roulette with issues of governance, health care and national security. Is that enough to tip Bandekar over to camp Biden? Apparently not. “I need to see a bit more spark in Biden,” he says. “He needs to spell out what he intends to do about our country’s 2.3 trillion dollar debt and how he plans to add jobs and fix health care.”

On the other hand, Biden-Harris seem to have struck the right note with Arun Natarajan, 52, from Minnesota. A PhD in engineering-material sciences, Arun voted Republican since 1998, gave Obama his vote for both terms and returned to the Re-

HARRIS, WHO HAS BEEN FAULTED FOR ACKNOWLEDGING HER BLACK IDENTITY OVER HER INDIANNES, FINALLY APPEARS TO BE ADDRESSING INDIAN-AMERICAN VOTERS HEAD ON.

publican camp in 2016 after Obama’s promise of a solid health care plan fell short. “I felt maybe Trump being a businessman could make a better deal, perhaps do something to upgrade health care,” he says. But with Trump out to axe the health care plan with no concrete replacement, Arun turned in his ballot early this time, voting for Biden-Harris based on their commitment to fix health care. “They address my number one

issue,” he says. “A person’s quality of life depends on his health. Had Biden-Harris focused more on immigration and wars, they would have lost my vote.”

When asked “seven months in to the pandemic what keeps you up at night?”, both Obama and Harris grew sober. Citing the 2.05 lakh Covid-19 deaths and over 70 lakh people who have contracted the virus, Harris condemned the Trump administra-



AP

tion's effort to strike down the Affordable Care Act, put in place by the Obama-Biden team. "I cannot stress how important having the affordable health care act that covers pre-existing conditions is," said Harris. "Especially given that Covid will become a pre-existing condition, given [its] potential for lung scarring and heart damage." This approach is probably what has 83 per cent women leaning pro-Democrat and only 17 per cent pro-Republican.

Interestingly, Indian-American women who support Trump face greater rebuke than their male counterparts for doing so. Political science student and first-time voter Athmika Dubey blames it on Trump's rhetoric and how much he has polarised the electorate based on gender, race, religion and economic status. Biden, she says, would be the better president for America. A President Biden would be better for India, too. It was under Obama-Biden's tenure that India received a niche ranking as a major defence partner, she recalls. Dubey also points out that "both India and the US need to rein in China for different reasons. And a tempered statesman like Biden can accomplish that". Bandekar disagrees, believing Trump's strong-arm tactics are the need of the hour to deal with China.

Members of the Indian-American electorate often discuss China in the Indian and American context. They wonder how Biden-Harris will handle this challenge, given the roughing up of relations with China under the current administration. Californian entrepreneur Rehan Dastagir hopes Biden can bring his statesmanship to work, iron out stronger trade policies through dialogue, ink better trade deals and "avert a new cold war".

Others at the fundraiser believe a Biden presidency would restore bilateral ties to the point advocated by him in 2006, when he envisioned US and India as close partners by 2020. They maintain a Biden administra-



PITCHED BATTLE
Melania and Donald Trump with Joe and Jill Biden after the first presidential debate in Cleveland on September 29

INDIAN AMERICANS HOLDING OUT THEIR VOTE WANT TO GET A BETTER FEEL OF THE HARRIS VIBE. THEY ARE NOT ABOUT TO VOTE ON THE BASIS OF THEIR INDIAN IDENTITY ALONE.

tion might even advocate a permanent seat in a reformed UN Security Council, given it was first mooted by Obama-Biden in 2010.

In the final weeks of campaigning, Biden-Harris and their supporters are even wooing Indian-American voters Bollywood-style. California-based entrepreneur couple Ajay and Vinita Bhutoria released a digital graphic in 14 languages with the slogan—"America Ka Neta Kaisa Ho, Joe Biden Jaisa Ho (How should be America's leader, just like Joe Biden)". The couple had also put together a music video, featuring Biden-Harris, based on a song from Aamir Khan's movie *Lagaan*. With a few tweaks, it reads, "Chale chalo, Chale chalo, Biden ko vote do, Biden ki jeet ho,

Unki haar, haan (Let's go, let's go, vote for Biden; May Biden win, their defeat, yes)".

Those Indian Americans, especially the younger generation, holding out their vote admit they just want to get a better feel of the Harris vibe. They have celebrated with pride her rise to power, but they are not about to vote on the basis of their Indian identity alone. They listen keenly to her plans on the issues close to their heart—civil rights, education, climate change and immigration. The more they hear, they admit they might be warming up to the idea of a Vice President Kamala Harris and the promise to "build back better" with a President Joe Biden. 🗳️



QAnon's factory for alternative facts

They are becoming the western world's most dangerous cult. With coded acronyms like WWG1WGA, 8kun and X22, QAnon is a platform of racist, anti-Semitic conspiracy theorists. Born in the US in the Trumpian era of 2017, QAnon is now spreading across Europe, especially in Germany's neo-Nazi strongholds. German sociologist Matthias Quent describes them as "people who are quitting the mainstream, who are raging against the establishment".

The pandemic accelerated QAnon's growth in Germany with neo-Nazis, anti-vaxxers (vaccination) and others joining the protest against Covid-19 measures, especially masks. They stormed the parliament, a chilling reminder of the 1933 Reichstag (parliament) burning—part of Adolf Hitler's violent campaign to incite voters ahead of German elections. Warns extremism researcher Julia Ebner, "QAnon is a potential threat to national security."

German intelligence agencies and the FBI agree. Earlier this month, the US House of Representatives overwhelmingly condemned QAnon as a "sick cult". QAnon's conspiracy theories range from the ghoulish to the absurd. Devil-worshipping, mind-controlling elites brew anti-ageing elixirs from children's blood. The coronavirus was manufactured in a Chinese lab with Barack Obama's help. The Covid-19 vaccine will turn humans into cyborgs. Colluding to enslave the masses are George Soros, Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg, Hillary Clinton, Tom Hanks, the Rothschilds and the Rockefellers.

But there is a hero in QAnon's worldview. "Trump is a saviour, a great redeemer for the German far right," says extremism expert Miro Dittrich. QAnon believes Trump will save the world from the liberal cabal and is faking Covid-19 to deceive and destroy them in the coming Armageddon. They cheer Trump's pandemic scepticism, nationalism and tolerance of white supremacists. They feel vindicated because his language and ideology

legitimise theirs.

QAnon members comprise Trump fans, right-wing trolls, provocateurs, hate-mongers, gun-lovers, weirdos, misogynists and prophets of doom. They include electricians and naturopaths, and German social media celebrities like news anchors and rappers who are conspiracy super-spreaders.

Before he massacred nine persons of immigrant background in Hanau, 25km east of Frankfurt, 43-year-old xenophobic German gunman Tobias Rathjen uploaded a video amplifying QAnon's conspiracy theories. Immigrants, liberal politicians and synagogues are targets. The killers of the mass shootings in New Zealand and El Paso, Texas, circulated their hate pamphlets on 8chan (later renamed 8kun), a QAnon-favoured internet channel. QAnon's German YouTube channel, Qlobal-Change, has over 17 million views.

For QAnon disciples with impressive online viewership, this is lucrative business: bagging ad revenue, selling books and shady cures—quack creams, oils, pills and vitamins. Perhaps, it is good they make money. With their maniacal eyes and crazy ideas, their patterned shorts and cross medallions, rough

beards and rougher mannerisms, they are unlikely to clear most job interviews. But QAnon is crystallising into a political force. Thanks to Trump, who recognises QAnon supporters as a significant segment of his base, the movement appears to be on the cusp of going mainstream. For the November Congressional elections, 22 Republican candidates are QAnon fans, with Trump-backed Marjorie Greene expected to win in Georgia.

We know that WWG1WGA stands for "Where We Go One, We Go All". Day X is the day Neo Nazis take over Germany. 8kun is an internet channel where violent anonymous posts vanish without a trace. But we still do not know who founded QAnon. Devotees believe QAnon's creator is either God or Trump.



Strategic value

With its entry into the DCOC, India gets a toehold in China's glowing pearl, Djibouti

BY REKHA DIXIT

LAST MONTH, INDIA got observer status in the Djibouti Code of Conduct/Jeddah Amendment (DCOC/JA). It is a little-known multilateral grouping that hinges around a country the size of Manipur and a population of less than 10 lakh. Djibouti has risen to importance because of its strategic location in the Horn of Africa, at the chokepoint of the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea. This part-membership gives India a toehold into a country where China stole a march against almost the entire world by making Djibouti one of the most important baubles in its grand String of Pearls.

The DCOC is a grouping on maritime matters, comprising 18 nations adjoining the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, east coast of Africa and island nations of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). It was established in 2009 to repress piracy and armed robbery against ships. The Jeddah Amendment 2017 enhanced its scope to include repression of illicit maritime activity, including maritime terrorism and illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing. Along with India, the UK, US, Japan and Norway have observer status, too. According to the ministry of external affairs, the position does not have a fixed term.

Djibouti's importance has been rising over many years, given the volume of international trade that passes into the Indian Ocean via the Red Sea. But in 2015, the world snapped into attention as China began building a military base there. The three big choke points for Chinese maritime traffic are the Strait of Hormuz, the Strait of Malacca and the Gulf of Aden, said vice admiral Shekhar Sinha (retired). With Gwadar in Pakistan, and a few long-lease islands from Malaysia, China has secured the first two points. Djibouti takes care of the third.

Djibouti was yet another missed opportunity for India that China took advantage of. In 2002, Djibouti, with which India has good ties, was in need of developmental assistance. "The India Navy was in favour of accepting this offer for developing Djibouti, as it would help us secure the sea lanes of commerce," said Sinha. "[But] back then, India was not outward-looking. We suffered from what the Americans call 'sea blindness.'"

China, meanwhile, began steadily investing in various infrastructure projects in Djibouti. It now controls the Djibouti International Free Trade Zone, Dolareh Container Terminal

AFP

POWER MOVE

The inauguration of China's military base in Djibouti in 2017



and Djibouti Port, and thus, the country's economy. The Chinese military base is around 60.7 hectares, with facilities to house 200 marines, wrote rear admiral Monty Khanna (retired) in a paper for Observer Research Foundation. The facilities are constantly evolving. A notable development is the construction of a jetty which, when ready, would cater for a deep-water military berthing facility, a huge fillip to China's capabilities there.

India is not a significant adversary in China's global plan. Its String of Pearls and Belt and Road Initiative are gamechangers in challenging the US's global influence. However, for India, the IOR is a very important space as it is the biggest country in the region. With the current dispensation having given the maritime region some importance, Djibouti is a crucial location for India to beef up its presence.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision of Security and Growth for all in the Region (SAGAR) has given a boost to India's maritime outreach. India is engaged in multilateral



cooperation with countries in the Indian Ocean Rim Association, Indian Ocean Tuna Commission and Indian Ocean Naval Symposium. Last November, at the East Asia Summit, India proposed the Indo-Pacific Oceans' Initiative for a safe, secure and stable maritime domain. India wants to enlarge its footprint in

waters where Chinese presence is increasing.

In a dynamic global situation, where the seas have regained importance, India is warily joining groupings to keep China under check in regional waters. The Indo-Pacific concept may be one of growth and development with the centrality of

ASEAN, according to India, but there can be no ambiguous couching of a grouping like the Quad (US, India, Japan and Australia), which has scaled up to foreign minister-level summits.

India's recent logistic sharing tie-ups with the US, France, and Japan also gives it access to base facilities at Djibouti, where France and Japan both have a presence. India has been patrolling these waters regularly since 2008, with one warship always on deployment in the western Indian Ocean region. China, too, has maintained the presence of at least three ships in these waters. Such heavy military presence has reduced piracy here; piracy has shifted to the west coast of Africa in recent years.

The DCOC is not related to India's bilateral ties with Djibouti or any other country in the region. "The very fact that India's request for observer status was accepted by consensus speaks volumes of India's bilateral ties with DCOC/JA member states," said a ministry official.

Observers view the DCOC entry as a positive move. They note that India so far has only access to information on white shipping (commercial), and tie-ups like DCOC which will give India access to grey (military) shipping activities, too.

For India, perhaps, such tie-ups are a better way of information and logistic sharing than expensive development projects whose benefits may not be that forthcoming. The Chabahar project in Iran, for instance, is only a commercial tie-up. Its expansion is under a cloud now with the US-induced tension in India-Iran ties. Chabahar, anyway, was no match for China's influence in Pakistan's Gwadar Port. China has now extended finances to Iran for port and infrastructure development. The Bandar-e-Jask project at the northern end of the Strait of Hormuz in Iran is set to be the next pearl in the Chinese necklace. ■

PM for CM

The BJP has apparently chosen its chief minister candidate for Bengal, but plans to fight the upcoming state elections using Modi's name

BY RABI BANERJEE

In 2016, the BJP made massive gains by announcing Sarbananda Sonowal as its chief minister candidate for Assam midway into the state election campaign. The party had held off declaring a face for the top post, and there was speculation that Himanta Biswa Sarma, who had recently defected from the Congress, could be the top man. Voters were confused. Modi was not a widely popular face in the state, and there was no clarity on who the party's poster boy would be.

Then BJP president Amit Shah ended the speculation by naming Sonowal as the party's choice. Shah was impressed by Sonowal's street-fighter image, and his efforts to weed out illegal foreigners in the state. The BJP won handsomely, dethroning three-time Congress chief minister

Tarun Gogoi.

With assembly elections in West Bengal due in April, the BJP finds itself in a similar situation. Another defector, this time from the Trinamool Congress, has emerged as a strong contender for the chief minister's position. Mukul Roy is up against BJP state president Dilip Ghosh. The only difference is that, unlike in Assam, Modi is a popular face in Bengal.

Apparently, the thinking within the BJP is that announcing a chief minister candidate this early could backfire. But this does not mean a decision has not been made. Party sources told THE WEEK that the name has been finalised, and only four or five top leaders know about it.

As of now, Roy is BJP's most crucial weapon in the battle against Chief



SALIL BERA

BALANCING ACT
Amit Shah with Dilip Ghosh (left) and Mukul Roy (right)

Minister Mamata Banerjee. He was one of the people who built the Trinamool Congress; he knows the weaknesses of his former colleagues. However, he has been reluctant to back Ghosh as chief minister. In fact, so apparent was the tussle between them that Roy suspended his party activities early this year.

He even went to the central leadership in Delhi seeking space to work independently within the party. Notably, in 2017, Shah had made it clear that Roy would be part of the central leadership of the party, and would help Ghosh in the 2019 elections.

The two did work together for a while, delivering the BJP's biggest

victory in the Lok Sabha elections last year—the party won 18 of 42 seats and lost six by fewer than 5,000 votes. With Modi as its face, the party won 40 per cent of the votes, just three points short of the Trinamool Congress.

The friction began when it was time to take credit. While Ghosh's loyalists portrayed him as a mass leader, Roy's supporters (mostly Trinamool defectors) painted him as the game-changer.

So, as it stands, the party has reportedly decided to fight the elections with Modi as its face. Said the BJP co-in-charge for Bengal Suresh Pujari: "[We had to name

chief minister candidates in] Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh as there the governments were 15 years old. In Bengal, where we won only three seats last time, there is no point in naming anybody. We will fight the election in the name of Modi ji."

The BJP's central leadership is wary of announcing a local face. Matched against Banerjee's strong image, the candidate might not measure up. Also, Modi has told the party that, among the handful of states going to elections soon, he would devote the most time to Bengal. At his instance, Shah is directly overseeing the party affairs in Bengal and has set up an office in Kolkata's New Town area,

near Ghosh's office-bungalow.

According to the BJP's constitution, the president has maximum power. So, Ghosh would lead from the front. However, BJP national president J.P. Nadda recently made Roy national vice president. An election in-charge, who would control the candidate selection alongside Ghosh, is yet to be named. The question is: Will it be Roy?

As a party vice president, Roy would gain more stature and can work independently. In that regard, Modi and Shah seem to have created a balance in the state unit.

Another position to be filled soon is that of the state in-charge. Pujari



IF THE BJP GETS A CLEAR MAJORITY, CHANCES ARE HIGH THAT DILIP GHOSH WOULD BE THE MAN FOR THE CHIEF MINISTER'S JOB. IF IT IS A HUNG ASSEMBLY, MUKUL ROY WOULD BE FAVOURED.

said Nadda, advised by Shah, would declare the new in-charges for all the states soon. "I have expressed to the party that I may be relieved as a co-in-charge (he is one of three) in Bengal," he said. "My party won my seat (Bargarh, Odisha) for the first time and I have a lot of responsibilities in several committees in Parliament. But yes, I would campaign in a massive way, and I can assure you that a tough man would replace me in Bengal."

In another interesting development, former state party president Tathagata Roy, who was till recently the Meghalaya governor, has returned to active politics. But as per party sources, there have been a lot of delays in the re-induction process. Roy even went to Delhi to meet B.L. Santosh, the BJP general secretary for organisation, to iron out the kinks.

Then, on September 26, Trinamool defector Anupam Hazra replaced Rahul Sinha as national secretary. By dropping Sinha, a stalwart in state politics and a friend of Tathagata Roy, the party leadership sent out a clear message to Tathagata and other veterans—they can work in the party, but without any "greed or aspiration".

Apart from Tathagata Roy, two other Bengalis working at the national level are reportedly keen on becoming chief minister. So, Ghosh is facing challenges from various quarters. On not being declared the man for the job, he said: "Did you think that Yogi Adityanath would be chief minister of Uttar Pradesh? Who would have thought that [BJP's first] Haryana chief minister would be Manohar Khattar?"

Said state BJP vice president Biswapriya Roychowdhury: "Our biggest target is to win first." The state's Muslims would help with that, he added. "The reason for that would be looting by the Trinamool," he said. "Through the Jan Dhan accounts, every woman received ₹500, twice. In Bengal, 40 lakh of the 53 lakh eligible



SALIL BERA

TATHAGATA ROY (ABOVE), WHO WAS TILL RECENTLY THE MEGHALAYA GOVERNOR, HAS RETURNED TO ACTIVE POLITICS. BUT THERE HAVE BEEN A LOT OF DELAYS IN THE RE-INDUCTION PROCESS.

women were Muslims. Trinamool workers went door to door and took a share of that money."

Perhaps sensing this shift, Zameerul Hassan, the state president of the All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen, asked Banerjee to form an alliance. The AIMIM would contest 94 seats, the Trinamool, 200. "But, she has not accepted," he said, adding that if the deal does not work out, the AIMIM would go it alone, which could be "dangerous" for Banerjee.

It is difficult to predict how Muslims in rural pockets would vote

this time. The influential Furfura Darbar Sharif in Hooghly has openly revolted against Banerjee and her party, which has put her on the back foot. So much so that she has openly canvassed for Hindu votes by giving monthly allowance of ₹1,000 to Brahmin priests and ₹50,000 to each Durga Puja committee in the state. There are an estimated 53,000 such committees.

Amid such communal undertones, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh sarsanghchalak Mohan Bhagwat visited Kolkata on September 23. He met his *pracharaks* at Kolkata's Keshav Bhavan and, according to RSS sources, admonished them for not doing enough during the pandemic. "Many *pracharaks* are part of the day-to-day activities of the BJP," an RSS leader quoted Bhagwat as saying. "Do not meddle with the BJP's party affairs in the district. If you have anything to say about BJP leaders and candidates, you should inform the state president."

Bhagwat has asked the cadres to work on a war footing for the next six months. As part of the plan, Bhagwat has asked them to go to villages and tom-tom the party's achievements, including the Ram temple and the Citizenship Amendment Act.

As for the BJP, Shah called the Bengal top brass to Delhi on October 1. "He sought a lot of information about the progress," said Ghosh. "He will hit the ground soon and has asked us to begin the campaign before Durga Puja (late October)."

Party sources said that if the BJP gets a clear majority, chances are high that Ghosh would be the man for the chief minister's job. If it is a hung assembly, Roy would be favoured for his ability to break opposition parties and bring in defectors, like Manipur Chief Minister N. Biren Singh (who had left the Congress for the BJP) had earlier done.

Regardless, the BJP is going all out in its mission to capture Bengal. 🗳️

FORTHWRITE

MEENAKSHI LEKHI



Educate the farmers

The agitation against the new laws allowing farmers to market their produce outside the agriculture produce market committee (APMC) *mandis* is odd. The idea of unrestricted agricultural market access to corporates is the brainchild of the UPA government. The new laws are nothing but implementation of recommendations in the third report of the National Commission on Farmers, chaired by M.S. Swaminathan, in 2006. The commission found that there was a need for private *mandis*, and marketing linkages should be established through contract farming.

The commission had recommended that the minimum support price (MSP) shall be at least 50 per cent higher than the average production cost. While finalising the National Policy for Farmers, the UPA did not accept this recommendation. However, the Modi government declared in the Union budget 2018-2019 that MSP shall be at least one and a half times over the cost of production, thereby increasing farmers' income. Even a high-level committee of chief ministers—including chief ministers of non-BJP-ruled states of Madhya Pradesh and Punjab—had suggested limiting the powers of APMC, and using market reforms and the Contract Farming Act to ensure corporate sector participation to further facilitate export-oriented production. These were the basis for the farm reform bills to get passed in Parliament. A classic case of the Congress proposes, Modi disposes.

The Modi government has always been a torchbearer of farmer-first approach. However, even with an increase in MSP (minimum of 50 per cent and maximum of 150 per cent) during Modi regime, smaller farmers in some states are unable to get MSP from the middlemen. And, they are forced to sell their produce at meagre prices because of hooliganism and local political influence. As

per a NITI Aayog report, less than 30 per cent of the farmers had received MSP for their produce in 2017-2018.

Neither the producer, nor the retailer, nor the customer reaps the benefits of MSP. Instead, the middlemen end up gaining a major chunk, which has a snowball effect forcing the farmers to take loans from the middlemen or from banks. Many farmers could not repay their loans, fell into debt trap and committed suicide. Harassment of farmers was part of the system.

Contrary to the opposition's claims, APMCs and MSP are still very much in place, and will continue to run in the new system. However, only the

farmer can decide whether he wants to sell directly to the retailer or enter into a contract with a buyer. But, if we analyse the opposition's moves in the past two years, we see a pattern of using social media and paid media to spread misinformation to malign the Union government.

Only the middlemen of the APMC *mandis* and the local goons backed by political

parties will gain from the current protests. Punjab and Haryana are the epicentres of the protests and it is not hard to understand why. As states are not permitted to levy market fee/cess outside APMC areas under the new laws, Punjab and Haryana could lose an estimated ₹3,500 crore and ₹1,600 crore, respectively, each year.

Agricultural system in India is used to the APMC system, hence some resistance is expected. The only way to stop these protests is to educate the farmers. If the farmers understand the actual law, rather than believing rumours, their grievances will wither away. Government representatives should conduct more seminars to educate the farmers about positive effects of the new laws. The new system will create a prosperous and exploitation-free agricultural sector.



ILLUSTRATION BHASKARAN

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■ INTERVIEW

Shivraj Singh Chouhan
chief minister

We fight only to win; will win all bypoll seats

BY SRAVANI SARKAR

THE DATE FOR THE BYPOLLS to 28 seats in Madhya Pradesh—November 3—was announced just a week ago, but Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan has been in campaign mode ever since he began his fourth term in office this March. From managing the pandemic to hitting the road with Jyotiraditya Scindia, who left the Congress for the BJP, and making a spate of welfare announcements in the post-lockdown period, Chouhan is doing what he does best—connect with people. The bypolls are crucial as they will decide whether the BJP will retain power or the Congress will make a comeback. Though the BJP needs to win only nine seats to stay in power, Chouhan is confident of winning all 28 seats. Excerpts from an interview:

Q/ How many seats do you think will each party win in the bypolls?

A/ I can certainly speak about my party that we are going to win in all seats. We compete and fight to win and only win.

Q/ Why do you think the BJP will win all bypoll seats and the Congress may not have a chance at all?

A/ Welfare of the state and its people is our topmost priority. Congress leaders are always involved in corrupt, mala fide and selfish practices. They do not have time for the welfare of the state; they are always busy filling their personal reserves and are

involved in party factionalism. The Bharatiya Janata Party focuses on the development of every section of society. I believe in doing my karma, which is serving the society.

Q/ Even as the Congress is pushing the narrative of “betrayal” by Scindia and his supporters, what, according to you, are the important issues this byelection?

A/ The MLAs who moved to the BJP from the Congress clearly said that Kamal Nath put the development of the state at stake. Chhindwara alone meant the whole state, in fact the whole country, for Kamal Nath....

The people of Madhya Pradesh are well aware about what the BJP has done in the past and what the Kamal Nath government has done in 15 months. Keeping in view the distress of the people in wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, we took quick result-oriented decisions such as wheat procurement even in lockdown period. We introduced the Kisan Samman Nidhi, street vendors’ scheme and many others that made a world of difference. Our ideology is purely developmental and people-oriented. Service to the people is our sole religion. We did not allow the development process to stop even during the Covid-19 crisis. The Congress will try to hide its

failure and faults by blaming others; it is an old tradition with the party.

Q/ Does the financial aspect of implementing the schemes you have announced worry you?

A/ We have not only made announcements, but also implemented these schemes in letter and spirit—it—transferring ₹60,000 crore to the accounts of beneficiaries.

I don’t believe in crying for want of funds. I believe in hard work. Availability of funds is all about political will, competency and financial

management skills, and the Congress has failed miserably in this area. So, as far as the work for public interest is concerned, there will never be any dearth of money.... If you are able to discern the plight of the people, you are determined to find ways for their amelioration, and then arrangement of funds is no longer a difficult task. Although it is true that we got an empty treasury, we are working [a way] out.

Q/ How do you plan to bring the state economy back on track?

A/ We are resolute in reviving [the state economy] with a well-thought-out plan of action. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has given us the vision of ‘Atmanirbhar Bharat’. We have prepared a roadmap towards realising his dream,

WE HAVE NOT ONLY MADE ANNOUNCEMENTS, BUT ALSO IMPLEMENTED THESE SCHEMES IN LETTER AND SPIRIT—TRANSFERRING ₹60,000 CRORE TO BENEFICIARIES.

based on sector-specific development, which will accelerate growth and boost the state’s economy.

We have also taken up the ‘Ek Zila, Ek Pehchan’ (one district, one identity) scheme to encourage region-specific farming and augment local economy, fulfilling the prime minister’s idea of ‘vocal for local’... We have taken decisions such as not raising petroleum-linked prices, which the Congress did during the pandemic, reducing stamp duty by 2 per cent and no additional taxes for the real estate sector as part of our measures towards reinvigorating the state’s economy and the real estate. IT-based monitoring will ensure efficiency and transparency in the functioning of the administrative machinery.

Q/ Do you think many in the BJP, especially in the Gwalior-Chambal region (Scindia’s bastion), might still be upset? Will it hurt the party’s poll prospects?

pects?

A/ I will term this as a mere presumption. The BJP takes decisions based on collective consent and deliberation. We work by rising above petty politics. Our party is a democratic organisation and has leaders who grow on their own capabilities.... We are confident that the BJP will win the byelections in each and every seat.

Q/ Anti-incumbency was said to be one of the major factors for BJP’s loss in the 2018 assembly polls. Do you think the voters’ mind has changed in two years?

A/ It was a fractured mandate, not in favour of the Congress. What had happened in the assembly elections was not due to anti-incumbency. It was because of the dilemma in peoples’ mind in a few places, and people accepted this immediately after the election results were announced. They were not happy with the Congress winning. They realised their mistake of not choosing a chief minister who would stand by them in good and bad times.

Q/ If the BJP gets the required majority in the house, what changes do you foresee in the state’s socio-political sphere?

A/ People will witness a revolutionary change.... A new chapter of development-centric politics begins here. The politics which has corruption and opportunistic approach as its basis is set to finish forever. The state’s politics will set new examples of democratic values under the BJP government. ①



MUJEEB FARUQUI

Forgotten firebrand

India's first woman comrade remains largely uncelebrated in the country's political 'his'tory

BY CITHARA PAUL

Suhasini was a revolution-ary. She was also a singer, a dancer and a poet. Noted American journalist Edgar Snow, in the article 'The Revolt of India's Women,' described her as the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Suhasini Nambiar née Chatto-padhyay, the first Indian woman to become a member of the Communist Party of India, was all these and more.

Suhasini was one of the few, if not the only Indian, to be received by Mao Zedong on visiting China. But, as the Communist Party of India celebrates 100 years of its formation, she remains relegated to the dusty pages of history.

"Tracing the details about Suhasini was a laborious task," said Vappala Balachandran, a retired IPS officer, who wrote *A Life in Shadow: The Secret Story of ACN Nambiar*—a widely discussed book about Suhasini's husband. "Whoever she met was totally impressed by her intellect, beauty and fiery personality, but if you look for physical footprints, you may not find any," he told THE WEEK. Balachandran, who retired as special secretary, Union cabinet secretariat, said that the most detailed chronological details of Suhasini's life were

maintained by the Bombay Special Branch; she was under surveillance till 1951.

Born in Hyderabad in 1901 into an illustrious Bengali family, she was the youngest of eight children. Her father, Aghore Nath, was a renowned scientist who was closely involved in the freedom movement. He was the principal of Hyderabad College. Her siblings were all illustrious in their own fields—the most famous being Sarojini Naidu, the Nightingale of India, and Virendranath (Chatto), the

revolutionary freedom fighter who believed international support was vital to fight the British.

Life changed for Suhasini at 17. She met A.C.N. Nambiar, who later came to be known as Jawaharlal Nehru's mysterious "journalist friend" who accompanied Subhash Chandra Bose to meet Adolf Hitler. The son of Vengayil Kunhiraman Nayanar, the first short story writer in Malayalam, Nambiar shared a great rapport with Indira Gandhi, too. A Padma Bhushan awardee, Nambiar was Indian ambassador to Germany from 1955 to 1958. Thanks to the speculation that Nambiar was a spy, he still remains a mysterious figure.

When the duo met in Chennai, Nambiar was a struggling young lawyer. Both were passionate and hugely talented. What followed was a whirlwind romance and a marriage, against the wishes of Nambiar's family. The couple moved to London in 1919, soon after the wedding; Suhasini joined Oxford University for studies and Nambiar started working as a journalist. After two years, they shifted to Berlin where she joined

PAINTING: BINESH SREEDHARAN

Berlin University to study German and Nambiar continued working as a journalist. Suhasini did translation gigs and also taught English to Germans.

It was life in Berlin or rather the political climate of Berlin that changed their lives forever. Suhasini gradually got drawn into radical left politics, leaving her Gandhian thoughts behind. Her firebrand brother, on whom British writer Somerset Maugham based a character in his short story *Giulia Lazzari*, was a major influence. Suhasini wanted to study Marxism deeper and left for the Soviet Union to join the Eastern University for Asian Students. She apparently got so immersed in communist ideology that her visits to Berlin became scarce. Suhasini also got drawn to the Chinese Communist Party around the same time.

In 1928, she returned to India, on the direction of Communist Internationale, to activate communist movements in India. The Communist Internationale was of the opinion that the movement was quite "lethargic and moribund" in India. Nambiar stayed back in Berlin and it was a separation that lasted.

In Bombay, she became a prominent face of the communist movement and played an active role in assisting those arrested in the Meerut Conspiracy Case. Suhasini played an active role in The Little Ballet Group and Indian Peoples' Theatre Association. Under her leadership, they staged plays which were well received by the public. She also started publishing *The New Spark* for the communist party.

Unaware that Nambiar was getting closer to his German secretary, Suhasini wrote to him for six years, appealing him to come to India. When Nambiar finally ended the marriage, it broke Suhasini and she is said to have gone into depression. "Nambiar and Suhasini were quite an unusual couple," said Balachan-

Suhasini was in politics till the late 1950s. As she could not accept the new style of politics that emerged in the 1960s, she gradually withdrew.

dran. "While Nambiar preferred to be a low profile leftist journalist and remained somewhat neutral, Suhasini was full of fire. They were bound to break up."

According to those close to her, Suhasini never really recovered from the emotional blow. But she did not show it. She dived into politics and continued to be the go-to-person in the socio-political scene in Bombay. In 1938, she married R.M. Jambhekar, a poet and trade union activist.

"Suhasini, the first Indian woman communist, had various facets in her illustrious life," said Subhashini Ali, Communist Party of India (Marxist) Polit Bureau member. "When I met her, she was more into social work. But she remained a deeply political person." According to Ali, Suhasini was very active with her NGO, New Work Centre for Women, till the very end.

Suhasini was in politics till the late 1950s. As she could not accept the new style of politics that emerged in the 1960s, she gradually withdrew. Soon, her health deteriorated and she became wheelchair-bound.

Suhasini, the deeply political, chain-smoking liberal, whom Captain Lakshmi (Lakshmi Sahgal of the INA) called her first political mentor, died unsung in 1973 in Bombay. **✶**

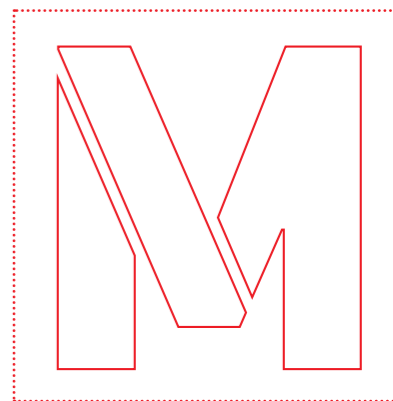


RIGHT ON THE MONEY

With fewer jurisdictional constraints and a wider functional ambit, the Enforcement Directorate has surpassed the CBI as India's most prominent investigating agency

BY NAMRATA BIJI AHUJA

GETTY IMAGES



ove over CBI, for there is a new sheriff in town. The Enforcement Directorate (ED) has become the latest nightmare for corrupt politicians, shady tycoons, terrorists, drug-peddling celebrities, Maoist insurgents, wildlife poachers and other high-profile fugitives. The agency, which was set up in May 1956 as an enforcement unit under the department of economic affairs, has now transformed into a crime-fighting juggernaut under the department of revenue. Some of the high-profile targets in the ED's crosshairs include businessmen such as Vijay Mallya, Nirav Modi, Mehul Choksi and Robert Vadra, and politicians like Bhupinder Singh Hooda, Ahmed Patel, P. Chidambaram, Praful Patel and D.K. Shivakumar.

Much of the ED's transformation has taken place under director S.K. Mishra, who took charge in October 2018. An unassuming officer from the Indian Revenue Service, Mishra prefers to keep a low profile. Even a photograph of the director is not available on the ED website. Mishra works six days a week out of the ED's modest

HOT PURSUIT

An ED team raiding Nirav Modi's office and showroom at Kala Ghoda in Mumbai in 2018, the year the agency was granted the power to confiscate assets and catch fugitives abroad



IN JUNE 2019, THE ED CHARGE-SHEETED FORMER UNION MINISTER P. CHIDAMBARAM AND HIS SON, KARTI, IN THE INX MEDIA MONEY-LAUNDERING CASE.

headquarters in Lok Nayak Bhavan near Khan Market in Delhi. He oversees an organisation which has a working strength of 1,273 officers against a sanctioned strength of 2,066 officers. Only about 400 of them are investigators.

Yet, the success rate of the agency is growing fast. And, so are the controversies. Recently, it had a run-in with the UK-based human rights organisation Amnesty International. Making use of certain findings from a CBI probe into Amnesty's functioning in India, the ED conducted a detailed investigation and found that between 2013 and 2019, a private limited company called Amnesty India International had received Rs 51.72 crore from Amnesty International-

al as "export proceeds" for certain services. But no services were exported by Amnesty India during this period and, therefore, the amount received was found to be in contravention of the Foreign Exchange Management Act (FEMA) and the Prevention of Money-Laundering Act (PMLA). The ED froze the organisation's bank accounts.

Incidentally, Amnesty's two major recent reports—on the abrogation of Article 370 and on the 2019 Delhi riots—were focused on India. The ED's crackdown

gave the Narendra Modi government ammunition to condemn certain "entities" funded by foreign donations for interfering in India's domestic political debates.

Amnesty International said the charges against it were unfounded. The European Union has taken note of the ED's action against the NGO. Nabila Massrali, EU spokesperson for foreign affairs and security policy, told THE WEEK that the EU had raised the issue with its interlocutors in India and Brussels and was hopeful that it would be resolved soon.

The ED has so far secured 18 convictions, arrested 224 persons, filed 734 prosecution complaints and is conducting trials in 640 cases. It has

attached property worth ₹77,304 crore. But what enhanced the agency's reputation the most were the three successful extraditions from the UAE—bringing back Christian James Michel, Deepak Talwar and Rajeew Saxena, who were facing charges in the AgustaWestland chopper scam. At least four more extradition requests are pending before foreign governments, including in the cases of fugitives such as Mallya, Nirav Modi, Choksi and arms dealer Sanjay Bhandari.

One of the recent successes for the ED came on August 28, when it got the "fugitive economic offender tag" against Chetan and Nitin Sandesara, promoters of the Vadodara-based Sterling Biotech. The Sandesara siblings are accused of routing undeclared funds and causing bank loan defaults to the tune of ₹8,100 crore. The fugitive tag allows the ED to confiscate their properties to recoup the losses.

For a very long time, the CBI was the undisputed hero of police stories in India, but, over the years, its vast mandate got divided among other agencies. While the ED took up economic offences, the National Investigation Agency was set up to probe terror, hijacking and national security crimes, leaving the CBI with a diminished brief. Today, the CBI is being increasingly relegated to playing second lead to the ED, especially in high-profile cases. More-



ROBERT VADRA WAS GRILLED IN 2019 ON CASES INVOLVING PURCHASE OF ASSETS ABROAD AND LAND ALLOTMENT IN RAJASTHAN'S BIKANER DISTRICT.

dering ₹20.32 crore.

"PMLA was enacted in 2002, but the rules were not notified till 2005," said M.L. Sharma, former special director of the CBI. "So it was virtually dysfunctional. Since the law was made in a hurry, it was amended six times between 2005 and 2019 when it finally became a powerful law." Section 5 of the Act empowers the ED to attach any property which is suspected to be 'proceeds of crime'. Upon conviction, the whole property can be confiscated and handed over to the Union government.

In June 2019, the ED charge-sheeted former Union minister P. Chid-

ambaram and his son, Karti, in the INX Media money-laundering case and filed a supplementary charge sheet in the Manesar land scam case against former Haryana chief minister Bhupinder Singh Hooda. Speaking to THE WEEK, Hooda said the ED got its powers from the law and the agency should use it judiciously. "The CBI and the ED should work as autonomous agencies and should be fair in their investigations," he said.

Yet another advantage the ED has over the CBI is that a statement made by an accused before the ED is admissible in court. A statement recorded by the CBI or the police has no value in court. In June, when the Covid-19 pandemic was at its peak, masked ED sleuths landed at the Delhi residence of senior Congress leader Ahmed Patel to record his statement in a case involving the Sandesara

over, opposition-ruled states like West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh are reluctant to hand over cases to the CBI.

"Sadly, the lustre and shine of the CBI has eroded under the NDA government," said Prithviraj Chavan, who had served in the prime minister's office from 2004 to 2010 as the minister with administrative control over the CBI. "This has happened because CBI directors are now handpicked by the government. And, by the government, I mean the prime minister," he said. On the other hand, the ED director reports to the revenue secretary and the Union finance minister for administrative purposes. And, unlike the CBI, which cannot operate in states without the consent of the respective state govern-

ments, the ED can suo motu register cases when there is a predicate offence (a crime which is a component of a more serious crime).

In March this year, the ED secured the conviction of Jharkhand minister Anosh Ekka in a money-laundering case linked to former chief minister Madhu Koda. It was a major victory for the ED when the special PMLA court gave Ekka a seven-year prison sentence for laun-

ED IS TRYING TO EXTRADITE VIJAY MALLYA FROM THE UK. HE IS WANTED FOR FRAUD AND MONEY-LAUNDERING CHARGES AMOUNTING TO ₹9,000 CRORE.



STRICT ENFORCEMENT

₹40,000 crore
Value of assets ED is looking to recover from a dozen fugitives

₹24,453 crore
Value of property attached

₹14,507 crore
Highest value attached from one party: Sterling Biotech (Nitin Sandesara)

VIJAY MALLYA

Proceeds of crime **₹9,990 crore**

Value of property attached **₹5,042 crore** (market value: over **₹11,000 crore**)

Declared fugitive economic offender on Jan 5, 2019

Confiscation of property is continuing

Extradition from the UK is being worked on

NIRAV MODI

Proceeds of crime **₹6,500 crore**

Value of property attached **₹2,369 crore** (including that of other beneficiaries)

70 searches conducted by ED; valuables worth **₹489.75 crore** seized

Bank accounts of Modi and his family members in Switzerland and Singapore with balance of **₹283.16 crore** and **₹44.41 crore**, respectively, frozen

Extradition proceedings have started in the UK and Modi is in jail

MEHUL CHOKSI

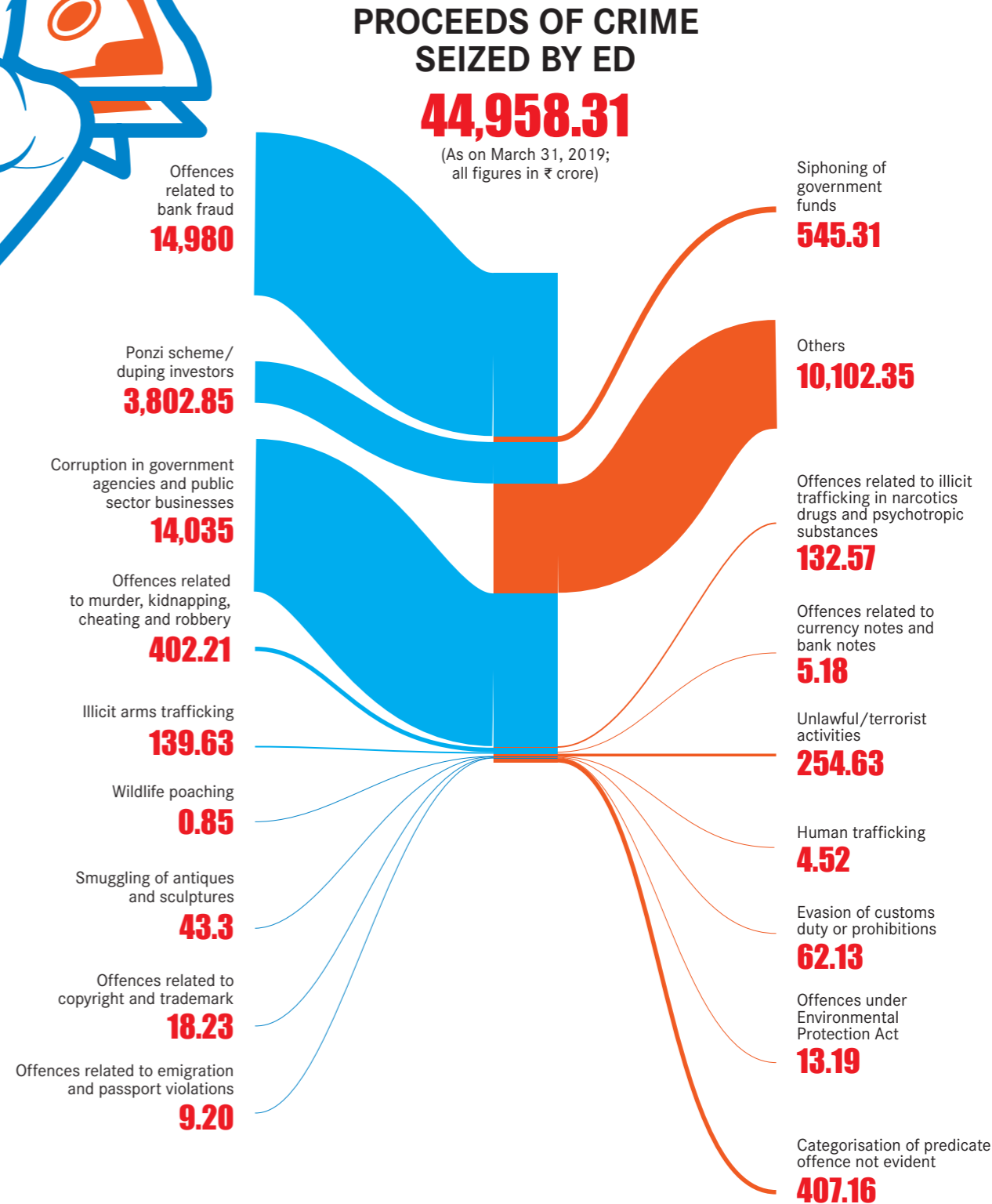
Proceeds of crime **₹6,097.63 crore**

Value of property attached **₹2,535 crore**

Passport revoked and Red Corner Notice issued against him by Interpol on ED's request

Application to declare Choksi as fugitive economic offender is pending before court

Extradition request pending before the government of Antigua since Oct 2018



GUEST COLUMN VELU NARAYANASAMY

ED, CBI have become puppets of Modi government

The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) and the Enforcement Directorate (ED) have become puppets in the hands of the National Democratic Alliance government. They take up cases which are shortlisted by the government and harass its political rivals and also businessmen and industrialists not liked by the government.

These days, the ED is playing the role which the CBI used to play in the past as the CBI's procedure for filing cases and conducting investigations takes a longer route. The ED is being used by the government to target political rivals and other adversaries. There is a lot of criticism today from the public and the civil society about the functioning of these organisations. But the government and the organisations are not bothered because they want to stick on to their chairs.

During my tenure at the prime minister's office, I was given a free hand by prime minister Dr Manmohan Singh to function independently. We worked to address the problems we were facing and also to strengthen the CBI's autonomy. We were very careful while appointing the CBI director and it was done in a transparent manner. We respected the views of the



leader of the opposition, who was part of the three-member selection committee, along with the prime minister and the chief justice of India or his nominee.

During our tenure, there was consensus in the appointment of the CBI director and the agency was functioning dispassionately without fear or favour. Several cases were filed even against leaders of the ruling coalition. We were criticised for it, but it clearly showed that there was no interference in the CBI's independent investigation process. Today, you see a totally changed scenario.

The CBI is in the pocket of the ruling establishment. There is rampant corruption and favouritism in the CBI because it is afraid of the people in power at the Centre. On the other hand, the reform that we brought was transparency, accountability and non-interference by the Central government.

The powers given to the ED were brought into force and the Prevention of Money-Laundering Act (PMLA) was implemented during the United Progressive Alliance government. It was used to investigate the parking of money earned through illegal means by criminals and tax evaders. This has now been side-tracked by the present government and the trust which the people had in the ED is lost.

The CBI was one of the most reputed organisations when the UPA was in power. It has now become an organisation that employs people with criminal backgrounds. The government keeps on ignoring the views of the opposition leader while selecting the CBI director. Everybody still remembers the fight between then director Alok Verma and special director Rakesh Asthana, but the government still tried to push Asthana for the post of director.

The selection of the CBI director should be done by a larger body and not just a three-member committee. It should have representatives from the ruling establishment, the judiciary and the opposition. Other eminent personalities should also be members of the committee. Only then the CBI will be able to function independently without being at the mercy of the ruling party.

The author, who is the chief minister of Puducherry, had served as minister of state in the PMO from 2009 to 2014, overseeing the department of personnel and training, which had administrative control over the CBI.

brothers as the Covid protocol mandated people above 65 to not step out of their homes. The Covid concession did not apply to Patel's son and son-in-law, who had to visit the ED office to give their statements.

"The ED is making hay while the sun shines," said senior Supreme Court lawyer K.T.S. Tulsi. He said PMLA was being misused and that many of its provisions were facing legal scrutiny. "A glaring example is section 45 which makes bail impossible for an accused in a money-laundering case," said Tulsi. "This has been quashed by the Supreme Court. The courts are working only on urgent matters because of Covid-19, but the moment the Supreme Court applies its mind to the issue, we will see many more provisions

being struck down." In his view, the problem is more about the government misusing the provisions. "This law was available to other governments also, but it was not misused. But today, the ED has become larger than the CBI," he said.

Vadra, who is the husband of Congress general secretary Priyanka Gandhi, was grilled extensively by the ED in February and June 2019 on cases involving purchase of alleged illegal assets abroad and land allotment in Rajasthan's Bikaner district. Chidambaram was not so lucky as he had to spend 40 days in Tihar jail. Another senior Congress leader Shivakumar, too, had to go to jail after the ED arrested him in an alleged tax evasion and hawala transaction case.

On October 5, the CBI conducted simultaneous raids at multiple loca-



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tions linked to Shivakumar and registered a case on allegations of possession of disproportionate assets worth ₹74.93 crore. CBI officials confirmed that it was ED sleuths probing money-laundering charges against Shivakumar who found that he could also

have violated the provisions of the Prevention of Corruption Act.

The ED has stolen a march over the CBI in the Hathras rape case as well. After Rajeshwar Singh, the agency's joint director in charge of the Lucknow zone, found that one of the accused in the case was already under its scanner, the agency sought more details from the Uttar Pradesh Police to track the source of funding for the protests in Hathras. The ED has found that a website calling for violent demonstrations to protest the Hathras rape has also been linked to other violent agitations,

IN JUNE, ED SLEUTHS LANDED AT AHMED PATEL'S DELHI RESIDENCE TO RECORD HIS STATEMENT IN A CASE INVOLVING THE SANDESARA BROTHERS.

especially in Kashmir. "A preliminary inquiry is going on and more information cannot be divulged at this stage," Rajeshwar Singh told THE WEEK.

Shantonu Sen, who was joint director of the CBI, however, said the ED still had a long way to go. "The CBI was prone to misuse, but compared with the ED, it had some checks and balances. While the CBI sleuths maintain a case diary during an investigation following the Code of Criminal Procedure, the ED does not follow such procedures," said Sen. But ED sleuths said they kept a record of their investigations.

ED sources said all state police forces were required



PTI

CONGRESS LEADER D.K. SHIVAKUMAR HAD TO GO TO JAIL AFTER THE ED ARRESTED HIM IN AN ALLEGED TAX EVASION AND HAWALA TRANSACTION CASE.

to share with it monthly reports of all FIRs. A dedicated division in the ED would sift through those FIRs and pick up money-laundering offences. For example, in money-laundering offences related to drug trafficking, the ED would pick up cases where a certain minimum amount of narcotics was involved. It would also look at corruption cases where ₹10 crore or more was involved, except in the case of political corruption. That was how the ED registered a case under PMLA after the death of actor Sushant Singh Rajput, because the Bihar Police had registered

an FIR on the basis of a complaint filed by Sushant's father, K.K. Singh. He had accused Sushant's girlfriend, actor Rhea Chakraborty, of siphoning off ₹15 crore from his son's accounts.

With the technological expertise of its cyber unit, the ED has accessed relevant WhatsApp chats, revealing details about narcotics consumption and the role of several celebrities, who are now being questioned by the Narcotics Control Bureau. "Our inquiries are based on the data provided by the ED," said an NCB official.

The ED works on most cases with a bare minimum number of officers. In its Ballard Estate office in Mumbai, there are just about 30 investigators. While the CBI had assigned nearly 40 officers to probe the Nirav Modi case, the ED put only three or four officers on the case. "Nearly 80 petitions are filed daily in different courts by various vested interests to dislodge the case," said an ED officer about the Nirav Modi case. "Two dedicated officers reply to each petition, get stay orders on bail applications and continue to investigate the case," said

the officer. Litigations are a major headache for the ED as high-profile accused quickly approach courts for anticipatory bail and also employ other diversionary tactics.

"Our attempt is to file the prosecution complaint within a year and not drag the matter once we summon an accused in a particular case," said an ED officer. ED sleuths prefer keeping fewer key witnesses in their cases in order to focus on important matters at hand and avoid endless court hearings. "Fewer key witnesses mean quicker trials and convictions. Moreo-



“ED HAS NAMED RATUL PURI, NEPHEW OF KAMAL NATH, IN A CHARGE-SHEET LINKED TO THE AGUSTAWESTLAND SCAM.”

ver, if a case is not proved, we will not shy away from filing a closure report," said the officer.

ED sleuths do not undergo police training at world-class academies, but they have a high-value property in Delhi, confiscated in a money-laundering case, which is being used as a training centre. About two-thirds of the officers on deputation to the ED are from the customs department, while one-third are from the income tax department. The ED has its own cadre where qualified candidates join as assistant enforcement officers, who rise in the hierarchy to become joint directors. The agency is in dire need of a headquarters, a training centre, housing facilities and its own offices across the country. A former officer recalled how he had to take an accused with him on a scooter once, all the while worrying that he might get off and run away at a traffic signal.

With the passage of the Fugitive Economic Offenders Act in 2018, the ED now has the power to confiscate assets and catch fugitives abroad. The first such confiscation, worth

₹1,350 crore, happened in the Nirav Modi case, and it posed a huge challenge for the agency. "We had to bring back over 2,300kg of polished diamonds and pearls from the UAE and Hong Kong. We had never done this before and there was no precedent available with any other agency," said an ED officer.

The consignments were stored in the warehouse of a logistics company in Hong Kong and were transported by an air cargo service. ED officials were constantly monitoring the shipment to ensure that nothing went missing.

When investigations began in the Kerala gold smuggling case to find out how the proceeds of smuggling were used and whether funds were diverted for terror activities, the ED's experience came in handy. The ED may not be a police organisation, but it has tightened the noose around cross-border terror financiers in Jammu and Kashmir and has cracked down on extortion rackets run by Maoist commanders in Bihar and Jharkhand.

The agency has a secret special task force which looks into terror financing and the smuggling of drugs and liquor. The force has enabled the agency to attach the proceeds of crime of Pakistani terror mastermind Hafiz Mohammed Saeed, Syed Salahuddin of the Hizbul Mujahideen, controversial televangelist Zakir Naik and designated global terrorist Dawood Ibrahim's aide Iqbal Mirchi

GUEST COLUMN KARNAL SINGH

ED has a better conviction rate than other agencies

The Enforcement Directorate implements three laws—Foreign Exchange Management Act, 1999 (FEMA), Prevention of Money Laundering Act, 2002 (PMLA) and Fugitive Economic Offenders Act, 2018 (FEOA). FEMA is a civil legislation dealing with foreign exchange. FEOA forces fugitive economic offenders to return to India; if they fail to do so, their assets will be confiscated and they will forfeit their right to take recourse to civil courts. PMLA deals with the pro-



ceeds of criminal activities enumerated in schedules A, B and C of the Act, requiring detailed analysis of financial statements and financial transactions routed through

different financial institutions. It results in civil proceedings relating to the attachment of the proceeds of crime and criminal proceedings relating to the filing of prosecution complaints in sessions courts against the accused.

A large number of cases pertaining to scheduled offences are investigated by various agencies. The ED is not in a position to take up money-laundering cases in respect to all these scheduled offences due to the shortage of manpower.

Besides PMLA cases, the ED had a huge pendency of FEMA cases from 2002 onwards. Steps were taken to expeditiously promote eligible officers and an annual calendar was prepared for conducting examinations and holding departmental promotion

committees. Still there is a huge gap between the sanctioned strength and actual strength.

This gap was to be filled up by deputation of officers from the police, income tax and customs. In order to attract officers on deputation, a proposal was sent to the government for making financial incentives of ED officers at par with CBI officers. The proposal was accepted by the government and this motivated more officers to apply, resulting in the ED's strength going up to 1,100 by 2018 from around 700 in 2015.

The ED handles high-profile cases involving people like Nirav Modi and Vijay Mallaya who have the financial strength to engage the finest lawyers. We need to match them to conduct best investigations. Selection and

training are, therefore, of utmost importance.

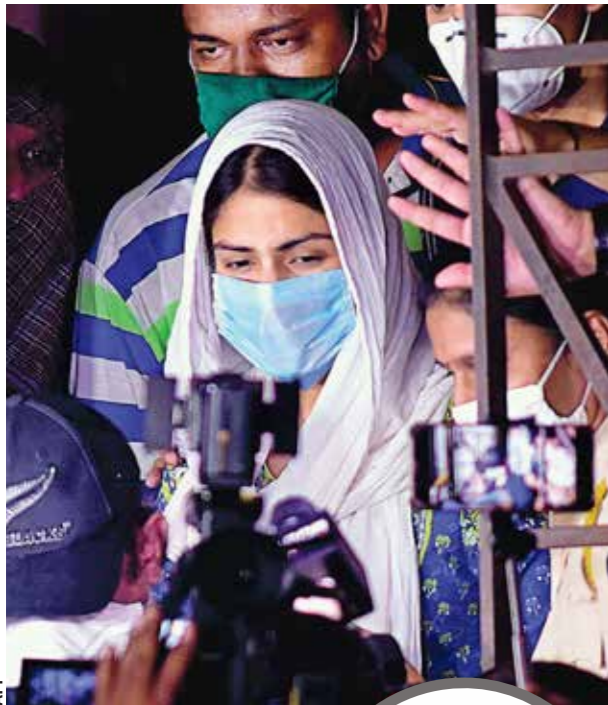
In order to enhance the professional skills of our officers, various training courses are organised, covering high-tech electronic evidence collection, financial analysis and various other techniques of investigation. Workshops on search, seizure, interrogation techniques, preparing the complaint for attachment and writing prosecution complaints have been organised. We have also organised moot courts to give our officers a flavour of court appearances.

The ED has in-house forensic labs in Delhi and in all regional offices. Earlier, electronic documents had to be sent to different Central forensic laboratories, and the results took up to

three years to come, hampering investigation. Now zonal offices are provided with kits for electronic data acquisition so that officers are not dependent on outside experts.

People often comment that the conviction rate in money-laundering cases is poor. Conviction rate is the ratio of the number of cases ending in conviction against the total number of cases decided. Till now, only a limited number of cases have been decided by the courts due to prolonged trial periods. Of the 15 cases decided (until 2018), 14 have ended in conviction. Thus, our conviction rate is 93.33 per cent, which is far better than any other agency.

The author was director, Enforcement Directorate.



ED REGISTERED A CASE AFTER RHEA CHAKRABORTY WAS ACCUSED OF SIPHONING OFF ₹15 CRORE FROM SUSHANT SINGH RAJPUT'S ACCOUNTS.

among others. The STF was successful in proving foreign exchange rules violations against Kashmiri separatist leader Yasin Malik and former Hurriyat leader Syed Ali Shah Geelani.

The ED is also active in targeting wildlife poachers by tracking down illicit money generated through the sale of animal parts. Recently, it has started cracking down on companies that run Chinese online betting applications. Mishra is, in fact, an old China hand as he used to work on Sino-Indian border management in the home ministry before joining the ED. In August, an ED team raided 15 locations in Delhi, Gurugram, Mumbai and Pune and found that Chinese nationals had floated multiple

companies in India to run online betting apps and that payment instructions were coming from China. It arrested a Chinese national and three Indians and froze ₹46.9 crore in four HSBC bank accounts.

The ED will have a key role to play when the global terrorist financing watchdog Financial Action Task Force (FATF) reviews India's anti-money laundering regime next year. The agency's actions in India and abroad will determine how the country has performed in curbing the menace of

money-laundering and the underlying criminal activity. The last FATF review was held in 2011.

Among the ED's most successful and most controversial missions so far have been the extradition of Saxena, Talwar and British national Michel in the AgustaWestland case. While Michel was deported from Dubai in December 2018, Saxena and Talwar were sent back by the emirate a month later. The case is politically sensitive with the ED claiming that Michel had disclosed the names of senior Congress leaders as recipients of kickbacks in the chopper deal. But the latest CBI charge sheet, which was filed on September 20, has not named any politician.

Michel's lawyer Aljo K. Joseph said it was a classic case of the government using its premier investigating agencies for political vendetta. "In the CBI charge sheet, none of the political names widely discussed by the media have been included," Joseph said. "This means that the investigating agencies have been used by the BJP to target its political adversaries without proof." He also pointed out that Michel was being held in Tihar jail without bail.

ED sources said the probe had become deeper with the sixth charge sheet naming Ratul Puri, nephew of former Madhya Pradesh chief minister Kamal Nath, in a money-laundering case linked to the AgustaWestland scam. "We are

hoping to fill the missing links," said an investigator.

A major challenge for the ED involves the extradition of Mallya from the UK. The former Kingfisher Airlines boss is wanted for fraud and money-laundering charges amounting to ₹9,000 crore. The Indian case for Mallya's extradition received a big boost with the ED's findings on money-laundering. Chief Magistrate of England Emma Arbuthnot accepted the ED's submissions and cleared Mallya's extradition after noting that the case was not politically motivated. Arbuthnot's order came at a time when the CBI, which was pursuing Mallya, was facing a credibility crisis because of the bitter internal feud between the agency's then director Alok Verma and special director Rakesh Asthana, who was heading the probe against Mallya. "The extradition was granted after we could establish how blatantly money was laundered," said an ED officer.

The only challenge remaining in the case is to deal with Mallya's efforts to get political asylum in the UK. If his request is denied, Mallya may be brought back to India, most likely within a year. And, the Ballard Estate office of the ED is preparing to take custody of its prized catch. Those who know the ED director well say he rarely smiles, but if the agency succeeds in bringing Mallya back, he can most certainly afford a hearty laugh. ☛

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

David Griffiths, director, office of the secretary general, Amnesty International



Bank told us about account freezing, not ED

BY NAMRATA BIJI AHUJA

The Enforcement Directorate's action against Amnesty India appears harsh. Is your organisation being targeted?

In the past couple of years, there has been a steadily escalating series of attacks and legal harassment against Amnesty India, which has culminated in the freezing of our bank accounts, essentially making it impossible for Amnesty India to operate. But the government has never substantiated the allegations against us by framing charges.

Even in the case of freezing our bank accounts, we heard it from the bank and not from the Enforcement Directorate directly. So what we see is a Kafkaesque sentencing without notification, charges and conviction, which is a shocking culmination of the Indian government's targeting of Amnesty India.

The government says Amnesty has flouted Indian laws.

There has been a succession of allegations, interrogation of board and staff members, raids on our offices and most recently the freezing of bank accounts by the ED. FIRs have been registered, but they have not resulted in charges being framed. What happened in September is merely the final stage of this kind of escalating harassment.

The United Progressive Alliance government, too, had denied permission to Amnesty India to receive funds under the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA).

Amnesty India has not applied for permission to receive foreign funding under FCRA because it is not required for its lawful operating model. But we have certainly witnessed legal harassment increasing significantly under the present government. That is consistent with the way it has treated the wider civil society and human rights movements, looking to silence and suppress critical voices, including with the

recent tightening of FCRA regulations. But Amnesty India has not sought to operate under FCRA. Under the entirely lawful and transparent setup that we have, the predominant funding for Amnesty India is from within India.

Does Amnesty International give financial support to Amnesty India?

Amnesty India has a mechanism to provide consultancy services and one of the clients is an international partner within the Amnesty movement. This is all fully compliant with the Companies Act and other applicable laws. But the domestic human rights work carried out by Amnesty India and the fundraising have been directed at a domestic audience with a view to funding the human rights work within India, thanks to around 11,000 donors at present.

Your organisation has been critical of issues such as the abrogation of Article 370 and the Delhi riots.

India has had a succession of serious human rights crises from the epidemic of caste violence and violence against women and minorities to the role of police during the Delhi riots and the role of security forces in Kashmir. India has historically prided itself as the world's largest democracy, with a vibrant civil society and media. Of course, India has a progressive Constitution, but actions like these, which include closing down of operations of Amnesty India and the challenges many organisations and civil society are facing, are absolutely not consistent with the message that India has projected to the world.

What steps are you planning next?

We will fight it in the courts once we have the opportunity, that is, when charges are framed and brought to court. So far, the government has only engaged in legal harassment and a smear campaign. ☛

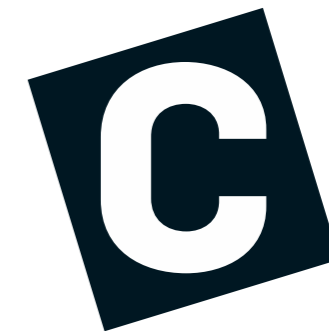

**PICTURE
OF GRIEF**

The victim's brother (in T-shirt) and mother (face covered) at home with other relatives

HEARTLESS IN HATHRAS

THERE ARE MANY
OFFSHOOTS
OF **THE HATHRAS
CRIME**, BUT IN ITS
ROOT LIES FEAR

BY PUJA AWASTHI
PHOTOS BY SANJAY AHLAWAT



"Caught in emotions, she walked on unaware...waiting in ambush, a wolf lurked somewhere."

The above lines could have been written for the 19-year-old from Hathras—allegedly raped and brutalised in the field from where she fetched fodder for her cattle.

But these lines were not written for her.

They are from a poem titled 'Main Chamaron ki gali tak le chalunga aapko' (I will take you to the lane of Chamars), by Adam Gondvi, a poet who wrote of dalit oppression and corrupt politicians.

In the picture that Gondvi (born Ram Nath Singh) paints of the sweltering dalit life, the search for justice is futile. As far as the template of crimes against women in Uttar Pradesh goes, this is eerily familiar. When caste, power and politics are coded into that pattern, a toxic pit emerges. And justice is buried in its depths.

The brutal injuries, the shifting between hospitals, the death, the hurried cremation, the threats, the blocking of access, a frenzied media and a political maelstrom—there are many offshoots of the Hathras crime.

In its root lies fear.

On September 14, the girl's brother gave a handwritten complaint to the local police station at Chandpa, the village of which their hamlet is a part. It said that the siblings had gone to the millet fields with their mother. When the brother made a trip home to offload a stack of hay, one Sandeep tried to kill his sister. Read the complaint: "She shouted and my mother responded, 'I am coming'. Upon hearing the voice, Sandeep ran away. The incident occurred around 9.30 in the morning."

At 10.30am, this complaint was converted into a police report. The sections applied were 307 of the Indian Penal Code (attempt to



TENSE SITUATION

A view of the victim's house; (above) policemen guard the way to the house

murder) and section 3(2) (v) of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities Act), 1989.

The victim was from the Valmiki caste—a people who have traditionally worked as sweepers and scavengers. The kind whom Gondvi's poem describes thus: "Standing up to Thakurs, they think is child's play... Such rascals have their bearings not at home, but in jail."

Sandeep and the other three accused—Luvkush, Ravi and Ramkumar—are Thakurs.

On September 19, senior Congress leader Shyoraj

Jivan Valmiki visited the victim at the Jawaharlal Nehru Medical College in Aligarh Muslim University, where she was admitted after primary treatment at Hathras's district hospital.

"The family was scared," said Valmiki. "The girl was in pain. Custom demanded that I do not speak much to her. But to the father and brother I said, speak the truth, do not be scared, we are all with you. They said she had been raped, but their hesitation over not mentioning it to the police was understandable."

After that visit at 3.30pm, Valmiki called the investigating officer. He was told that the victim's state-

ment had been recorded at 12pm the same day (September 19) and no mention of rape was made. On September 22, in another statement, the first mention of rape and four assailants was made.

The medical report from AMU noted, "Opinion regarding penetrative intercourse is reserved pending availability of FSL (forensic science laboratory) report". It added: "No secretions present 8 days past assault." The forensic report read: "There are no signs suggestive of vaginal/anal intercourse. There are evidences of physical assault (injuries over the neck and the back)."

These reports that the state has cited to bolster its 'no rape was committed' claim are legally tenuous as a dying declaration overrides medical examinations that negate rape.

Rajkumari Bansal, a forensics expert from the Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose Medical College, Jabalpur, said, "Medical reports can be manipulated. It is foolish for the government to believe that people will accept its version." Bansal stayed with the victim's family for three days, driven by her desire to "prevent dalits from being systematically prosecuted".

The victim's brother said, "I was terrified for my sister. She lay in blood without the clothes on the lower part of her body. I just wanted the police to help us get her to a hospital. But they said they would not do it without a written complaint. So, I scribbled something on a paper, adding towards the end our caste."

A pervasive fear of the police is commonplace in Uttar Pradesh where law and order lumbers to the tune of politics. During the previous regime of the Samajwadi Party, Akhilesh Yadav's caste peers were stationed on all posts that involved direct contact with people. Thus, justice or its absence



DAYS OF DARKNESS

September 14

A woman, 19, is assaulted in the hamlet of Boolgadi in Chandpa village (block Mursan, district Hathras, Uttar Pradesh). Her brother files a written complaint naming one Sandeep.

September 19

The victim's statement is recorded. She names Sandeep for molesting her and attempting to kill her by strangulation. Section 354 is added to the FIR. After initial investigation, Sandeep is arrested.

September 22

A revised statement by the victim is recorded on the family's insistence. For the first time, three more accused are named and Section 376D (gang-rape) is added to the FIR. Section 354 is removed. A medical examination is conducted at AMU.

September 23-26

The three other accused are arrested.

September 29

The victim dies and is taken from Delhi to Hathras.

September 28

The victim is moved to Safdarjung Hospital in Delhi.

October 1

A two-judge bench of the Allahabad High Court takes suo motu cognisance of the cremation and directs the state's additional chief secretary (home), director general of police, additional director general of police (law and order), and the Hathras district magistrate and superintendent of police to present themselves before it on October 12. The victim's family is also asked to be present. Section 144 is imposed in Hathras. ADGP Prashant Kumar claims that the forensics report does not suggest rape.

September 30

The victim is cremated between 2.00am and 2.30am. The family claims this was against their wishes and in violation of Hindu customs. State forms three-member SIT to investigate the incident.

October 2

SIT team gives its first report suggesting narco tests for everyone involved in the case, including the victim's family. Hathras SP and four other policemen are suspended.

October 6

State government files affidavit before Supreme Court citing intelligence inputs to justify late-night cremation to stem law and order problems. It states the issue was deliberately given a caste and communal colour.

reflected this preference.

Under Yogi Adityanath, the man who compared women to unbridled energy that needs control lest it turn dangerous, the police seem unconcerned about crimes against women. When those crimes are against the poor from backward castes, dalits or minorities, they matter even less. And when the state acquires for itself an unaccountable, unquestionable right to search and arrest without warrant through a special force (called the Uttar Pradesh Special Security Force), the fear grows deeper.

Earlier this year, a report titled Barriers in Accessing Justice chronicled the experiences of 14 rape and gang-rape survivors in the state. Authored by the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative and the Association for Advocacy and Legal Initiatives, the study noted, “Survivors faced delay, derision, pressure and severe harassment when they approached the police to report complaints and seek the registration of a first information report... (They) faced discrimination by the police on the basis of gender and caste, impeding their access to justice at the gateway to the legal system. These experiences amplified the trauma of survivors and affected their mental and physical well-being.” For the marginalised, these burdens are heavier.

The 2019 report of the National Crime Records Bureau counted 11,829 crimes against SCs and STs in the state. This accounts for more than one fourth of all such crimes reported in the country. On the charge of assault on modesty of women from these communities, the state beats all others. It also has the highest number of cases being tried in courts for all crimes against SCs and STs.

In the victim’s village, the Thakurs and Brahmins are more than two and a half times the SCs. But these upper castes are petrified by the hostile glare of the media and the politicians.

Yogendra Singh Gehlot, the Hathras president of the Akhil Bhartiya Kshatriya Mahasabha, one of the organisations speaking for the hamlet’s Thakurs, said, “This case is born out of personal enmity. The victim’s family has been swayed by political forces. All we demand is a fair probe—through whichever agency.”

Said Ramkumar’s father, Rakesh (he uses just one name): “Daughters have no caste, they are *saanjha* (shared). So, this is a crime against my daughter. The police say my son committed it. He is a quiet boy who keeps to himself. At the time of the crime he was at the dairy plant where he works. Check the attendance. If we are lying, hang us all. But do not threaten us in this manner.”

His most pronounced point of reference is the

Bhim Army. Its volunteers are rumoured to be lying in wait around the village, ready to attack when the police presence is thinner and the attention quieter.

Vinay Ratan Singh, the national president of the Bhim Army, said that his organisation was interested in ensuring justice, not in fomenting trouble. To a question on why they had chosen to focus just on Hathras, Singh said, “This case deserves particular condemnation, but we go everywhere such cases are reported.”

That everywhere includes Balrampur, where on September 29, a 22-year-old dalit woman was assaulted and allegedly gang-raped. A case just as horrific but one that did not tug at our conscience as sharply. (The state government has since assured



TROUBLED KIN

(Above) CPI(M)’s Sitaram Yechury and CPI’s D. Raja talk to the Hathras victim’s father (centre) and other relatives; (below) the mother and the wife of one of the accused



Medical reports can be manipulated. It is foolish for the government to believe that people will accept its version.

—Rajkumari Bansal, forensics expert

the family of quick justice).

Uttar Pradesh is strewn with such crimes that are forgotten by those who Gondvi calls “the contractors of religion, culture and morality... the ministers in states and the government centrally”.

In the state’s capital, on September 29, a 19-year-old dalit girl, after much dissuasion by the police, filed a report alleging that she had been kidnapped and repeatedly raped by two named and other unnamed persons. But no political or other indignation followed.

Even cases that provoke anger, fade into oblivion.

On December 5, 2019, a 23-year-old woman was set ablaze in Bhatan Khera, a hamlet in the Bihar block of Lucknow’s neighbouring Unnao district. Five Brahmin men were accused of the crime. The victim, who also alleged rape, belonged to a caste of blacksmiths. Four days later, the state’s law minister announced the setting up of 218 fast-track courts, of which 144 were to hear rape cases.

Yet, the victim’s family waits to record its statements. On October 2 this year, the deceased’s six-year-old nephew went missing. Her family lodged a case of kidnapping, naming, among others, three relatives of the earlier accused.

“We have been shunned by almost everyone in the village,” said the victim’s father. “They say we became greedy after my daughter’s death. They will not even talk to us for fear that we will complain to the police. But we are powerless people. Justice is not for us.”

In Gondvi’s hamlet of the oppressed, a space that subsumes all of the state, this is expected. For, after all, it must be wondered, “...what the world has come to... the one beneath our feet till yesterday, have arisen today.” And that must not be permitted. ❶

(Gondvi’s poem as translated by Lucknow-based activist Sangita Jaiswal.)

HOUSE OF GRIEF

The dalit family in Hathras will not relent in its search for justice

BY SNEHA BHURA

In one of the three rooms of her house, a dazed mother sits on the floor, her *pallu* pulled over her head. It has been more than a week since her 19-year-old daughter succumbed to injuries after being allegedly gang-raped and brutally tortured some 700 metres from her house in Boolgadi village of Hathras district in Uttar Pradesh.

The stream of enraged, solicitous visitors—including politicians, reporters, activists, neighbours, district officials, protesters, policemen and investigators—has left her slightly immobilised. She sits with her hand on her head. The need to stitch a consistent narrative around her daughter’s assault has become more than urgent. There is no time to grieve a terrible loss from a horrific crime. Or even erase disturbing wounds from her memory. Because the mother was the first to see her daughter lying stripped, paralysed and maimed amid tall stalks of bajra (millet). Because the mother made desperate attempts to file a first information report, and seek medical treatment from one general hospital after another, even as her daughter flitted in and out of consciousness. Because she fed her biscuits and juice even as the daughter struggled to record her statement and name her assailants from her hospital bed. Because state authorities hastily cremated her daughter on September 30, in the secrecy of the night, without her consent. Because hers is a Valmiki family in a Thakur-majority village and years of accumulated anger over constant subordination can only end in *nyay* (justice).

So, for the sake of an elusive *nyay*, the mother once again recounts the harrowing details when



LIVING TO FIGHT
Relatives preparing food for the victim’s family; (below) journalists gathered outside the house

a political leader from Delhi comes calling on a Tuesday morning. She remembers how she panicked upon finding a single slipper of her daughter lying in the bajra fields, how when she peeked further in she found blood oozing from her daughter’s face, eyes and tongue. “Her spine was broken,” she says, letting out a long, deep wail. She recalls how she quickly covered her daughter’s body with her blood-soaked clothes and rushed to the local police station with her family members. And how the police made them wait even as blood kept dripping from her daughter’s body, how there was disdain on the faces of the policewomen, how she never got any written documents or medical slips, how she was not allowed inside the hospital room when her daughter recorded her statement. At one point, the mother loses her cool. “I am being made to answer the same questions again and again,” she says, before breaking into a searing lament.



A group of women huddle around her with words intended to placate: “Calm down. They have only come for you.”

Round and round we have circled back to yet another horrific assault on womanhood that has triggered national outrage and tapped into a collective grievance. The 2012 Nirbhaya case in Delhi, the 2014 Badaun gang-rape and murder case, the death of an eight-year-old in Kathua in 2018. Or the rape case of Unnao, where the victim was set ablaze on her way to a court hearing last year. Around the same time, the four accused in the gang-rape and murder of a 26-year-old veterinary doctor near Hyderabad died in an “encounter”. The cycle—a group of men asserting power against and instilling fear in a single woman in a deeply hierarchical society—recurs in the same framework with sensational plot twists and rumblings of state apathy. The 24x7 news cycle seems to become sword and shield.

Says one of the four siblings of the Hathras victim, “There is a lot of attention from the media now. So we have enough police protection. But once the media is gone, that is when we will need all the protection. I fear for my mother, father and sister-in-law, who might end up suffering a similar fate like my sister.”

The brother’s anxiety might remind one of the reports of District Magistrate Praveen Laxkar allegedly issuing veiled threats to the family. He had reportedly nudged them to support the government’s statement, reminding them that the media would soon leave.

The brother vividly remembers the day, September 29, his sister died in Delhi’s Safdarjung Hospital. She was brought there from the Aligarh Muslim University medical college. “It was around 11pm that we asked if the postmortem examination had been completed,” he says. “Some said the body had left the hospital,

others said it was kept safe. We were being led astray. I do not know how they cremated her body without our permission; I do not know if they used kerosene or petrol or oil. We had said we would cremate her body with all the rituals in the morning. They did not listen to us one bit.” He keeps repeating the last line as his mother continues to recall more grisly details to gasps of surprise and horror from her listeners.

Outside this small room, packed mostly with women in masks, there is a melee of male callers around the victim’s elder brother in the courtyard. A neat little segregation of the sexes has organically taken place. There, the victim’s sister-in-law quietly heats milk and tosses chapatis on a clay stove, clutching her *pallu*.

“That day, on September 14, my sister-in-law woke up at dawn, made *todi ki sabzi* (ridge gourd), kneaded dough and left for the fields to cut grass. In fact, she woke up at the crack of dawn every day and took care of all the household chores. When I gave birth to a girl this August, she stepped in to take care of the house. My children were so fond of her. They never cried in her presence,” recalls the sister-in-law, before drifting off in her thoughts. “If only she had studied or gone to school, this would not have happened. We will not stop repeating ourselves until the truth comes out.”

The family and neighbours deny any acrimony with members of the dominant Thakur caste. The five Valmiki (dalit) families live quietly, mind their own affairs and eat the labour of their hands, working on the farms of upper-caste men.

“We are Thakurs, they are Harijans. How can we talk to them? We hardly have any interaction,” lashes out 65-year-old Rajwanti, the mother of Ramkumar, one of the four accused. She stays some 200m away from the victim’s home. “I understand the grief of a mother in



KEEPING WATCH
A policeman patrols a lane near the victim’s house

If only she had studied or gone to school, this wouldn’t have happened. **We will not stop repeating ourselves unless the truth comes out.**

—Sister-in-law of the victim

the circumstances, regardless of caste, but how did my innocent son get stuck in this? Her mother could have shouted and raised an alarm just when she saw her daughter missing in the fields that day. She just went on cutting grass? Why did she not shout? If I was in her place, I would have raised hell. She did not do anything.” Rajwanti demands a proper investigation that would establish her 27-year-old son’s whereabouts on the day of the crime.

The plight of the dalits is illustrated through the words of Charan Singh, chairman of the NGO Bharat Vasi Seva Sansthan, set up to handle issues of labour uplift in the dalit community. “Since the BJP government came to power in the state, NGOs like ours hardly get to do any work,” he says. “We are mostly keeping busy doing farm work. Our licence is not getting renewed.”

Amid all this, an upper-caste Pandit neighbour sits outside his house in the afternoon heat, wearing a blank expression. He just wants to be left alone, and calls the matter a Valmiki-Thakur dispute. He complains how, since his village came into the spotlight, all farm work has stopped. There are no songs or serials on the television. Just this one news. “I do not understand this circus,” he says. “Aren’t the accounts of a grieving mother and her dead daughter enough to end this?”

■ INTERVIEW



Prashant Kumar,
additional director general of police
(law and order), Uttar Pradesh

We have not ruled out sexual assault

BY NAMRATA BIJI AHUJA

Q/ Why was there heavy police deployment at the victim’s house?

A/ Soon after the incident on September 14, there were intelligence reports that said that certain sections were making deliberate attempts to stir up caste tensions and create communal discord. Based on intelligence inputs, the police were deployed to prevent any kind of threat to the victim’s family. If there had been any untoward incident, [like] a family member of the victim being attacked or certain groups attacking their house or setting it on fire, the police would have been blamed.

It is the responsibility of the local police and the local administration to carry out a threat assessment and, based on that, provide safety to the family and the village.

Q/ Why do you think certain groups are trying to stir up caste-based violence?

A/ If you see the track record of Uttar Pradesh in the past three and a half years, there have been no law and order problems, communal incidents or caste-based violence. So, certain elements and groups are making attempts to disrupt the peace.

Q/ Why were the last rites conducted hurriedly, in the dead of night?

A/ It has already been clarified that the decision was taken at the local level by the administration, including the district magistrate and the superintendent of police, taking into account the law and order situation at the time. The last rites were performed according to religious customs in the presence of family members.

Q/ Why did the police jump the gun to say there was no evidence of rape?

A/ The report based on the sample from the Jawaharlal Nehru Medical College Hospital in Aligarh, which was sent to the Forensic Science Laboratory in Agra, said that no spermatozoa was found. These are the facts, but the media has misquoted me saying that I have said there was no rape. I am not saying it is not a case of rape. On the basis of the FSL report and the evidence being collected in the case, the investigating officer will list the offences and prepare his report. Everything will be included in the report and it is the legal duty of the IO to take into account all facts and evidence of the case.

Q/ When will the report be finalised?

A/ Usually, the investigating officer has to prepare his report and submit it in court within 90 days of the arrest.

Q/ Does the post mortem by doctors in Delhi contradict the FSL report?

A/ All reports are on the same page.

Q/ Are you ruling out the possibility of sexual assault?

A/ Certainly not. We are probing the case and nothing has been ruled out yet.

Q/ What are the charges pressed against the accused?

A/ The police has registered an FIR and added section 376D of the IPC, which deals with gang-rape, on the statement of the victim; various other charges are being investigated.

Q/ Why is there a need for a CBI investigation?

A/ The Uttar Pradesh government is open to a fair investigation and it is all for transparency. Now, everyone should cooperate to bring out the truth of the case as the state government has recommended a CBI investigation.

Q/ Have you identified the groups that were trying to incite caste-based violence?

A/ An investigation has been launched to probe the larger conspiracy. The UP Police have registered a separate FIR to probe the bigger conspiracy and we have definite leads on groups and individuals trying to cause trouble and disturb social harmony.



Demolishing the Hathras girl

So the august courts have concluded that the Babri Masjid pretty much fell down by itself. The hefty amount of photographic and audio-video evidence that the CBI submitted was dismissed because it “could have been tampered with”. The accused were acquitted because “nobody saw them making any hand gestures or in any other way exhorting the crowd to break down the mosque”. The fact that they were right there, sitting on a stage and watching as the demolition happened is not proof of anything apparently. There is a lot of focus on the “noise” and the “dust” that prevented anybody present from quite comprehending what was going on. And so, for lack of evidence, everybody has been declared blameless and squeaky clean, and BJP cadres across the nation celebrated with laddoos.

Give the propaganda makers a few years and they will have us swearing that it was Lord Ram himself who made the hand gesture that caused an earthquake to happen at the disputed site at the very moment the *kar seva* was being performed, and it was the consequent shifting and rumbling of the mighty tectonic plates that did the evil mosque in. (In fact, I am willing to bet good money that that will be the climax of the much-touted Kangana Ranaut directorial *Ayodhya*, set to release any time around a big election. So cinematically appealing and so much fresher and goose-bumpier than the other, always available but slightly bleh option, i.e., a Pakistani conspiracy.)

Of course, the verdict is an obscenity. What is equally obscene is that #Hathras is starting to look ominously like our new #Babri.

Attacked for merely existing, the Hathras rape victim, too, was knocked to the ground, violated, reduced to rubble and left for dead. Clear proof and a dying declaration are being negated as we watch, and loved ones are being brutally arm-twisted

and muzzled. Worried perhaps, that the eye of the international press is on India post #BLM and about a new and growing awareness of the plight of dalits, and determined that Hathras should not become as big as Nirbhaya, the UP government has hired a fancy public relations firm to put out a version saying there was no rape at all! A damaging “alleged” is being tacked on to every mention of rape to snip the “false binary” between Hathras and Nirbhaya. Anonymous WhatsApp messages are assuring us cosily that the death was an honour killing carried out by the victim’s own family because she was infatuated with high-caste boys.

And, it is working. A sweet old lady in a white lace dupatta confided quite earnestly to me in my yoga class that the girl’s own mother had strangled her, broken her spinal cord and inserted a rod up her vagina. The sweet old lady had read all about it on her phone.

Following a policy of throw-everything-you-can-and-hope-it-sticks—again reminiscent of the Babri model—a line is also being trotted out about how the girl’s family are the tools of a shadowy foreign power that wants to destabilise UP and unleash a civil war statewide, because it is so jealous of the developmental leaps (LOL!) UP

has made under Yogi Adityanath.

That will probably work too.

Going forward, we can expect more denials, more delays, more demonising of the victim and her family, and better strategy and spin than what is currently on display at the IPL.

To use current parlance, Hathras is being cancelled. Just like the Babri Masjid demolition was cancelled. With a wave of its all-powerful and super-expensive PR brush, the Adityanath government is whitewashing the whole gruesome incident just in time for Diwali. Because if you do not whitewash, Lakshmiiji cannot be enticed into entering your home and blessing you with prosperity, *na*.



Stay hydrated

Drink water at regular intervals to prevent kidney stones and urinary tract infections

In men, urinary retention has been the commonest problem in the past seven months. The most common reason for that is prostate enlargement. The incidence of kidney stones, which is common in men and women, goes up in summer as people tend to drink less water and sweat more. But the problem persists at other times, too. A high percentage of women visited the hospital with complaints of urinary tract infections, again because of not drinking enough water.

Lockdown impact

Before the lockdown, certain patients were getting investigations done for the cancer of the kidney or the prostate. But once the lockdown started, they have not ventured out and have postponed their tests. They fear Covid-19 would kill them. Now their cancers have advanced from curable to incurable or difficult-to-manage stage. Also, we have seen women

coming in with issues of an overactive bladder, which has been almost entirely because of the lockdown. It is a psychological condition and has nothing to do with organ-related pathology. All organs are fine, but there is an urge to urinate every 15-20 minutes. This might be because of the mental stress that had become a common feature during the lockdown.

Indians and cancers

India has the highest incidence of penile cancer in the world. Penile cancer is rare in circumcised men. Indians are less prone to developing prostate cancer when compared to the west, but we are catching up fast given the change in our lifestyle and diet. People who smoke more than 10 cigarettes a day are more prone to bladder cancer.

Self-care and hygiene

The most important aspect is to stay hydrated. Because of a sedentary lockdown routine, with little body



Please do not postpone visits to your doctors anymore. Relevant and necessary steps are being taken at hospitals to prevent the spread of infection.



movement, the thirst levels tend to go down. But in order to prevent issues such as kidney stones and urinary tract infections, it is important to drink water at regular intervals. Normal sleep cycle and a balanced diet, along with some physical activity, can help keep urological issues at bay. People with diabetes or other lifestyle diseases are more prone to developing kidney-related diseases. Also, please do not postpone visits to your doctors anymore. Relevant and necessary steps are being taken at hospitals to prevent the spread of infection. Hence, it is better to approach the doctor than postpone essential treatments and surgeries.

Also issues like blood in urine is not normal, and must not be ignored. One must immediately approach the doctor to get their bladder checked for tumours. Reducing the intake of salt and processed food will help in improving bladder and kidney health.

—As told to
Pooja Biraia Jaiswal



People who smoke more than 10 cigarettes a day are more prone to bladder cancer.

Spot blood in urine? Get yourself checked immediately for tumours in the bladder.

Less intake of salt and processed food will help improve bladder and kidney health.

India's GDP could contract between 9 and 12 per cent in the current year

BY ABHINAV SINGH

Gautam Kumra has spent over 27 years in McKinsey & Company, a US-based management consulting firm with a presence in 65 countries. He is a founding board member of the Public Health Foundation of India and the IIT Delhi Endowment Board. Kumra also serves on the board of IIM Bodh Gaya and is a member of the Global Advisory Council of the Lincoln Center for Performing Arts, New York. He spoke to THE WEEK about the challenges the Indian economy faces because of Covid-19 and the need for urgent reforms. Edited excerpts:

What are the uncertainties caused by Covid-19 and how long would it remain? What kind of GDP growth can we expect this year and what can be done to improve it?

The economic impact of Covid-19 is highly uncertain and can be judged only in terms of potential scenarios. According to our scenarios, India's GDP could contract between 9 and 12 per cent in the current year, depending on the effectiveness of virus containment and economic policy responses. There is very high uncertainty on both the depth and duration of the health and economic crisis. Whatever the extent of the crisis, it could mark the most severe decline in India's GDP in four decades.

The government has responded with liquidity and fiscal measures,



THE WAY FORWARD

India needs to create at least **90 million** new non-farm jobs over the next decade

For this, India's GDP needs to grow by **8 to 8.5 per cent** annually (2023-2030)

1,000 plus midsize and **10,000** plus small firms need to scale up

Indian economy needs to raise **\$2.4 trillion** in 2030, up from **\$865 billion** in 2020

60 per cent of the reform agenda requires action at the state level

but what reforms are still required?

Beyond immediate crisis response measures, the government has also announced some structural reforms that could have positive effects on medium-term growth.

Facilitating cash in hand for the people could stimulate and revive demand in the economy. To enable this, the government has announced several direct benefit measures for the farm sector and vulnerable households. However, given the depth of the crisis, incremental stimulus is likely warranted to stimulate demand (for example, direct income support for informal non-agriculture workers and the urban poor) along with support to stressed sectors, which will struggle to recover, in addition to accelerating spending in infrastructure and expediting pending payments of government and PSU (public sector undertaking) dues.

Many sectors, especially MSMEs, may not be able to improve before the end of the current fiscal. What according to you are the sectors that may take more time to revive and sectors that may revive sooner?

Sectors such as non-discretionary retail and agriculture have seen rapid growth with

“

MSMEs might be hit worse than corporates.

“

Facilitating cash in hand for the people could stimulate and revive demand in the economy.

“

It may be critical to move on the privatisation agenda.

limited impact because of Covid-19. Then there are sectors like pharma, IT, chemicals, freight and logistics that had a dip in Q1 but had a fast-paced pick up later. Sectors such as auto, construction, textiles, metals, and oil and gas exuded slow recovery and then there are sectors such as airline, hotels and tourism [which will take time].

Particularly on MSMEs, there could be a growing gap between 'winners' and 'losers'. This trend is being seen globally. The gap between the top and bottom quintiles of companies by economic profit was widening before the Covid-19 crisis and has been further amplified as a result of it. MSMEs, therefore, might be hit worse than large corporates.

What is your perception of the public sector enterprises in India? What kind of reforms are needed in them?

While some PSEs are high performers, as a group they face challenges leading to strained public finances because of the need to support them. The overall labour productivity of private sector companies is at least twice as high as that

of PSEs in the same sector. This is particularly stark in sectors such as mining (where private sector productivity is 3.5 times higher), steel (5.1 times higher), and telecom and media (about 12 times higher).

Over the past eight years, public sector banks for instance have needed considerable capital infusion. To address these challenges, the government, as part of the Aatma Nirbhar Bharat scheme, declared its intention to limit the presence of PSEs in strategic sectors. In nonstrategic sectors, it plans to privatise or merge or bring under holding companies all PSEs, and allow private sector participation.

It may be critical to move on the privatisation agenda. Privatisation of 400 SOEs (state owned enterprises) where the government's share of the book value was \$140 billion in 2018, could yield up to ₹40 trillion (\$540 billion) over the next decade. Just 40 or so PSEs could yield 80 per cent of the overall potential privatisation proceeds across sectors like oil and gas, financial services, power, manufacturing, telecom, and mining.

To read the full interview

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Yediyurappa's new land reforms are meant to modernise agriculture and help turn Karnataka into a 'factory of the future'. How good is the plan?

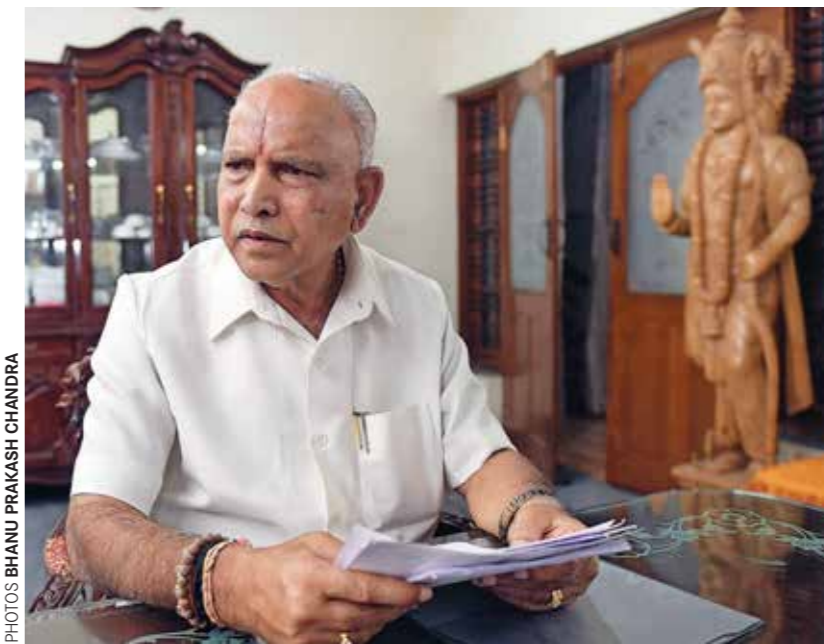
BY PRATHIMA NANDAKUMAR

ON MARCH 1, 1974, chief minister D. Devaraj Urs implemented a revolutionary land reform that helped thousands of landless tenant farmers in Karnataka take ownership of the fields they had been cultivating. As land was redistributed among the poor to free them from exploitative tenancy laws and absentee landlords, a slogan resonated across the state—*Uluwavane bhoomi odeya*, or the tiller is the owner of the land.

Forty-six years later, the state government led by Chief Minister B.S. Yediyurappa has brought about another set of game-changing land reforms. On September 26 this year, the assembly passed, by voice vote, the Karnataka Land Reforms (Second Amendment) Bill, replacing an ordinance promulgated in July this year. The amendment lifts restrictions on buying agriculture land, and repeals certain sections of the parent act of 1961, which bars non-farmers from buying farmland and penalises those who falsely claim that they are eligible to own farmland.

Opposition parties allege that the amendment reverses decades of farm reforms and imposes a "modern-day zamindari system" on farmers. They have been supporting statewide protests by farmers, dalits, labour organisations and pro-Kannada outfits, which want the amendment and the farm bills recently passed by Parliament to be withdrawn.

Farmer organisations say the



PHOTOS BHANU PRAKASH CHANDRA

HARVESTING ANGER

(Left) Farmers staging a protest in Bengaluru; (above) Yediyurappa says only fallow land would be used to set up factories

Industry bodies say the stringent consent and compensation provisions in the 2013 act have resulted in land acquisitions coming to a standstill. The Union government, which is struggling to build smart cities and develop highways and industrial corridors, is banking on BJP-ruled states to push through land reforms.

Opposition parties allege that such reforms would "corporatise agriculture" and put India's food security at risk. "Before the green revolution, the food production in the country was about 50 million tonnes," said former chief minister Siddaramaiah. "But now, it is 291 million tonnes. But if farmland is [used for other purposes], it might lead to food scarcity. This has exposed the nexus between the government, corporates and housing societies."

Karnataka has 195 lakh hectares of land, of which 30 lakh hectares are forest land, 22 lakh hectares are designated agriculture land, and 11.79 lakh hectares are lying fallow. The government says the new act will encourage industries only on fallow land. Irrigated farmland and land owned by dalits will continue to be protected, said Yediyurappa.

Industries bodies say the fear of farmers losing their land to corporates is unwarranted. "Till now, all industries in the state have together used less than 1 per cent of the total land and created one crore jobs," said C.R. Janardhana, president, Federation of Karnataka Chamber of Commerce and Industries. "With the new law, industries can utilise another 1 per cent and create one crore more jobs."

Laying the groundwork

amendment will force small-scale farmers to sell their land and become labourers. "Instead of encouraging farmers to sell their land at competitive prices, farming should be made remunerative," said Kurubur Shantakumar of the Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha. "More than 19,000 applications from landless farmers seeking land are pending before the government. The farm bills are all moving towards privatisation of agriculture. The food production in the country today is 285 million tonnes, enough to last the next two years. The farmers have toiled hard to ensure food security. The government should not forget this."

The BJP maintains that the reforms would help farmers embrace technology, enhance production and solve the agrarian crisis. "The new act will help bring a new era of farming. Many youth, including software professionals, want to engage in farming today," said Revenue Minister R. Ashok. "Many are buying land in neighbouring states that do not have restrictions. We want farmers to adopt modern techniques to scale up agri exports, which will make farming remunerative. Right now Karnataka's share in agri exports is only 5.7 per cent; Gujarat's is 17 per cent."

The Yediyurappa government has accomplished what the Union government could not in 2015. The Centre had tabled a bill in Parliament to amend the 2013 Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, but strong opposition forced it to refer the bill to a joint house committee.

The state government is finalising a new industrial policy, focusing on 13 major sectors like automobiles, pharma, cement, steel and logistics, to help turn Karnataka into a “factory of the future”. “The policy will attract investments worth ₹5 lakh crore that can create 20 lakh jobs,” said Yediyurappa.

On March 19 this year, the state government amended section 109 of the Karnataka Land Reforms Act, 1961, allowing industries to sell agricultural land converted for industrial use after seven years. It also granted “deemed approval” for purchase and change in land use—if the state high-level clearance committee failed to file objections within 30 days.

The land bank created by the Karnataka Industrial Area Development Board has not been very helpful, say investors. At least 140 proposals worth ₹50,000 crore made in the past five years have failed to take off because of acquisition hassles. “The poor ranking of the state in ‘ease of doing’ business was mainly because of scarcity of land and red tape,” said Janardhana. “Telangana and Andhra Pradesh developed at our expense owing to the free access to land there.”

Ashok said the farmers could get competitive prices only in an open market. “In 1974, the great farmer leader Prof M.D. Nanjundaswamy favoured the scrapping of sections 79(a) and (b) [of the 1961 act], saying it was unconstitutional as it violated Article 19(g) [the right to practise any vocation]. I believe the farmer should have the right to sell his land like any other asset,” he said.

He also accused the Congress of double-dealing. “The 1961 Act was amended 34 times,” said Ashok. “Many stalwarts of the Congress, including R.V. Deshpande and Mallikarjun Kharge, had argued in favour of repealing sections 79(a) and (b). In fact, the Congress government in 2015 had attempted to scrap the sections by setting up a cabinet subcommittee. An amendment in 2017 raised the non-agricultural income limit for the buyer from ₹2 lakh to ₹25 lakh per annum.”

The Janata Dal (Secular), which counts farmers as part of its support base, is play-



Farmers are not foolish. They now understand the value of their land, especially if it is in the irrigation belt.

Ramakrishna Omkar, farmer in Vijayapura district

ing both sides. JD(S) leader and former chief minister H.D. Kumaraswamy has supported the new reform, saying he too had faced difficulties in buying agriculture land. But the party has extended its support to the farmer agitation as well.

Land distribution patterns show that the opposition to lifting restrictions on selling farmland has been weakening. Land values have been spiralling upward, and the average land holding in the state is 1.55 hectares now, down from 3.5 hectares in the 1960s. Large tracts of farmland are entangled in legal battles. “The state has 73,173 cases of violations under the 1961 Act, which will be abated with retrospective effect,” said Ashok.

As per the 2015-16 agriculture census, there are 78.32 lakh farming households in the state. Around 66 lakh are small and marginal farmers, holding less than 1.45 hectares. One in five rural households in the state are landless, suggesting that a huge number of farmers are still employed as farm labourers.

“Farmers are not foolish. They now understand the value of their land, especially if it is in the irrigation belt,” said Ramakrishna Omkar, a farmer in Vijayapura district. “If corporates buy land and start farming on a large scale, we, too, will benefit, as they bring new technology and a bigger market for local produce. Small farmers can till their land and work for the corporate farms or agro-based industries for additional income. It is a win-win situation.”

DETOUR

SHOBHAA DE



Suhana Khan comes into her own

It cannot be easy being the offspring of a Bollywood superstar known as King Khan. But, Shah Rukh Khan’s 20-year-old daughter has frequently said she loves being called “Daddy’s Girl”. Last week, Suhana, who is an acting student at New York University, addressed the issue of ‘colourism’ head on in an Instagram post (she has 1.1 million followers). She wrote about her own experience of being called ugly at age 12, and more recently, with trolls who taunted her with nasty ‘*kaali billi*’ tags.

While a section of social media hailed her for raising a sensitive issue, others trolled her for her stand, pointing out that her father endorses a fairness cream! This is the real dilemma faced by children of incredibly popular, iconic personalities, like SRK. If they decide to walk an independent path, they risk being mocked, and if they choose to remain in the shadows, they are laughed at even more for “doing nothing with their lives”.

Suhana is no stranger to the double-edged sword that dangles over her. It started when she was featured on the cover of Vogue (India) at age 18. What Vogue considered a ‘scoop’ was dismissed as a gimmick by critics who pointed out the obvious—what had Suhana done with her life to merit a prestigious cover? Subsequently, Suhana’s parents may have advised her to lie low and focus on her studies. Clearly, with her latest post, Suhana has jumped back in and her views are being avidly discussed. If a superstar’s daughter has been a victim of ‘colourism’ in a country obsessed with fair skin, one shudders to imagine what it must be like for millions of other ‘dusky’ young girls.

Suhana belongs to Gen Z. These are kids who take their individuality seriously and are known to speak up on issues they consider important. Suhana has called out those who cruelly discriminate against individuals based on their skin colour. By raising

her voice, she has also demonstrated her willingness to go beyond being seen as a pampered star kid.

She has been born under a spotlight, and will have to live with constant public scrutiny. She describes herself unselfconsciously as a ‘future star’! Not a ‘future actor’—which is very different. With two good looking brothers (Aryan and AbRam) and a high-profile designer mother (Gauri Khan), her life seems prescribed and unbelievably privileged. After all, SRK ranks among the richest stars in the world. Her brother Aryan is being groomed for superstardom, while little AbRam already has a considerable fan following at age 7. All three children must know their destiny as celebrities to Gen Next.

On Gandhi Jayanti, Suhana and AbRam featured in their father’s social media post, recreating the famous three monkeys pose with another person. Even that well-intentioned post was dissected and critiqued by trolls, with a Sayani Gupta (actor) asking SRK to speak up for the truth and not just shut “your ears and eyes and mouths”. This may be the first time that a very junior female star has dared to take on SRK and his family. It will be interesting to see how Suhana responds not just to this jibe, but to what may follow.

It was bold and brave of Suhana to put herself out there with the ‘*kaali billi*’ post. It must have resonated with countless young girls and boys dealing with an unfair ‘fairness complex’, even within their own families. At the end of the day, she is just another 20-year-old, grappling with issues of identity and confidence. When she disarmingly says, “I have crooked fingers” in a promotional video, one can perceive her vulnerability, which makes her seem like any other girl—funny, awkward, defensive, appealing.

Now that she has raised the banner of ‘colourism’, it is time to take Suhana Khan more seriously. When will we ever wake up to a ‘colour blind’ India?



SUHANA KHAN INSTAGRAM

www.shobaade.blogspot.com

Silent invader

A highly invasive weed of foreign origin is spreading across north India and it could threaten the country's food security

BY REKHA DIXIT

THERE IS AN EMERGING weed problem in north India. No, this one is not star-spangled like the one currently being exposed in Bollywood. The ramifications, however, could be much worse, as it could threaten India's food security.

Two studies in the recent years have flagged the emergence and spread of a hitherto lesser known plant, *Emex australis*, across the wheat fields of Haryana and west Uttar Pradesh. Both studies warn that, if left ignored, this plant could take over the fields and reduce crop yield.

To the untrained eye, *E. australis* looks like a cousin of the spinach. In fact, in South Africa, where it is a native, its leaves are sometimes used as a vegetable. It is a sturdy plant which establishes itself in thick clusters and can deplete a field of nutrients meant for the crop. The weed has already spread across Australia, edging out both wheat and the sweet pasture grass. Known by various common names like cat's head, bull head, devil's thorn, spiny emex and goat head, this weed produces fruits called achene, which have three sharp spines, giving the plant yet

another moniker, the three-cornered jack. In pasture lands, these spines can injure grazing cattle. Extremely resilient, the spines attach themselves to tractor tyres, shoes and even bare feet, and thus spread from field to field. They can even float on water, thus furthering the range.

Jyoti K. Sharma, head of Shiv Nadar University's Center for Environmental Sciences and Engineering, said that they first noticed the plant during a field trip, when the students were documenting the flora of the area around the university campus in Greater Noida, way back in 2015. Later, they noticed some plants within the university campus, too, around the thematic botanic park that was being made. Soil for landscaping the park had been brought in from the neighbouring areas, and this is how the plant, too, must have come, they guessed.

The university then surveyed Chithara village near the campus, where they found the plant to be growing extensively. Sharma, who is also the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization's international forestry consultant to several countries in south and southeast Asia, said that the plant was not present in the regions previously; it has somehow established itself in recent years.

It is not as if this plant is totally unknown in India. There is literature to show its identification in Bihar sometime in the 1980s. It has also been reported from Jammu and Kashmir since 1987. However, for reasons not yet explained, the plant did not spread itself across the country

for decades, despite its innate ability to do so. How and when it reached the Gangetic plains and established itself are questions that require investigation.

In a paper published in 2018 in the *Indian Journal of Plant Science*—by Sharma, and his colleagues Amit Kumar Tripathi and Mohammad Ahmad—the researchers warn that the plant is adaptable to different climatic conditions, has the potential to become highly invasive, and could edge out native species. It reproduces aggressively—each plant is capable of producing over 1,100 seeds during a lifetime. These seeds are able to persist in the soil for several years.

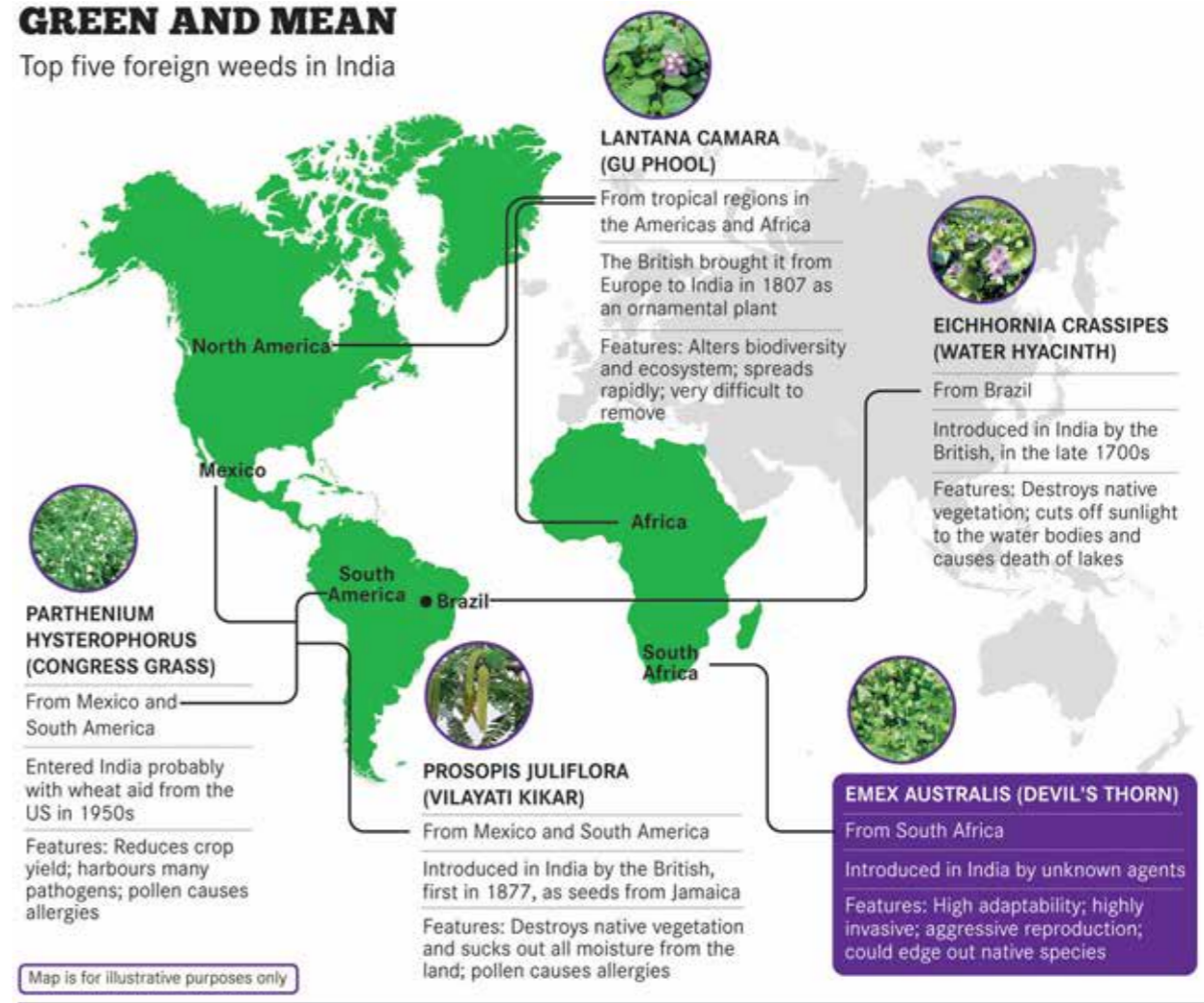
Around the same time as the Shiv Nadar researchers were typing out their research, Viren-

dra Kumar, a plant pathologist and assistant director at the directorate of plant protection, quarantine and storage, stumbled upon a clump of these pesky plants in a field at Chhainsa village near Faridabad. At that time, he was in the insecticide department, overseeing a field test on a new weedicide. "We were testing the weedicide when I noticed this plant, which I had not seen before," said Kumar. "We sprayed the chemical on it, as well as on other known weeds. A week later, however, when we returned to see the results, the other weeds had perished—some had been chemically burnt, others had collapsed—but this clump was thriving."

Kumar then sprayed the clump with various concentrations of weedicides and studied it for

GREEN AND MEAN

Top five foreign weeds in India



GRAPHICS SREEMANIKANDAN S./RESEARCH REKHA DIXIT/ILLUSTRATION JOB P.K.

several weeks. The cluster continued to thrive. Following this, Kumar, along with a colleague, assistant plant protection officer E. Kumari, did a survey of 35 adjoining villages and discovered that the weed had comfortably gone native and established itself in varying degrees of density in 25 villages. “Surprisingly, they were even better established than many of the known weeds in the fields,” he said. “This initial study is only a warning bell; agencies like the Indian Council for Agricultural Research should now do more detailed research and look for ways of tackling the problem before it blows up in our face.” Kumar published his discovery in the *Journal of Crop and Weed* in 2019. The two studies may be small, but they already indicate the spread of the weed across states.

Invasive plants are those which come from other lands, their seeds usually riding piggy back on agriculture imports. Since these plants have no known control agents—for instance, bugs that feed on them—in their new homes, they spread rapidly, elbowing out native species. Kumar says wheat harvests can suffer in yield by as much as 62 per cent due to weeds. Almost all countries now have strict plant-quarantining rules, under which such imports are isolated and tested for presence of foreign pests, pathogens and weeds. In some agriculture-intensive countries like Australia, even shoes of passengers are checked to ensure there are no clinging burrs or achenes which could seed local populations of a foreign plant.

In fact, in 2004, when Greece hosted the Olympics and decided to evoke the spirit of ancient Athens, it had not reckoned with the bio-security regulations of the modern age. Many countries frowned upon the olive wreaths that were presented to medal winners, mandating fumigation and other pathogen killing processes before being allowed in.



This initial study is only a warning bell; agencies like the Indian Council for Agricultural Research should now do more detailed research and look for ways of tackling the problem before it blows up in our face.

—Virendra Kumar, assistant director at the directorate of plant protection, quarantine and storage

Yet, in a mobile world, it is not so difficult for exotic species to infiltrate new lands. One of the most pervasive weeds in recent times is *Parthenium hysterophorus* or “Congress grass”, which is believed to have entered the country in the 1950s along with the wheat the United States sent to then impoverished India. Like *E. australis*, *Parthenium* grows densely, choking out any other plant that might even try to grow in the area. Worse, it triggers respiratory allergies in many people.

Similarly, water hyacinth, a native of the Amazon, has strangled water bodies across the country. It is said that the plant came to India because Lady Hastings was enchanted by its beautiful mauve flowers, and planted a few in her garden pond. Over 200 years later, the British Raj may have gone away but the plant has gone native with a vengeance. It is even a mariner’s nightmare as it gets caught in ship propellers.

The multi-coloured *lantana*, too, was introduced to India in the 1800s as an ornamental plant. It became a garden escapee in no time and has overrun even forests now, edging out native species. Cutting down the woody shrub is of little use, as the cut branches begin sprouting leaves and shoots even before they can be disposed of.

Prosopis juliflora or *vilayati kikar* is considered as one of the most hated trees in India. The Mexican import, again through the British, is a desert tree with little commercial use. Yet, it has edged out the *kikar*, *babool* and other acacias native to the land, each of which have a host of uses in medicine and other commercial products.

E. australis is used for traditional medicine in Africa. However, the uses of the weed are limited, and the damage it can do to the fields is far more serious. In the land of *athithi devo bhava*, just how well will this uninvited guest thrive? We will know more in the years to come. ❶

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TIGHTROPE WALK

Even as Rambo Circus launched its first digital show, most circus companies in India are reluctant to go online despite taking multiple hits

BY SNEHA BHURA



THE SHOW MUST GO ON

Biju Nair, a clown with Rambo Circus, gets ready for an online show

VISHNU V. NAIR



CHANGING TIMES

Rambo's clowns entertain a virtual audience; (above) Tulsidas Chaudhury of the Great Bombay Circus

VISHNU V. NAIR



Sujit Dilip from Maharashtra knows the game of survival in the circus industry. After all, his father managed their Rambo Circus company in the UAE, competing for audiences alongside Russian and Italian troupes—until infighting among sponsors forced them to shift base to India in the 1990s. On the phone from Mumbai, sounding a little tired and disconsolate just a week before the debut of Rambo Circus's 'digital show' on September 25, Dilip rues the slings and arrows suffered by the

Indian circus industry.

First the government banned the use of wild animals with no compensation to fill the gap. Then they disallowed employing individuals below 18 years—14- to 18-year-olds are most flexible for training as acrobats and trapeze artistes, says Dilip. Also, international circus performers could only visit India on an employment visa, when most overseas circus companies send their artistes on cultural visa, as they operate under their respective culture ministries.

"We are worse than farmers. We do not get any kind of loans because we are not stable; we are travelling all the time," says Dilip. "There are just 15 to 16 circus companies left in India now, but why is the government not helping us? There are so

many permissions required just to perform in the capital. No wonder I do not ever see an Indian flag in the performing arenas of international circus festivals."

This January, Dilip went to meet the stakeholders of the Moscow State Circus to facilitate a talent and knowhow exchange. "We have been meaning to create a sort of a dream show where holographic horses would jump on the heads of children," says Dilip. "I ended up spending a lot on R&D for this. Who would have known then that a virus would scuttle all our plans and finances!"

Since May, Dilip has been reaching out to politicians, NGOs, gurdwaras and crowdsourcing platforms to cobble up money for food, water, electricity and the works—the

Mumbai rains wreaked havoc on their tent pitched in Airoli, Navi Mumbai, he says. "One fan told us that even dogs get funds online, so why can't artistes also try?" he says, referring to his Ketto crowdfunding campaign that yielded some ₹12 lakh. And then Laqshya Live Experiences, a production company, offered to shoot a fully scripted, choreographed, computer and mobile-friendly circus show, called 'Life is a Circus: An Ode to the Greatest Sportsmanship.'

With a production cost of around ₹18 lakh, Life is a Circus is slick in production values. There is deft camera work and stage close-ups that one may not encounter sitting in a circus tent. But how will the artistes benefit? "There is a donation link on BookMyShow, and donations go to the artiste,"

says Saurabh Khurana, a partner at Laqshya. "Once the cost of the show is covered via ticket sales, the revenue can go to Rambo Circus. This is the broad arrangement." Dilip is banking on this opportunity to reinvigorate a cultural enterprise on its last legs. The digital show, in its first run, had 35,000 views, and has been renewed for another weekend.

Biju Nair, a clown with Rambo, is learning to interact with audiences on Zoom in between the live streams. "We have worked very hard for the show; shot it with full protocol. Now we are going inside audience's houses through their laptops and phones," says an excited Nair, 52, who ran away from Kerala as a child to escape an abusive father and found himself in Mumbai. He recalls serving tea and water to Shah Rukh Khan on the sets of the TV series *Circus* (1989), which is where he decided to become a circus clown. The last few months in the Airoli camp have seen him venture into the nearby jungles to forage for food and firewood, but he is certain these are short-lived constraints. "This pandemic has taught us to let go of our arrogance," he says. "We have to work harder now. And we have

to change and think differently."

But Anwar Khan from the Great Golden Circus in Ahmedabad is sceptical. "Foreign circuses are not doing online shows, who is going to watch online circus in India? Besides, we are self-made, we do not seek donations," says Khan, who has dispatched most of his artistes home.

Ravi Babu, from Kolkata-based Ajanta Circus, says the thought of going online and asking for donations hurts his pride. "We will only do live shows because circus is a live act. Rambo Circus is reducing the dignity of the circus industry. You know, Bengalis walk around with so much self-respect. Why will we beg for money?" asks Babu, slightly livid.

Sanjeev Balagopal from the Great Bombay Circus in Tamil Nadu thinks that selling tickets online is not financially viable for circuses. "An entire family can watch the show for the price of one ticket online. How will that help us?" asks Balagopal, who moved his troupe to Mannargudi town from Chennai, before the national lockdown kicked in. He faced great difficulty while sending home his oldest employee—74-year-old clown Tulsidas Chaudhry from Chapra, Bihar—who has been with GBC for 61 years. "He just would not leave. But the Covid-19 situation in Tamil Nadu is not good and we do not know when we can perform again," says Balagopal.

Chaudhry cannot stop raving about his employers. "They are my family," says Chaudhry, a prostrate and kidney cancer survivor. "I cannot stop thinking and worrying about them. My boss told me that he would call me back once the situation got better. He pays for my expenses. He even gives me a salary, but I just do not like it here." The company paid for his treatment in 2004. "I have never lived away from them. I am two-and-a-half feet tall. I cannot do any other work. Can you please make the circus start?" he asks, almost pleadingly. ❶



SUJIT DILIP IS BANKING ON RAMBO'S ONLINE SHOW 'LIFE IN A CIRCUS' TO REINVIGORATE A CULTURAL ENTERPRISE ON ITS LAST LEGS.



MASTER OF SILENCES

V.S. Gaitonde's painting has become the most expensive Indian artwork ever. THE WEEK explores the maestro's enduring appeal

BY ANJULY MATHAI

At a V.S. Gaitonde memorial lecture organised by the Raza Foundation in 2012, artist Prabhakar Kolte recalled the first time he met Gaitonde, while the latter was staying in Nizamuddin, Delhi. It was on his third attempt that Gaitonde let him in. Either Mozart or Beethoven was playing on the record player.

Gaitonde asked Kolte whether he liked music.

Kolte replied that he did.

Then listen to this, said Gaitonde.

After the record finished playing, Gaitonde got up and played it again. And then again. Kolte was nettled. He had come there, after all, to speak with the artist, but he was clearly not interested. Then the bell rang. Gaitonde said it was his lunch and went to collect it. Upon returning, he told Kolte:

"This is only for myself. What about you?"

"Don't worry about me," said Kolte. "I had a big breakfast. I will go down and come back."

"Don't come back," said Gaitonde. "You see, after lunch, I usually take a nap."

The anecdote tells so much about Gaitonde (1924-2001)—his reclusive nature, his complete absorption with music and other art forms, his

indifference to what others thought about him, and his preference for a simple and monastic lifestyle. He was an artist who created different worlds with his paintbrush and then inhabited those worlds, reluctant to step into the actual one in which the rest of us lived.

Much of this aloofness can be attributed to his spiritual quest, through Zen Buddhism, for detachment and what he called "nothingness". In his art, this translated to an attraction to abstraction and "non-objective works". One can discern various Indian and western influences in his art, like those of

Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse and German-Swiss artist Paul Klee. But he imbibed these influences, made them his own and expressed them in a way that reflected his unique, internal journey. His inward looking was almost the essence of his outward appeal.

Gaitonde was born in Nagpur to Goan parents and studied art at the J.J. School of Art in Mumbai. Some of his works have been the most highly-valued Indian artworks ever. In 2015, one of his oil paintings sold for ₹29.3 crore, making it the highest-priced Indian artwork at the time in modern and contemporary

art. Then another work from 1982 sold for ₹26.9 crore in 2019 and early last month, an untitled 1974 oil-on-canvas was auctioned at Pundole's in Mumbai for ₹32 crore. "His style was fantastic, with the water marks, calligraphy and drawing as painting," says artist Bose Krishnamachari. "Some of his works are very silent. There is abstraction in layers—a mirror image of a painting within a painting which reflects his [life] experiences."

According to Mallika Sagar, auctioneer at Pundole's and its specialist in modern and contemporary Indian art, there has been an increased awareness of Gaitonde's work and his creative process over the last several years, due, in part, to commercial transactions at auctions in India and internationally. "And, of course, the artist's retrospective held at the Guggenheim Museum in New York and Venice in 2015-2016, which introduced his works to a wider audience," she says. The Guggenheim retrospective she refers to was curated by Sandhini Poddar and comprised over 40 paintings sourced from across Asia, Europe and the US. *The New York Times* art critic Holland



Gaitonde's 1974 oil-on-canvas

Cotter described it as containing "some of the most magnetic abstract painting of any kind in New York right now...."

Cultural historian and art critic, Ranjit Hoskote, however, cautions against putting Gaitonde on a pedestal. "Abstraction travels well across international borders, as it tends to be legible through universal lenses like mysticism," he says. "It sidesteps cultural specificity. The international reception of Gaitonde's art has benefited from this. It is a pity that

DESPITE HIS ATTEMPT TO DISLODGE HIS ART FROM ANY KIND OF IDEOLOGICAL MOORINGS, GAITONDE WAS A PRODUCT OF HIS TIMES.

the door of the global museum world opens only to one or two artists from the global south at a time.... The best way to honour Gaitonde would be to contextualise him, not to worship him."

Despite his attempt to dislodge his art from any kind of ideological moorings, Gaitonde was a product of his times. In 1950, he joined the Progressive Artists' Group, formed in 1947 in Mumbai by F.N. Souza, M.F. Husain and a few others; it ultimately disbanded in 1956. The Progressives were extremely experimental, co-opting international art practises and traditional Indian motifs into an indigenous form of "local modernism". In the early part of his career, Gaitonde painted elements of traditional Indian mural and miniature art against an abstract background. In the 1960s, his paintings assumed a more Zen-like aura, when he gave up aspects of figuration completely. He shifted to a monochromatic palette in 1961. Gaitonde was asking his viewers to 'sense' rather than 'see' what he was trying to convey. His art, during this time, was highly intuitive. It had a sort of airy otherworldliness to it, highly influenced by his Buddhist philosophy.

But it is his later works, from the 1970s onwards, that are arresting. This is the time he starts making art from pieces of newspapers and magazines using palette knives and rollers. These works have an earthy physicality to them, in stark contrast with the levity of his former works, as though he was desperately trying to pin down something that proved perpetually elusive. Interestingly, according to his friend, artist Ram Kumar, this was a period of loneliness for him, when he first moved to Delhi in 1972 and withdrew further into his shell. This constant search—an animal longing for something indefinable—powerfully draws you into his works. Therein might lie the key to his enduring appeal. 🕯

CAR REVIEW



AT A GLANCE
India launch: October 9
Variants: Super (entry), Smart, Sharp and Savvy (six/seven seater)
Colour options: Agate red, metal black, metal ash and warm white
Max power: 218PS@4,000rpm
Max torque: 480Nm@1,500-2,400rpm
Price: To be announced; ₹30-40 lakh expected

THE GENTLE GIANT

MG Motor's latest SUV, the Gloster, can roar over the roughest roads. But, it is a totally different beast inside

BY K. SUNIL THOMAS

The MG Gloster was one of the most anticipated cars of 2020. And, as first looks go, it is imposing. It towers over the competition (Toyota Fortuner, Ford Endeavour); its intricately designed LED lights, dual exhaust pipes and octagonal front grille gleam almost menacingly. The Gloster also has a lot to offer inside, and not just under the hood.

MG Motor has made its mark

over the past couple of years by providing innovations like internet connectivity. The Gloster, too, comes with its own USP—it is India's first autonomous Level 1 SUV. This means features like self-parking and auto-following the car in front adaptively (Level 5 would be the driverless car). And, no, you cannot go to sleep (yet)—driver vigilance and monitoring is advised for all these actions at present.

But, what good is an SUV if you cannot take it off-road? And that is where the real fun comes in, with many drive modes like sand, rock, mud and a snow mode, which we gleefully tried though we were in the hot and dusty hinterland of Haryana. In our defence, we tried it on a rather slippery, slushy patch.

The electro-mechanical differential lock or EDL translates into a

sort of spell with the torque, intelligently transferring it to the wheel with traction. Mighty useful if you go off-roading and are not shy of doing some gravity-defying moves on a particularly challenging incline or uneven terrain.

Complementing the SUV's size, the twin turbo diesel engine delivers satisfactory power and torque, and there is, of course, the four-wheel drive (only in the higher models) and sport option. But this giant not only roars, but can purr on request with perks galore. The design and interior features that push the envelope range from a driver's seat that can be adjusted 12 ways (eight ways for the co-driver seat), a PM 2.5 filter (MG Motor, after all, is headquartered in Delhi NCR!), a voice-command based song search through the in-built Gaana app (in the three higher variants), seat heating, tyre pressure monitoring, wireless charging, compatibility with both Android and Apple, and more. In fact, true to MG's internet-centric evolution in India, the iSmart 2.0 technology in this car comes with more than 70 internet-connected features. ❶



INVISIBLE MEN

BY ANJULY MATHAI

Serious Men tells the story of Ayyan Mani (Nawazuddin Siddiqui), a dalit migrant from Tamil Nadu who works as personal assistant to an ornery, supercilious Brahmin astrophysicist called Arvind Acharya (Nassar) at the National Institute of Fundamental Research. Fed up with being insulted and bullied by Acharya, Mani swears that his son, 10-year-old Adi (Aakshath Das), will never have to face such indignity.

In many ways, *Serious Men* is a story of contrasts—the polished and clinical interiors of the NIFR contrasted with the chaotic chawl in which Mani lives. The upper-caste and privileged Acharya contrasted with the impoverished-but-enterprising Mani. Desperate for a way out of his situation, Mani pins all his hopes on Adi—a child prodigy who can multiply 10-digit numbers in a jiffy and scores full marks on his class tests. He hopes Adi can bridge the vast gulf between the two contrasting worlds. Adi is paraded before huge crowds and has hundreds of followers on social media (including former US president Barack Obama). There is only one catch: Adi is no real genius. Mani buys his question papers beforehand and tells him the answers to complex questions through a Bluetooth device. His genius is nothing but the weight of Mani's dreams for him.

Sudhir Mishra's film does not have the lighter touch of writer Manu Joseph's eponymous book, from which it is adapted. But even without Joseph's snarky observations and dry wit, it retains its soul, mainly because of one reason: Siddiqui's portrayal of Mani—wonderfully nuanced, and holding together the complex elements of his personality. The background score by Karel Antonin, too, is praise-worthy, ably complementing the story's tonal shifts. Some criticise *Serious Men* for not doing justice to the caste equations which fuel the narrative. But I do not think it is caste that fuels it. Rather, it is Mani, and his desperation to be seen in a world in which he is invisible. Caste merely enshrouds him in that invisibility. ❶



GUNDALA
(Indonesian, 2019)

A RELUCTANT SUPERHERO

BY JOSE K. GEORGE

Sancaka is a lonely young man, working as a security guard at a printing press in a crime-infested part of Jakarta. He stays out of other people's business and ignores the crimes around him. His father once told him that people become less human when they do not react to injustice. But Sancaka is more influenced by someone who trained him to defend himself after the death of his father, and told him to mind his own business to avoid trouble.

Sancaka is forced to come out of



his alienated self when his neighbour and her brother are harassed by some goons. Soon, Sancaka finds himself up against a corrupt system, and a disfigured mob boss, who has been using orphans trained to be highly skilled assassins. Sancaka—who had a phobia of thunder and lightning—gains superpowers after being struck by lightning during a fight, and eventually becomes a symbol of hope for the people.

Directed by Joko Anwar, *Gundala*, which premiered at the 2019 Toronto International Film Festival, is more in the vein of *The Raid* series, *The Night Comes For Us* and other such phenomenal Indonesian action flicks than the VFX-heavy DC and Marvel films. Rooted in the Gundala comic books published between 1969 and 1982, the movie offers nail-biting action sequences with dollops of humour.

SERIOUS MEN
 Available on Netflix
 Rating
 ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Interview / Avni Doshi, writer

Rhythm matters more than anything

BY MINI P. THOMAS

I would be lying if I said my mother's misery has never given me pleasure." Thus begins Avni Doshi's debut novel, *Burnt Sugar*, a gripping tale of love, devotion and betrayal. It is about Tara, a woman who gave up a loveless marriage to lead a life of wild freedom, with her child, Antara, in tow. Years later, when she needs to be cared for, Antara is wondering why she should love the woman who never seemed to love her.

Titled *Girl in White Cotton* in India, it has been shortlisted for the 2020 Booker Prize, to be announced on November 19. "I am excited to be on the list, and happy that my novel has been able to reach more readers," says the Dubai-based Indian-origin writer in an exclusive interview with THE WEEK.

Excerpts from the interview:

Q\ *Burnt Sugar* comes across as a bold attempt to redefine motherhood. Is motherhood overrated?

A It is such a personal experience for every human being, and I am sure many think it is overrated. But there hasn't always been a space to be honest about that. Even though my own experience of motherhood has actually been deeply transformative,

I can see why it is not for everyone. In fact, I spent years going back and forth on whether to have children.

I do think that culture puts certain expectations on women with regards to motherhood, that they are expected to desire it, and that someone who makes other choices is often made to feel less than. It is just another way to police women's bodies and minds. Being a mother is not always magical—it often leaves you feeling diminished. Why can't we be open about that?



"I LIKE TO DISCOVER CHARACTERS AS I GO ALONG. I LIKE THEM TO SURPRISE ME SOMETIMES."



Q\ How did you imagine the fraught mother-daughter relationship and capture it in its completeness?

A It is important to get the emotional tenor. So I had to go into my own well of emotions. I thought about my fears, my dreams and my nightmares while I was writing this novel. A lot of the book depended on bringing these to the surface and being able to look at them dispassionately. I wanted to be objective about what worked and what did not—I don't know if I succeeded. Intensity, I think, is also about the sentences. Rhythm, in many ways, matters more than anything else.

Q\ You studied art history and had a stint as an art curator. Did this make writing easier?

A Studying art history and working in the art world have informed the way I write as well as what I write about, but I am not sure if these are things that make a writer's journey easier. The art world and literary

world are quite distinct, and I had very little understanding of how publishing works. I consider my work as a writer of fiction to be separate to what I did before.

Q\ How did you keep yourself motivated during the seven-year-long journey?

A I had to trick myself into returning to the novel after each failed draft, but I quit often, vowing that I would not write anymore. It was hard and frustrating sometimes, but every day was a new day. I suppose I am stubborn, maybe even obsessive.

Q\ Did Tara and Antara appear in your mind as fully-fledged characters or did their personalities develop over the course of writing?

A All the characters in the novel emerged through the writing process. When I started, I had an overall



Girl in White Cotton
By Avni Doshi
Published by Fourth Estate
(HarperCollins India)
Price ₹599, Pages 288

sense of them, but they developed more clearly in my imagination with each sentence that I put down. I am careful about not deciding too much about the characters before I begin writing, because in previous drafts this has not worked. I like to discover them as I go along. I like them to surprise me sometimes.

Q\ Why did you pick a different title for the UK publication of the book? What does *Burnt Sugar* signify?

A My editor at Hamish Hamilton in the UK suggested that the original title would not resonate with readers there because the various layers of meaning would not be immediately apparent. In India, white cotton can imply grief and asceticism, while in the UK it reads as purity. Sugar appears in the novel, so *Burnt Sugar* refers to that, but also to a simmering darkness that unfolds in the book. ❶



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...FIGHT LIKE A GIRL

INFOCUS

The year 2020 has been a rollercoaster ride for everyone around the globe. The pandemic, as scary as it is, also taught us that our choices and actions have the power to protect the vulnerable among us in a big way. The same holds true when it comes to breast cancer.

As an oncologist, I prescribe screening and lifestyle modifications for my patients along with the medication needed. It acts as a stimulus for the

medicines given. But here I pen down the most important but ignored need of a cancer patient; emotional and psychological support from both family and society. Even if it is much needed in all types of cancer, I am narrowing down to breast cancer.

Breast cancer is the most common type of cancer seen in women with roughly 1 in 8 women being diagnosed with it. The odds are high that nearly everyone is affected by this disease somehow. Breast cancer is a highly curable disease and the cure rate is more than 90% if we detect it in the early stages. But what is more important is getting the patients ready for the battle and helping them triumph over cancer.

To talk about breast cancer we should first understand the psyche of women. The trauma they go through right from the moment the illness is diagnosed is unimaginable. Even at that moment they are worried about their families and kids more than themselves. In most Indian households the woman in the house is the axis around which everything and everyone revolves. The woman shuttles between her role as a wife, mother, daughter, a career woman and what not, cares very less of herself, forget being cared for.

This comes from an eye opening moment from my professional life.

One fine morning I received a call from one of my patients, Mrs X, who was diagnosed with breast cancer and undergoing chemotherapy. Her usually pleasant tone was shadowed. I was surprised as during her previous visit to the hospital I had informed her family the good news that her illness was completely curable and her chemotherapy will come to an end in a few weeks time. I did not realize I was dampening my patient's happiness. She feared all the love and care she received from her family during her treatment would end once the treatment is over and she will go back to the one who takes care of everyone and be the one whose needs are ignored. She told me over that call how she wished to cling to her illness for that little extra care her family gave her. I was shocked that she chose the illness over a healthy life so that she can enjoy the care from her family.

Caring for a woman diagnosed with breast cancer is a bigger responsibility. Ensuring emotional and psychosocial support to a newly diagnosed cancer patient is as important as giving accurate treatment to her. It is not sympathy or just a perfect dietary chart she needs. She needs constant motivation to keep herself active and positive. Motivate her to do things she loves, encourage her to get back to her hobbies, tell her she looks beautiful no matter what, make her feel loved and respected. Let her realize how good she is and how important she is to you. It will reduce her mental stress and helps to complete the planned treatment with much confidence and ease. As a doctor I adopt a personalised approach towards my patients which always gives me positive results. It really helps them fight the battle.

We recognize the month of October as breast cancer awareness month, which is a worldwide annual campaign involving thousands of organisations to educate people about breast cancer, importance of early detection, treatment options and more.

In this 'Pink Month' let's promise to ourselves that we will stand by any woman in need and support her through the crisis.



Sneak peak

A new teaser of Akshay Kumar's upcoming retro-themed espionage thriller, *Bell Bottom*, directed by Ranjit M. Tewari, seems to have hit all the right notes. Set in the Scottish highlands, the teaser has Kumar's signature style stamped all over it, especially in the way he carries off his snug bellbottoms with panache. The teaser was released barely hours after the film team landed back in the country after a packed 60-day schedule. The film, which co-stars Vaani Kapoor, Huma Qureshi and Lara Dutta Bhupathi, releases in April 2021.



Cash overflow

According to the latest Forbes report, Sofia Vergara is the world's highest paid female actor of 2020. She made \$43 million in a year. Most of her earnings came from the sitcom *Modern Family*, in which she plays a Colombian immigrant, and from judging the talent show, *America's Got Talent*. She reportedly earns \$5,00,000 per episode of the sitcom and \$10 million per season of *America's Got Talent*. Other women who featured in the list include Angelina Jolie, Gal Gadot, Meryl Streep and Nicole Kidman.



JOE SEER



AABHA HANJURA,
Kashmiri folk musician

From Kashmir, with love

Folk artiste Aabha Hanjura performs across diverse genres, often combining Kashmiri folk sounds with elements of contemporary rock, jazz and blues. She got her break with the Kashmiri folk song 'Hukus Bukus' in 2017, which was featured in the web series *The Family Man*. She recently released a song 'Nundbane' from her upcoming album *Sound of Kashmir*, and performed at #ArtMatters, a major fundraiser by Teamwork Arts.

Q You quit a successful corporate career to become a full-time independent artist.

A Yes, when I was choosing this path, I was sure I was not going for something that was easy, accepted or well-known. The Kashmiri language is so niche that it is barely spoken by 0.02 per cent of the country. My passion drove me to leave the comforts of a high-paying job. Although I sing in different languages and I write in Hindi, Urdu and Punjabi, Kashmiri is a language I try and put more spotlight on, because it is hardly represented in the mainstream, even at festivals. Initially it was really tough, because people did not understand what I was trying to do. Then there was intrigue, interest and finally there was the breakthrough song, 'Hukus Bukus'.

Q Tell us about how you use traditional instruments and Kashmiri sounds to create modern folk fusion.



A I have experimented with a bunch of genres in my latest album. In 'Hukus Bukus' it was gypsy folk. 'Khanmoej Koor' was a soft ballad. 'Roshewalla' [involved] a soft rock treatment. I do not really box my music into any [specific] genre. But I love ethnic folk instruments and a lot of them are from Kashmir. So I try and keep that flavour alive as much as possible.

Q Are there many Kashmiri musicians in the mainstream commercial scene today? Vibha Saraf's 'Roshay' was there in *Made in Heaven*, and your song in *The Family Man*.

A When I started doing this, there was nobody. Today, I am so happy to see so many artistes bringing in their own flavour. Each of us have our own sonic identity and that serves the culture in the best possible way. A lot of Kashmiri music has been featured in movies and web series, which is something I am very excited about.

Q How has this period of isolation helped your music evolve?

A Isolation has both helped and not helped. Sometimes the silence has helped me to get a lot of writing done. Sometimes I crave to be in the studio or around people. I am somebody who really thrives on that live energy.

—Sneha Bhura

All guns blazing

In the second season of the hit series *Mirzapur*, actor Shweta Tripathi's character, Golu, is armed, out to avenge her sister's death. "I still remember the first time I held a gun," Tripathi says about her gun training. "The loud [sound] shook me completely.... We used real guns and so I worked with stunt director Manohar Verma for 10 days.... I used to take Cheeta (husband Chaitnya Sharma) on training sessions and he was excited to see me push the boundaries and prepare for Golu 2.0. I put on earplugs and music while training." The show is set to release on Amazon Prime on October 23.



INSTAGRAM



Playing naughty

Actor Kajal Aggarwal, of *Singham* and *Thuppakki* fame, announced her upcoming wedding to entrepreneur Gautam Kitchlu on October 30 in Mumbai. "This pandemic has certainly shed a sobering light on our joy, but we are thrilled to start our lives together..." Aggarwal posted on social media. A few steamy pictures of her from the Playboy-themed bridal shower thrown by sister Nisha and friends raised the temperature on the internet by a few degrees.



COMPILED BY
ANJULY MATHAI



The leveller of cities

It is becoming increasingly clear that, whether we like it or not, the Covid-19 pandemic is here to stay. The optimistic spirit in which we greeted the first lockdown—with Prime Minister Narendra Modi telling the nation that the battle of Kurukshetra in the Mahabharata was won in 18 days, but defeating the coronavirus would take 21—seems absurd today.

More than six months have passed since his speech, India has today the highest number of daily cases and daily deaths from Covid-19 in the world, and neither Mr Modi nor his government is making any confident assertions about the end of the pandemic. A vaccine may or may not come by March 2021, and it may or may not work, but even in the most upbeat of scenarios, it will take several months more for everyone vulnerable to be vaccinated, and even then, we will not know how long the vaccination will remain effective.

But if we have to continue to live with Covid-19 for an indeterminate period, while somehow safeguarding both our lives and our livelihoods, it is also clear that many things will have to change. The obvious area of change will be in the world economy; in an earlier column here, I have already written of the visible risk of “deglobalisation”. There is a worldwide rush to reset global supply chains and raise trade barriers. The demand for more protectionism and “self-reliance” (echoed in Prime Minister Modi’s call for “*atma nirbharta*”), for bringing manufacturing and production value chains back home or at least closer to home, is mounting. But today I am thinking more about the impact of the pandemic on our daily lives.

Much of what we took for granted till recently—and which seemed to be knitting the world ever closer together—seems vulnerable in the post-Covid-19 era. The pandemic and the resultant lockdowns have already ended regular international travel across free and open borders. Restrictions, mandatory Covid-19 tests before departure and upon arrival and inescapable quarantine rules in each country have all hemmed in the allure of international travel.

Professional life is another major casualty. Already, new patterns of work, following strict social distancing norms (and often with working from home a few days a week), have become the new normal. Many companies—most famously Twitter Inc—have decreed that their employees may work from home indefinitely. Teeming office buildings and crowded workspaces may soon be a thing of the past. Managers are beginning to grapple with questions they never needed to ask themselves before: do we need the expense of physical offices if people are mainly working from home? But what happens to camaraderie and team-building if co-workers are not exchanging gossip at the water cooler, arguing in the conference room or flirting in the canteen?

Our cities will change, too. Urban planners have given us cities with a high population density within small radii. But if we are working from home anyway, do we need classic “urbanisation” anymore? Given 24/7 electricity and high-speed broadband, we could just as easily live in villages and work. Once proximity to your job is no longer indispensable, and free mingling is discouraged, the appeal of the city wanes.

Working life is going to be very different for Generation Z (which may as well stand for zoonotic, the adjective that describes viruses that leap the divide from animal to human). Student life already is. Classes at both high school and college have largely migrated online. There seems little prospect that normal student life, with easy mingling on crowded campuses, will simply resume.

Fear of a virus, a deadly unseen enemy, may mark our lives for a long time to come, even after this particular pandemic ends. We have already learned to fear danger in the stranger we meet, the friend we hug. The post-Covid-19 world, whenever that comes into being, is likely to bear the imprint of this disaster in far-reaching changes to our lives. To update a cliché: we may need to start dating our times as BC (Before Covid) and AD (After Disaster).

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