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NEIGHBOURS WITH AID, BUSINESS

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PROTECT MEGHAN, SAYS NEW BOOK ON THE ROYALS

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THE WEEK

SEPTEMBER 20, 2020

MP BYELECTIONS
BJP, CONGRESS CAUGHT
IN OWN MIRES

LADAKH
THE FIGHT FOR THE HEIGHTS

VIRUS-PROOF JOBS!

PLUS

Hot sectors
that are hiring

Loss of livelihood
haunts India

Supraja Ashok,
digital marketing specialist,
Chennai

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ILLUSTRATION: BINESH SREEDHARAN

GREAT INDIAN JOB RACE

Some 27 million youth in India lost their jobs in April thanks to the pandemic-induced lockdown. Though hiring picked up in the subsequent months, the market recovery is expected to remain flat. Some jobs however remained virus-proof and they are hot property now.

PLUS

- ◆ The big 10 jobs—from data analyst to virtual trainer
- ◆ Pandemic-induced job losses have thrown lakhs of middle-class Indian lives into disarray. The only redemption is a quick economic turnaround

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COVER DESIGN **BINESH SREEDHARAN**

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That's the spirit

THE INDIAN industry fought Covid-19 with ideas that triumphed over the odds ('Viral fervour', September 6). Many young entrepreneurs have come up with smart, innovative ideas, which, I am sure, will even astonish people in developed nations. That is the spirit. You have made us all so proud.

Almost all companies in India have reinvented in no time, which is a positive signal. Yes, there is uncertainty all over on what is in store for tomorrow. But, we need to get going and live and deal with this virus in style.

Tigin Thomas,
On email.

The innovative ways with which industry stalwarts and young entrepreneurs outmanoeuvred the crisis, finding opportunities in adversity, are praiseworthy.

Digital technology played the role of pivot in all such initiatives. The twin mantra of 'innovate and adapt' will,

hopefully, take us through the tricky terrain to safe ground.

Raveendranath A.,
On email.

Hidden agenda

It does not matter whether the PM-CARES Fund is made public or not ('Pow-

erpoint', September 6).

It seems queer that the apex court based its verdict solely on legal aspects and failed to question the ethics behind using 'PM' in the name of a trust fund.

The motivated use of the PM-CARES Fund has been clearly demonstrated, when it financed two 500-bed Covid-19 hospitals in Bihar, where elections are due in some months.

Pankaj Kumar Chatterjee,
On email.

Don't mess with the Gandhis

It is an established fact that the Congress has always been a family outfit where the first family, the Gandhis, hold sway in almost everything ('Family comes first', September 6).

The exceptionally high level of sycophancy in the Congress has ensured a free run for the Gandhis, despite their stewardship leaving a lot to be desired.

Fawning courtiers, a bunch of old fogeys, and leaders sans any mass base rallied around the Gandhis at the recent Congress Working Committee meeting. Those who had drafted the letter found themselves grossly outnumbered,

and at the receiving end of brickbats galore. An insinuation that some of them had even hobnobbed with the BJP was mooted. For all their noble intentions they are well on their way to the doghouse, and one can hardly expect the party to give them new responsibilities anymore.

Moral of the story: Don't mess with the Gandhis, even if they are running the party to the ground and hardly give a damn about it.
C.V. Aravind,
On email.

Bhushan the great

Dissent lies at the core of democratic tradition and instead of forming a circle of hush-hush around 'the party', in an Orwellian manner, the Congress leaders definitely need a lesson or two from Prashant Bhushan ('Schizo-nation', September 6). His lyrical legalese is brilliant, but even more impressive is the fact that he stands by his words.

Sangeeta Kampani,
On email.

Stick to English

The National Education Policy proposes that children should be taught in their mother tongue or the local language compulsori-

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REGIONAL CO-ORDINATING OFFICE
Tej Building, 1st Floor, Bahadur Shah Zafar Marg, New Delhi 110 002.
Tel: 011-23354920, 23354921, 23359541, 23355801, 23356537
Fax: 43541354

EDITORIAL

Manorama Buildings, P.B. No. 4278, Panampilly Nagar, Kochi 682036, Kerala, India.
✉ editor@theweek.in
🌐 http://www.theweek.in
☎ +91 484-4447888
📞 +91 484-2315745

ly up to class five ('Forth-write', September 6).

Politicians always speak in their mother tongue for its emotive appeal. India has 22 recognised languages. There are more than 1,500 mother tongues. There are vast linguistic minorities in every state. As such it is impossible to teach children in their mother tongue. It is possible to teach only in the local language.

For us, English is not a foreign language. It is only a language of foreign origin. It has become our own by over 200 years of use. It has given us immense benefits. It is a doorway to knowledge. All books in medicine, engineering, computer science, banking and law are in English.

The north Indian states, in the fervour of independence, gave up English. They fell back. The south Indian states, which retained English, moved forward. English newspapers and magazines are published and read all over India. This is not the case with regional language papers, including Hindi. English is the only slender thread of unity binding India now.

The medium of instruction may be left to the parents. Even if the local language is to be made compulsory, it may be done up to class three and not class five. This will make it easier for those students who move to other states.

India is a federation of states. It is also known as a subcontinent. Utmost

care has to be exercised on the language issue. Is it not strange that those who stress on the mother tongue, invariably send their children and grandchildren to English medium schools?

**B.G. Baliga,
On email.**

Due to financial problems, some students are facing difficulties in owning computers. They also do not get any relaxation in fees.

To mitigate problems, the government has to address the concerns of such students, especially those belonging to weaker sections of society. Laptops should be given free of cost to students belonging to poor families. Loans, in their case, should be approved fast, and subsidies should be disbursed regularly.

**K.V. Vaidyanathan,
Ahmedabad.**

It suits them

The Congress has reached the situation that it is in today because of many factors. Some of them are:

- 1) Rahul and Priyanka Gandhi lack qualifications and maturity to lead the nation.
- 2) Narendra Modi is the strongest leader we have seen after Indira Gandhi.
- 3) The Congress leaders will not accept a leader outside the dynasty, as it suits their designs to hide their misdeeds ('Rites of return', August 16).

**Jayaram Kollegal
Venkatsuban,
On email.**

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— APERITIF —

THE BIG PICTURE

BITTEN BY THE FITNESS BUG

Palestinian athlete Ahmed Abu Hasira demonstrates his parkour skills in the locked-down Gaza city.

PHOTO BY REUTERS

POINT BLANK



#Modinomics has fallen flat. For the survival of economics, jingoism cannot be a remedy. Narendra Modi, you talk to former PM Manmohan Singh and listen to him patiently.

Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury, leader of opposition in Lok Sabha, on Twitter

That's normal for me, being in New Zealand. We don't get anyone to come for domestic cricket! So I'll be able to share some tips on playing in front of 10 people.

Mitchell McClenaghan, New Zealand cricketer, about playing the IPL without spectators

Without hard work and focus, talent can become directionless. If you want to make it in this business, you have to be ready to give it your all, to not let setbacks keep you down and to persist in the face of all odds.

Anil Kapoor, actor

The BJP may be in power right now. But surely it must remember its days in the opposition, and not lose sight of the fact that it could be there again.

Pavan K. Varma, former diplomat

The craft of my films may be a reflection of my ego, but the content... that is my purpose. It always will be.

Mohan Raja, filmmaker



GETTY IMAGES

You may think nobody is watching.... that nobody notices your naked greed, your black heart, the real rotting maggot-infested ogre that you are. But you are wrong. We are watching.

Richa Chadha, actor, on Twitter, criticising the media trial of actor Rhea Chakraborty

WORD PLAY

Quoisexual is one of the new words added by Dictionary.com on its September 2 update. A quoisexual is a person who does not understand experiences or concepts of sexual attraction and orientation. It is based on the French word *quoi*, which means "what". The term quoisexual was coined on the microblogging website, Tumblr, in 2014. Later it found users in the broader internet. Apparently, the word has a humorous nickname—WTFsexual.

MILESTONES

TECHNOLOGICAL LEAP

India successfully test-fired its first hypersonic missile demonstrator using the indigenously-developed scramjet propulsion system on September 7. This is a significant step towards the development of hypersonic cruise missiles.



REVERED BROADCASTER

British broadcaster David Attenborough was presented the Indra Gandhi Peace Prize at a virtual event on September 7 by former prime minister Manmohan Singh. The award consists of a cash prize of ₹25 lakh along with a citation.



SUPER SOLUTION

Sheffield University researchers developed a new compound that is capable of killing the two sub-groups—gram positive and gram negative—of antibiotic-resistant bacteria. Also known as superbugs, the antibiotic resistant bacteria pose a major public health problem.





Criticism, commendation and key

The adjective 'idiosyncratic,' meaning an individual whim or fancy, appears just four times in the Reserve Bank of India's 308-page annual report, which was made public a fortnight ago. But it was enough to make senior bureaucrats and economists in Delhi share the report online and discuss the implications, as the word is used to criticise policies that contributed to economic slowdown in the last five years.

Decisions taken by key economic ministries like finance, transport, ports, coal and civil aviation came under the scanner. The report notes that the enforcement of emission and axle load norms for commercial vehicles was an idiosyncratic event.

The decision was announced and implemented by the transport ministry, but the deadlines were rigidly enforced by the Supreme Court. Listed among domestic and global idiosyncratic factors are the grounding of a domestic airline (Jet Airways), financial sector stress, revenue issues in telecom sector, coal production losses impacting railway freight traffic and lessened port activity.

The candid report by RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das lists the "formidable drags" that led to the slowdown from 2018 itself, weighing heavily on "animal spirits" of entrepreneurship and risk-taking. Using the virus analogy, the report warns that the usual risks that are relegated to the background—due to the stimulus packages of the Central government and the RBI—"may be sinisterly mutating", thereby predicting newer economic viruses that would plague the country even after the vaccine is administered to the population. Barring this warning, the report is a continuous commendation of the RBI's responses initiated since early 2019. The report also lists out steps to be taken to put the economy and the banking system back on track. The RBI's prescription is monetising assets of the Centre in steel, coal, power, railways and

ports, which has already been announced as part of the ₹20 lakh crore stimulus package.

The RBI's thumbs-up for privatisation came just a few days before the death of Swami Kesavananda Bharati, who was associated with the 1973 Supreme Court judgment on basic structure of the Constitution. It was a judgment that changed not just the law but politics itself. But the pontiff, who focused on spirituality and music, was fighting for the citizen's fundamental right to property, in order to prevent the Communist government of Kerala from taking over the mutt's lands. The Supreme Court registry had clubbed his case with the appeals of some businessmen who were fighting

nationalisation of their assets by the leftist government of Indira Gandhi. It became a fight for the control of the nation's political and economic soul.

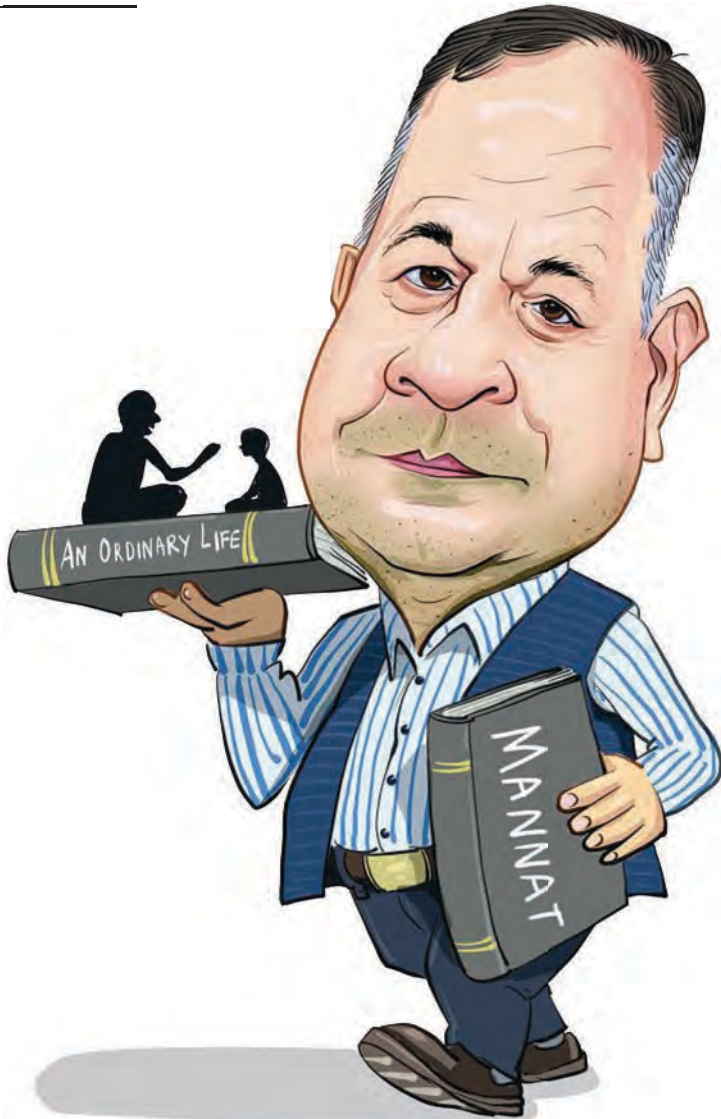
After defeating the grand coalition in 1971, Indira Gandhi went on a nationalisation spree. The grand coalition was made up of the rightist Bharatiya Jana Sangh and

Swatantra parties, the left-of-centre socialists and the rightist syndicate faction of the Congress, and was supported by privilege-stripped maharajas, land-owning classes and private businesses.

While privatisation of the nationalised sectors began with the 1991 economic reforms of a Congress government, the second wave of ambitious privatisation is being undertaken by the Narendra Modi government. The aim is not only to monetise the state assets but also to make an ideological statement on privatisation of property, which would have thrilled the petitioners and their backers in the Kesavananda Bharati case.

But it was the genius of the Supreme Court of that time that took a dispute on property ownership to answer the larger questions of the Constitution and its unalterable basic structure, of which an independent Reserve Bank of India is a vital part.





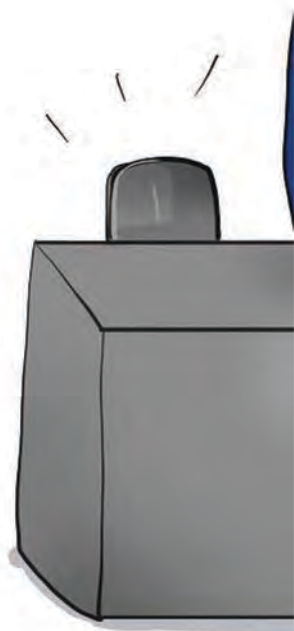
ILLUSTRATIONS JAIRAJ T.G.

BALLOTS TO BOOKS

Ashok Lavasa's stint at the Election Commission was eventful. He was the lone dissenting voice in the Model Code of Conduct cases against BJP leaders. His own image came under a cloud when his close family members were probed for alleged income tax irregularities. Given all this, there is bound to be a lot of interest in the two books that he is coming out with. Looks like he will not be spilling any beans though. *An Ordinary Life: Portrait of an Indian Generation* is centred around Lavasa's father and the values he stood for. The second book—*Mannat*—is co-authored with his wife, Novel, and tells the story of places of worship in India that test human strength and stamina.

C FOR CONGRESS, CHELSEA

On September 1, Kerala got two new district Congress committee presidents: M.P. Vincent (Thrissur) and U. Rajeevan (Kozhikode). Rajeevan's first address to the media resulted in some unintended hilarity when he turned up in a white mask with the Chelsea FC crest. Football fans in the state immediately took to social media to trade jibes. Chelsea fans were naturally chuffed, while other fan clubs playfully threatened to withdraw support to the Congress. All said, the blue rampant lion did trend for a while in the football-crazy state. Perhaps, Chelsea should thank Rajeevan, a former schoolteacher, with passes to a game at Stamford Bridge. What say, Roman Abramovich?

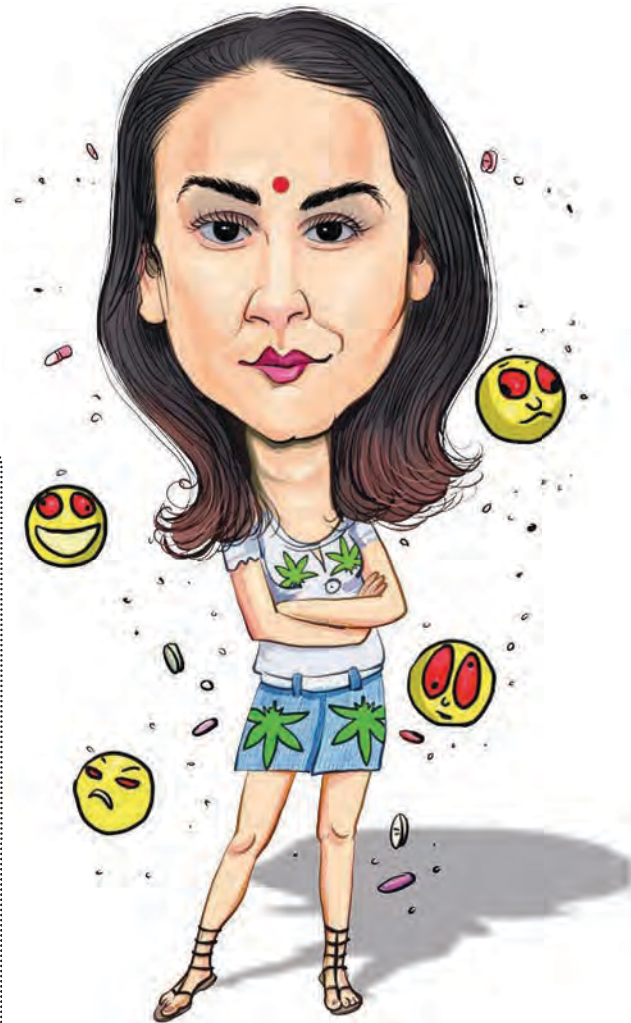


NAYS HAVE IT

A Covid-19 testing centre has proved to be extremely lucky for MLAs and MLCs of Telangana. The temporary facility was started inside the Assembly premises to test lawmakers ahead of the session. Around 60 per cent of the legislators were tested. No positives.

HUG-PLOMACY ON HOLD

The 75th session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York might likely have only one attendee in person—US President Donald Trump. All other heads are likely to address the sessions, between September 22 and 29, virtually. Modi is likely to get an opportunity to address the assembly on September 26. But it looks like there will not be any hugs for dear friend Trump, who will soon get into election mode. Even if Modi had gone, the new normal would prevent him from giving hugs.



HIGH AND LOWS

Roping in stars can reap rich dividends for political parties during polls, but they can prove to be a liability, too. The BJP learnt it the hard way with the recent arrest of Sandalwood actor Ragini Dwivedi in a drug racket case. Soon after her arrest, photographs and videos of the actor campaigning with BJP leaders, including B.Y. Vijayendra, son of Karnataka Chief Minister B.S. Yediyurappa, during the assembly bypolls went viral. The BJP quickly clarified that she was “not a member” of the party.

NOISY NEIGHBOURS

As India's neighbourhood gets increasingly slippery, New Delhi will have to step up its game to keep the Chinese influence and other factors at bay

BY REKHA DIXIT

This summer, if the conflict in the Galwan region brought out simmering hostilities with China, fault lines also became visible in India's ties with other neighbours.

Nepal has been in a blame-India-for-almost-everything mood. Bangladesh is having friendly conversations with Pakistan, even as it denied an audience to India's high commissioner in Dhaka. To the west, Afghanistan's peace process with the Taliban is narrowing the space India has there. Investments for an alternate route to Afghanistan, via Chabahar in Iran, are also facing an uncertain future.

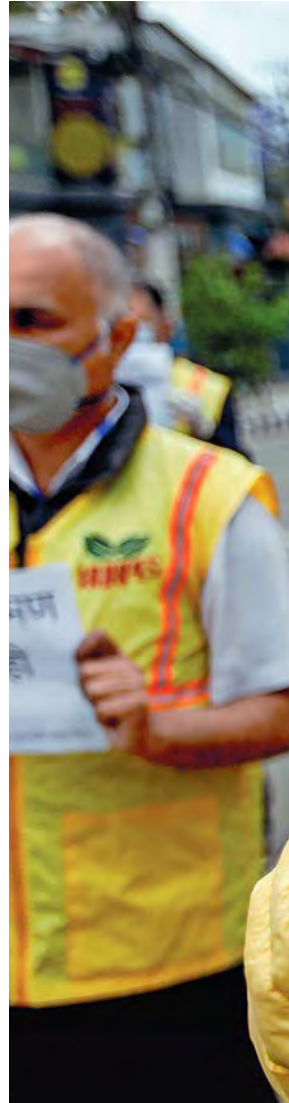
In a world where the dynamics are changing rapidly, with a new cold war emerging between the US and China and countries having to recalibrate ties as multilateralism crumbles, a combination of wrong timing, India's domestic developments and the China factor have made the neighbourhood rather slippery for India. "The rise of China poses new threats in the immediate neighbourhood, though we have extended our Neighbourhood First approach to Together We Grow," said Ram Madhav, BJP national general secretary at a virtual discussion. Farash Uddin, economist and former

governor of Bangladesh Bank said: "In international politics, there are no permanent enemies. China opposed our independence, but now wants to befriend us. We have limited funds and India should not mind if China does projects with us."

China, no doubt, is an important player in India's neighbourhood; its chequebook-outreach is only one of the many strategies in its diplomacy. Beijing's open involvement in Nepal's internal politics, as it tried brokering peace between rival factions of the ruling Nepal Communist Party, was another example of China's assertion this side of the Himalayas. China is certainly interested in seeing the elected communist government complete its term under K.P. Sharma Oli. Observers say that even Bangladesh's new bonhomie with Pakistan—a phone call between prime ministers Imran Khan and Sheikh Hasina and in-person talks between Bangladesh foreign minister Abdul Momen and Pakistan's envoy to Dhaka, Imran Siddiqui—were at China's prodding.

India has managed to win over the Maldives after Ibrahim Mohamed Solih took over last year. It recently announced a slew of financial help projects for the archipelago nation,

ANGER
POLITICS
Nepali activists
with anti-India
placards



including an undisclosed amount as financial assistance to deal with the pandemic. This is the first and only financial aid India has given for the pandemic to any country. India had, however, committed \$1 billion to the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) for pandemic management.

Nonetheless, India may not be able to counter Chinese influence everywhere in the neighbourhood. Also, as Manjeev Puri, India's former ambassador to Kathmandu said, while the China factor is important, equally significant are rising asi-



REUTERS

rations and development needs of these countries. India, despite good intentions, cannot meet all these needs, especially those requiring massive funds. The neighbourhood will not just turn to China, but also South Asia and the west. Already, Bangladesh is in talks with China to finance a project on the River Teesta. Significantly, India and Bangladesh have not managed to seal the Teesta water sharing pact, because of objections from West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee. Sri Lanka has also reached out to China for a \$500 million development loan,

despite past experience of falling into the Chinese debt trap; it had to lease out Hambantota port for 99 years.

Also, over the decades, India's neighbours have worked hard at building identities distinct from India. They are not going to shed this new found image in a hurry. So where then, does India's Neighbourhood First policy stand? Have the investments of recent years gone to waste? And where exactly did India's calibrations go wrong?

There is only one solution for India, say observers. Do more for the neighbours, even when they are

grumbling or calling names. Inspection on whether precious funds have gone waste in investments which have not yielded diplomatic dividends are pointless.

India has been able to use its soft power effectively, helping friends and neighbours with capacity building and training. But the track record with larger projects, specially infrastructure ones, is not always that good. India has promised rail links in Nepal and Bangladesh, a port development project along with Japan in Sri Lanka. Recently, India also promised to fund the largest infrastructure

project in the Maldives, the Greater Male Connectivity Project comprising a \$100 million grant and \$400 million line of credit. These need to be delivered in time.

With Myanmar, India promised funding the \$484 million Kaladan Multi Mode Transport and Transit Project, connecting the two countries by sea (Kolkata and Sittwe) and land (highways through Mizoram and Rakhine and Chin provinces). The project has moved slowly, with concerns even emerging over its completion. Meanwhile China is planning a China Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), along the lines of the one it has with Pakistan. CMEC will give China access to the Bay of Bengal and thereby, the Indian Ocean. Madhav noted that India's growth was towards its eastern littoral. The delay in projects like Kaladan, therefore, belie the emphasis India places on its Act East policy.

There is also a certain decision-making tardiness which often rankles neighbours. Deep Kumar Upadhyay, Nepal Congress leader and former ambassador of Nepal to India, said India was missing the opportunity to make prompt diplomatic responses and bilateral engagement on agreed-upon disputes over boundaries and issues important to Nepal—trade deficit, water management and power. Sri Lanka, in deep financial distress since the Easter bombings last year, has repeatedly asked for postponing repayment of a \$960 million soft loan; India has not yet taken a decision.

If the Iranian side is to be believed, there was a similar dragging of feet over the 628km Chabahar Zahedan railway line in Iran, which the Indian Railway Company was to build. India says the delay was on the Iranian side. Whatever the reason, the project is out of Indian hands. Though Iran claims to develop the link (which goes up to the Afghan border) alone, \$400 billion Chinese funding

is keeping Tehran financially secure. Iran has also eliminated India from developing the Farzad B offshore gas field, though the Oil and Natural Gas Corporation was involved in discovering gas reserves there.

With Iran, the whole equation is upset because of India's vigorous friendship with the US. "How we salvage our ties with Iran, and negotiate space for ourselves in Afghanistan will depend not just on us, but also on developments in the world," said Kriti Shah, researcher, Observer Research Foundation. The outcome of the US elections in November is one factor.

Several domestic policies in recent times have also had impact across borders. The CAA upset Bangladesh, and even Afghanistan, though it prudently kept quiet. With new attacks on Hindus and Sikhs in Afghanistan, it later facilitated the transfer of Afghan Sikhs to New Delhi. "Afghanistan will get Talibanised," said Kanwal Sibal, former foreign secretary at a discussion.

The new political map of India after abrogation of Article 370 upset Nepal, which was looking for a reason to deflect attention from its internal political mess. In the appropriation of disputed territory, and in quickly bringing out a new map of its own, Nepal found a populist nationalist cause. India called the move a cartographic aggression, but did not offer much comment as Nepal sent

armed guards to patrol border posts, stopped flood prevention work along the Bihar border, ranted about the birthplace of Ram and the Buddha and sundry irritants.

Farash Uddin said: "Our friendship is on very solid ground and irritants cannot shake it." But he added that irritants like Indian leaders calling Bangladeshi immigrants termites could be avoided. Concerns over the CAA and National Citizenship Register are palpable in Dhaka, and even the inauguration of a Ram temple in Ayodhya caused a frown, though Bangladesh has steadfastly called it India's internal matter. Madhav said there is a mistaken understanding of the CAA. This only means India needs to work harder at explaining its position, say observers.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's outreach to SAARC nations for joint pandemic handling has had mixed results. While the gifts of medicines and therapeutics and capacity building of health trainers is the kind of soft power India excels in, the arrest of nationals from neighbouring countries who attended the Tablighi Jamaat conference in Delhi negated much of the good work. Delhi Police had charge-sheeted 956 foreigners from 36 countries who attended the event. Though many were given bail, the slow pace of investigations and the conditions under which they were kept are a diplomatic headache, and positioned India as "intolerant".

New Delhi is now gradually enhancing relations with its neighbours, a step that observers felt would right many perceived slights. The Independence Day call between Modi and Oli lasted 15 minutes, and was the first conversation since their SAARC Covid-19 virtual meet in March. Two days later, Indian ambassador to Kathmandu held a virtual meeting with a Nepali delegation headed by its foreign secretary S.D. Bairagi to review Indian projects in Nepal. New Delhi underplayed

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's outreach to SAARC nations for joint pandemic handling has had mixed results.



the meeting, calling it routine. But in Kathmandu, which was clamouring for attention for weeks, these talks are regarded as the beginning of a thaw.

As observers say, Nepal knows the limitations of baiting India. Even if Nepali leaders talk about revisiting the pact for recruiting Nepali soldiers into the Indian Army, the fact remains that India spends Rs4,000 crore annually on the salaries and pensions of Nepali citizens in the Indian Army. The loss in remittances alone will be a big blow for Nepal. Nepal is also aware of its limited importance to China. Connectivity projects through landlocked Nepal, for instance, will lead to nowhere for China.

Foreign secretary Harshvardhan Shringla's recent visit to Dhaka to meet Hasina is significant. He is the first foreign dignitary to visit after the country after the pandemic hit, and this keeps the bilateral firmly in its "*sonali adhyay* (golden phase)". Shrin-

gla may next head for Myanmar.

India has decided now that its future is with the east. Thus, the BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) bloc is important, as is the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. In fact, Madhav believes India should still keep a window open for the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, "since the future of the world is in the Indo Pacific region". Yet, ironically, it was India's diplomatic outreach towards its west that has reaped recent dividends. Modi wooed the Gulf with enthusiasm, the countries responded with equal vigour. Thus, when Pakistan recently pouted at the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation platform for not calling out India over Kashmir, and threatening to form a parallel Islamic cohort, Saudi Arabia frowned and withdrew a much-needed financial loan.

TACTICAL FRIENDSHIP

Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina (left) with Chinese President Xi Jinping. Bangladesh is in talks with China to finance a project on the River Teesta

The immediate neighbourhood may not be at its best right now, but this is not the first time India finds itself in such a situation. As T.C.A Raghavan, author and former envoy to Islamabad said at a lecture, the present international scenario has similarities with the late 1980s and early 1990s. In a globally dynamic backdrop—breakdown of the USSR and reunification of Germany—India had its own backyard issues with Nepal, Sri Lanka, and even China. The difference now is the emergence of China as a superpower, while then, the world was becoming unipolar. Lessons from then should not go waste. ●



GETTY IMAGES

**FAITHFUL
FIGHTERS**

Around 40,000 Gorkhas serve in the Indian Army

MALICIOUS INTENT

The China-funded study on what motivates young Nepalis to join the Indian Army is yet another attempt to target India-Nepal ties

BY PRADIP R. SAGAR

BINOJ BASNYAT, a retired major general of the Nepal army, has fond memories of his time spent in Delhi 10 years ago, pursuing a course at the National Defence College. He bonded quickly with Indian officers from the Gorkha regiments, including General Bipin Rawat, now chief of defence staff. Basnyat, who has seen several ups and downs in India-Nepal relations, is confident that the friendship will last despite the recent crisis in bilateral ties, even as China tries to drive a wedge between the neighbours.

In a move that signals China's intent, its embassy in Kathmandu has engaged a local think tank called the China Study Centre (CSC) to explore what motivates young Nepalis to join the Gorkha regiments of the Indian Army. The study will also look at the areas in Nepal where such recruitments are popular, the socio-economic impact of the recruitment and the level of interest of potential candidates in joining the armed forces of foreign countries. The move has caught the attention of the Indian military establishment as it has come at a time when India and China are engaged in a tense border standoff.

"The closeness between Nepal and India has always troubled China. It has never liked Nepali youth joining the Indian Army," said Basnyat.

As Sino-Indian tensions grow, China is increasingly making use of the CSC, said to be funded by the People's Liberation Army, to gather information on Indian activities. The Indian military intelligence has repeatedly expressed concern over the growing influence of the think tank at a time the Nepali government is headed by a decidedly pro-China K.P. Sharma Oli and the Communist Party of Nepal.

According to a report by the Sashastra Seema Bal, more than two dozen CSC offices have come up in Nepal, with half of them operating close to its 1,751-km-long border with India. While the CSC maintains

that it is engaged in teaching Chinese language and disseminating cultural information about China and its various art forms, Indian security agencies believe that it spreads anti-India propaganda.

Nepal is the only foreign country whose nationals are part of the Indian Army. Close to 40,000 Gorkhas serve in the seven Gorkha regiments of the Army, which have won numerous gallantry awards, including two Param Vir Chakras. The Gorkha regiments have given several chiefs to the Army including the legendary Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw and also its last two chiefs, General Dalbir Singh Suhag and General Bipin Rawat. The Army presently operates 16 recruiting centres across Nepal.

It was commander Sir David Ochterlony of the East India Company army who first recognised the bravery of the Gorkhas, a sturdy hill tribe, during the Anglo-Nepalese war (1814-16), and invited them to join his army. Since then, the Gorkhas have been part of multiple military campaigns including the 1857 rebellion, the Afghan wars and the two world wars. In 1947, India, Britain and Nepal signed a tripartite agreement after which seven of the 11 existing regiments of the Gorkhas in the British Indian Army joined the Indian Army while the remaining four joined the British army.

More than 70 years of meritorious service of the Gorkhas has come under some strain recently because of the deterioration in India-Nepal relations. Last year, Nepal Foreign Minister Pradeep Gyawali said the 1947 agreement had become “irrelevant” in the “changed political context”. A section of the Nepali intelligentsia and lawmakers, meanwhile, has started questioning the practice of the country’s youth serving in foreign armies.

Sundar Nath Bhattarai, officiating chairman of the CSC, meanwhile, denied that his organisation was con-

ducting any study on behalf of the PLA. “China knows that the Nepalese Gorkha join the Indian Army under a tripartite agreement between India, Nepal and Britain. There is, however, a view that the Gorkhas should not join Indian Army,” Bhattarai told THE WEEK. “We have been operating in Nepal for over 20 years and we indulge only in academic research on China-Nepal relations. There is no ulterior motive.”



The Indian foreign policy establishment thinks that Nepal is playing the China card against India. The bonhomie the two countries used to share no longer seems to exist. In May, when Nepal objected to India’s road construction in Lipulekh, Army Chief General M.M. Naravane pointed out that Kathmandu’s reaction was at someone’s behest, in an apparent reference to China.

Retired Indian officers believe that the CSC’s exercise is backed by China. Former northern army commander Lieutenant General (retired) D.S. Hooda, who was with the Gorkha regiment, said the Chinese

military was trying to exploit the differences between India and Nepal. “The intention could be to get information and subsequently to exploit it for spying,” he said. “We need to be careful about their moves, especially as we have close to 40,000 Gorkha soldiers.”

Lieutenant General (retired) Vinod Bhatia, who was director general of military operations, said the CSC was controlled and funded by the Chinese government. “The ongoing study is part of the Chinese military’s psychological operations, its three-warfare strategy of psy ops, public opinion and legal warfare. It is aimed at putting the adversary in a dilemma.”

But the move faces pushback from within Nepal as well. Colonel (retired) Dhan Bahadur Thapa, who served in Indian Army’s 11 Kumaon regiment, said it was a proud moment for any Nepali to join the Indian Army. “It is a tradition and a norm in Nepal,” he said. “China is using this as propaganda. The Chinese military is now standing against Indian forces (in eastern Ladakh) and they are trying to put pressure on the Nepal government to stop the youth from joining Indian forces.” But he said the 1.3 lakh Gorkhas who retired from the Indian Army would oppose any such move.

India’s ties with Nepal transcend political leadership, according to Lieutenant General (retired) Shokin Chauhan, an officer from the 11 Gorkha Rifles and former Indian defence attaché in Kathmandu. “The two countries have a ‘roti-beti’ relationship and the Army and the Gorkhas form the bedrock of the relationship,” he said. “China is trying to find out the motivation for Nepali youth to join the Indian Army. It could be an attempt to infiltrate the Army or to lure the Nepali youth to the PLA. But Gorkhas have a very strong emotional connect with the Indian Army.”



SALIL BERA

FRIGHTENING FAITH

A Chinese Christian cult makes rapid inroads into northeast India, causing concern among local churches and political leadership

BY RABI BANERJEE

A Christian sect founded in China and banned by the Chinese government as a dangerous cult, is spreading fast in northeast India, say alarmed church leaders. The growing popularity of the Church of Almighty God, also known as Eastern Lightning, has forced various Baptist groups, the predominant Christian denomination in the region, to formally warn their flock and fellow church leaders countrywide.

The cult—established in 1991 by Zhao Weishan, a former physics teacher from Henan province in central China—says Jesus Christ



NEW CHALLENGE

Baptist churches make a major denomination in the northeast

has returned to earth in the form of Zhao's wife, Yang Xiangbin. Zhao and Yang fled to the US in 2000 after the cult was banned and its members were targeted by the Chinese government. Chinese officials say Zhao and Yang have turned billionaires and live in a palatial bungalow in New York, spending millions of dollars to advertise their cult across the world, especially in Taiwan and Hong Kong. Yang is said to be protected by her female devotees and usually does not meet men. Her words are considered to be scripture by members of the cult.

When it was banned in 1998,

the cult had close to three million followers. Members would conduct door-to-door campaigns, collect information about potential followers and, sometimes, "force" them to join the group. The campaigns sometimes turned violent like it did in 2014 at a McDonald's outlet in Shandong province in eastern China. A woman who refused to join them was beaten to death by members of the cult. Two of the killers were sentenced to death for the crime.

The cult, which now has an active social media presence, is said to be spreading its influence in India's northeastern states. In Nagaland, church leaders say it is becoming popular at a time when peace talks between the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isak-Muivah) and the Union government seem to be on the verge of collapsing. The church, which is working hard for the success of the talks, finds itself constrained by the challenge posed by the cult.

That the cult first entered Nagaland has been a cause of worry for the church, given the state's past China connections. In the 1970s and 80s, Naga insurgents used to frequent China for ideological as well as arms training. Chinese influence among its cadre was so strong that the NSCN had to clarify in its constitution that although its preferred ideology was socialism, it would follow the theological principles of Christianity. The church now foresees another challenge from China, but a spiritual one this time. Zelhoh Keyho, general secretary of the Nagaland Baptist Church Council, says the church is more worried about the growing influence of the cult among Christians in Nagaland.

"This cult is aggressive, dangerous and can tempt young minds through its teachings. Its members are fundamentalists who do not believe in the Bible, but in violence," says Keyho. He has written warning letters about the cult to churches across the

entire northeast and also to church bodies in Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata and Bengaluru, cities with a sizeable presence of young believers from the northeast. "We have asked them not to fall into the trap laid by the Chinese cult. It could destroy them," he says.

Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya are the three Christian majority states in the northeast; Manipur, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, too, have significant Christian populations. According to the Baptist council, the Chinese cult is active through social media in all these states, although it is yet to find any evidence about physical congregations.

"They have created several chat groups on social media. In Nagaland, our study failed to find any physical congregation. But we fear that somewhere in the northeast or in the mainland, the cult has created a congregation," says Keyho.

Alarmed by Keyho's letter, the Council of Baptist Churches in Northeastern India, an umbrella organisation of the Baptist churches in the region, has started assessing the threat posed by the cult. Keyho says the non-Christian-majority states have been slow to respond, but are now stepping up their efforts. "Manipur has swung into action already, sending alerts," he said.

W. Konghar, general secretary of Manipur Baptist Convention, says a similar cult based in South Korea was found to be active in the state last year. "That cult, too, was quite belligerent and propagated an unusually aggressive concept. I wrote about the danger it posed and asked people to stay away," he says. South Korea is a popular destination for students from Manipur and Nagaland, and Korean cuisine is popular in the region. Such cultural influences, church leaders fear, could allow cult members to attract and cultivate vulnerable youth.

When the Church of Almighty

God was banned by China, many of its members took refuge in South Korea and Japan. Some moved to the US and Europe. After social media became popular and accessible, members based abroad started preaching to people back home, posing an ideological challenge for the Chinese government and the communist party.

Critics of the Chinese regime believe that the cult and its popularity is a reaction to the relentless oppression of Christians in China. They feel that the cult would have died a natural death but for the systematic persecution, including torture chambers—called shelter homes by the authorities—where arrested cult members were imprisoned for life. The harsh measures appear to be a message to Chinese Christians as a whole, to demonstrate that China will never tolerate the practice and propagation of Christianity.

Says Wati Aier, eminent scholar and Baptist church leader from Nagaland, “Christianity has always had a stake in China from the time of Chairman Mao. Persecution of Christians is nothing new. But there is an attempt to link the banning of this cult with the persecution of propagators of Christianity. The two, however, are completely different.”

Keyho says the Baptist council sympathises with the oppressed Christians in China. “Underground churches in China are facing a difficult time. But we have to differentiate between a cult and the church. We are against China’s aggression against Christianity and we demand that it stop persecuting churches. But that does not mean we will support an anti-Christian cult like the Church of Almighty God.”

Keyho and other church leaders believe that the cult sees India as a soft target as teams based in South Korea, Japan, Malaysia, the US and the UK are actively engaged in targeting Indians. “My colleagues told me

that they had received chat requests from cult members. They sound very loving initially and there is no aggression when they approach you first,” says Keyho.

With the situation becoming alarming in Nagaland, the governor has been apprised of the potential crisis. “If needed, we will ask the Central government to ban such disturbing websites and chat apps in the northeast,” says Nagaland Deputy Chief Minister Y. Patton, referring to the social media campaign of the Chinese cult.

Keyho says the biggest problem with the Church of Almighty God is that it prefers to use force to make people accept its philosophy. “The cult is completely against our faith and beliefs and even contradicts the philosophy enunciated in the Bible,” he says. “It preaches something



This cult is aggressive, dangerous and can tempt young minds through its teachings.

Its members are fundamentalists who do not believe in the Bible, but in violence.

Zelhou Keyho, general secretary of the Nagaland Baptist Church Council

called the third testament (some reports say the cult wants the Bible to be replaced by the third testament revealed by Yang). That is completely wrong. When it cannot force someone ideologically, it unleashes violence.”

Mizoram, another Christian majority state in the northeast, has adopted a wait-and-watch policy. “We are yet to start any investigation on whether the Church of Almighty God is having any effect on our state,” says K. Lalrinthanga, president of the Baptist Church of Mizoram. “But yes, we have observed that some of our youth are quite indifferent to our church activities. As of now, we are not seeing much trouble. But, of course, we will take up the issue once the Covid-19 pandemic gets over.”

The Baptist church in Arunachal Pradesh says the state is unaffected by the influence of the cult so far. “The Baptist council has taken up the matter seriously. So we will be cautious. We have been spared so far because of our limited internet connectivity,” says Changa Chippo, general secretary of the Arunachal Pradesh Baptist Council.

Aier says the cult has spread all over northeast and it is not something new. “The only new thing is that we have now taken serious note of it,” he says. He says such cults are formed with a small group of people, but have charismatic leaders. “It is emotionally exciting and the members can be swayed,” he says. Aier says such cults from China can spread across the world and wants church leaders to step up and educate society about their dangers.

“China is a communist state and it requires all its citizens to owe allegiance to communism. So, not only Christianity, but other religions are also getting persecuted,” says Wongkhar. “But, in India, it is our duty to see that our boys do not approve of this kind of Christianity. Such cults are alien to our country.”



The royal vanishing act

Ex-King flees to unknown land". This time-warp headline takes us to medieval eras when monarchs fled their kingdoms, pursued by rebels, coup leaders, murderous kin or invading conquerors. But, this happens in 2020, involving the former King of Spain, Juan Carlos, 82. The unknown land he fled to is Abu Dhabi, where he is reportedly luxuriating in a \$13,000 a night "paparazzi-free" hotel, with his loyal lover of 40 years.

One palace writer claims Queen Sofia has not shared her bedroom with Carlos since 1976, when she caught him cheating. Another claimed this King Don Juan had 5,000 mistresses—another time-warp reminding us of Emperor Akbar and his harem of 5,000 concubines.

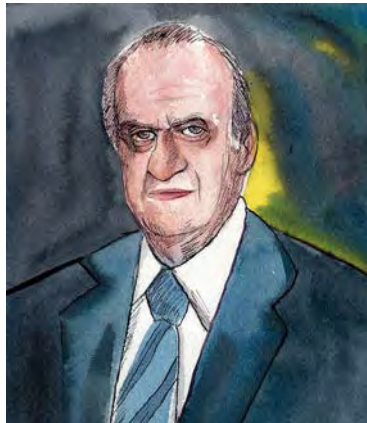
It is not companionship or carnal liaisons but a corruption scandal that drove Carlos out of his homeland. He is accused of siphoning tens of millions of dollars from a secret offshore fund linked to Saudi Arabia. Spain's supreme court prosecutor is investigating whether the former king received bribes for a \$11 billion contract awarded to a Spanish consortium for constructing a high-speed rail linking Saudi holy cities, Mecca and Medina. Spanish and Swiss authorities are investigating whether the rail contract is connected to a reported \$100 million "gift" that the late Saudi King Abdullah gave to a foundation associated with Carlos.

In 2014, public dissatisfaction spurred Carlos to abdicate in favour of his son Felipe—after a 38-year reign. Serving Spanish monarchs are immune to prosecution, but not necessarily ex-kings. Critics wonder whether Carlos fled to avoid conviction, a fate that befell his son-in-law, Inaki Urdangarin. A retired handball player, Urdangarin is currently serving a six-year jail term for embezzling \$7 billion in public funds.

Scandal has pursued the former king from the time he was a young prince. As a teenager, he killed his brother in a shooting accident. In 2006, there was a furore over allegations that he had shot dead a drunken bear after enticing it with vodka-infused honey. Most devastating was his secret, "tone deaf" extravagant hunting holiday in 2012. While Spain reeled under unemployment and austerity induced by the financial crisis, Carlos spent tens of thousands of dollars killing elephants and African buffalos in Botswana.

One former lover said Carlos financed his lavish lifestyle with "suitcases of cash" brought back from trips to Arab nations. The holiday became public only when he fractured his hip in a fall and had to be evacuated back to Madrid in a special aircraft. His 13-year-old grandson had to be hospitalised after he shot himself in the foot. People were aghast that the boy was allowed to use such lethal weapons, given the family's deadly history with firearms.

Despite his flaws and foibles, the former king has a place in people's hearts and in Spain's history. After dictator General Francisco Franco's death in 1975, King Carlos's support enabled Spain's bloodless transition from fascism to democracy. For Spain, stability is paramount then as now with regions like Catalonia demanding to break free. But Carlos is now a polarising figure. Younger generations see less justification for a luxury-loving monarchy, kept afloat with taxpayers' money. In pandemic-ravaged Spain, people are losing patience with royal misconduct. King Felipe has renounced his inheritance from his tainted father. He has also stripped his father of his annual \$2.3 lakh allowance. But that is easily shrugged away when several million dollars lie waiting in Swiss banks.



Himalayan war horse

How a covert unit, comprising mostly Tibetan commandos, has become India's frontier force against Chinese aggression

BY NAMRATA BIJI AHUJA

IT WAS A bittersweet moment for Jampa La, 83. He was moved to tears on hearing chants of 'Bharat Mata ki Jai' and 'Jai Tibet' as the mortal remains of Nyima Tenzin, wrapped in the Indian tricolour and the snow lion flag of Tibet, were brought to Leh on September 7.

Jampa is one of the first paratrooper commandos to be trained by the Indian Army as well as the Central Intelligence Agency of the United States. During the 1962 India-China war, the US helped India create a covert unit, comprising mostly Tibetan soldiers, called Special Frontier Force (SFF), also known as 22 (two-two) or Establishment 22. Jampa and 900 other Tibetan commandos were its first recruits who soon became masters of guerrilla warfare and mountain warfare. They were the first paratroopers in the Indian Army—one of the best in the world.

But Jampa could not achieve what Nyima, 51, has. Nyima lived as the son of two civilisations but died as the patriot of one. Nyima died reportedly in a landmine blast on August 30 on the south bank of Pangong Tso during an operation to thwart fresh attempts by the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) to transgress into Indian territory. Another

SFF fighter, Tenzin Loden, 24, was injured; he is admitted in the Army hospital in Leh.

On the night of August 29, the SFF foiled the PLA's ploy by occupying a dominant position near Thakung in southern Pangong Tso. It is with the help of the SFF that Indian troops have occupied heights close to the lake and Rechin La, giving them a dominant position over Chinese posts in that area for the first time since the fresh Indo-China conflict started in April.

"We are fighting a double war," said Loden's father, Yeshe Tenzin, who was an SFF commando for 22 years. "We are fighting not only to defend India's border, but also to defeat China in Tibet. It is a golden opportunity for us."

China's biggest weakness is its occupation of Tibet. If India recognises Tibet as an occupied country, it will dislodge the very basis of China's territorial claims in the Himalayas. What makes Nyima's sacrifice and Loden's valour unique is that for the first time in 58 years, India has openly declared that Tibetans are on its side and are ready to fight China. "The PLA being confronted by a Tibetan soldier standing in India's defence on the Himalayan heights is



signal enough to Beijing that there is real danger ahead," said a senior government official in New Delhi. The presence of BJP general secretary Ram Madhav at Nyima's funeral in Leh was a clear signal from New Delhi that there will be a cost to Beijing's every action. Nyima was not an Indian passport holder and proudly carried the Tibetan identity card, but he was given a guard of honour by the Indian Army in full public view. The civil society gathered to recognise his sacrifice and laid wreaths, singing Tibetan national songs and the Indian national anthem as well.

"Tibetan soldiers have been making sacrifices for 58 years but because of a more confident approach of the Modi government and internet facilities at its disposal, India has been able to recognise them this time," said Yeshe.

Notwithstanding the Dalai Lama's "middle way" approach, the Tibetan freedom struggle is being led by



DEPARTED HERO
Soldiers pay respects to Nyima Tenzin in Leh



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Nyima, 51, died in a landmine blast on August 30 during an operation to thwart attempts by the Chinese PLA to transgress into Indian territory.

commandos like Yeshe, Loden and Jampa, whose motto is do or die. Living in a Tibetan settlement for war veterans, located along a highway in Dehradun, Jampa remembers an eventful past. “We lived in a big house in Kongpo, nearly 380km east of Lhasa,” he told THE WEEK. “My parents owned large tracts of farm-

land. But the Chinese soldiers looted everything. I lost my family.” His parents Tsering and Tsering Youdon, elder sisters Sithar and Shilok and younger brother Tsewang Tamding had all died in Chinese captivity. “But my younger sister Tsamchoe survived the massacre and so did my wife Palden and son Tseten. They

are still in Tibet,” said Jampa, whose family name was Kongpo Chhankar.

One night in 1960, Jampa fled to India along with the husband of his elder sister. “We lived so close to the Indian border that it was a straight route,” he said. Jampa first came to Sikkim. “Unable to return to my country, I decided to join Establishment 22 when the Indian Army started recruiting Tibetans,” he said. “We were the first few recruits who were trained by Americans. I did not know Hindi at that time but I remember some of the Americans knew Hindi.”

With its base in Chakrata in Uttarakhand, the covert unit continues to be under the administrative control of the Directorate General of Security, which comes under the Research and Analysis Wing; its operational control lies with the Indian Army. The Tibetan commandos wear the maroon beret, trademark of India’s Special Forces, and are trained as parachute commandos. Their skills

in guerrilla and high altitude warfare are unmatched.

“Our lung power is unmatched,” said Jampa. “In these altitudes, mountain climbing and fighting the enemy go hand in hand. Scaling heights comes easy to us.” Jampa, like Nyima, rose through the ranks to become a company commander. During the 1971 war, he scaled more than 16000ft to secure the Line of Actual Control. In 1984, the SFF played a crucial role in taking control of the Siachen glacier. During the 1999 Kargil war, the unit declared victory at Tiger Hill. The Tibetan soldiers, therefore, are stationed at Siachen and Ladakh, securing the LAC and protecting their “home in exile”.

Jampa remarried in India, but the wife, Tsering Bhuti, died in 2000. He has three children—his elder daughter is in Canada, son is a Thangka art teacher in Dharamsala and his younger daughter recently got married and lives in Shimla. “My children were born Indians but we still hold our Tibetan identity. Both are our strength,” he said.

Today, the SFF has around 10,000 soldiers. Of these, 6,000 are Tibetan refugees (around one lakh Tibetans live in exile in India); the rest are Gorkhas from Nepal. Since 2009, there has been some hike in salaries and pension benefits of SFF soldiers, but they are still not on par with those in the Indian Army.

The Central Tibetan Administration, which is running the Tibetan government in exile, located next to the Dalai Lama’s abode in Dharamsala, is aware of the sacrifices being made by Tibetan soldiers along the LAC. There is an unsaid understanding that peace and resistance can co-exist.

“Tibet is my fatherland and India is my motherland,” said Lhagyari Namgyal Dolkar, member of Tibetan parliament-in-exile. “But many Indians question whether China is attacking India because of the Dalai



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SFF fighter Tenzin Loden, 24, was injured in a landmine blast on August 30; he is admitted in the Army hospital in Leh.

Lama and the Tibetans. We want to tell them that we are not a burden, instead we are your frontier force. China wants to control Ladakh just like it controlled Tibet.”

Dolkar’s uncle was also an SFF commando. “We will sacrifice our lives for India because it is our motherland, but we will also defeat China because we are fighting for Tibet,” said Dolkar. “We relate to the Indian freedom fighters because our

emotions are still raw. We are not in history books yet, we are living a freedom struggle.”

As the newly created Union territory of Ladakh faces threat from across the LAC, it is these Tibetan soldiers who know how to tease the dragon. SFF veteran Sonam La, 57, said that Tibetans were well aware of China’s tactics and strategies. “The Chinese fooled Tibetans saying they were building roads in Lhasa and slowly captured Tibet,” he said. “So, we can tell their game when they build roads along the LAC.” Sonam was an instructor at the training centre in Chakrata, where the Indian Military Academy recruits undergo training in mountain warfare and rock climbing.

Sonam’s parents had entered India through Tawang. His father joined the SFF and fought in the 1971 war. “My father got shot in the leg. He retired in 1974 on medical grounds,” said Sonam. “That is when I decided I will complete the mission my father had set out on. And that was to free Tibet.” After convincing his mother, he joined the covert unit in 1982.

The SFF’s appeal for equal pay and benefits is in court now. But there is hardly any hue and cry over it. “We are neither fighting for economic gains, nor fearful of any discomfort,” said Sonam. “Some, like my father, earned ₹400 as salary with no pension benefits, others like me get a pension of ₹28,000 per month.”

But Tibetan poet and activist Tenzin Tsundue said that to truly celebrate Nyima’s sacrifice, India must officially recognise the SFF for its 58 years of service as India’s Himalayan war horse, and immediately give equal pay scale and rank promotions for SFF soldiers. He also said that India must officially come out in support of Tibet. “This will not only help secure Ladakh but also help Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Myanmar protect their territorial integrity from Chinese aggression,” he said. “India must take the lead.”

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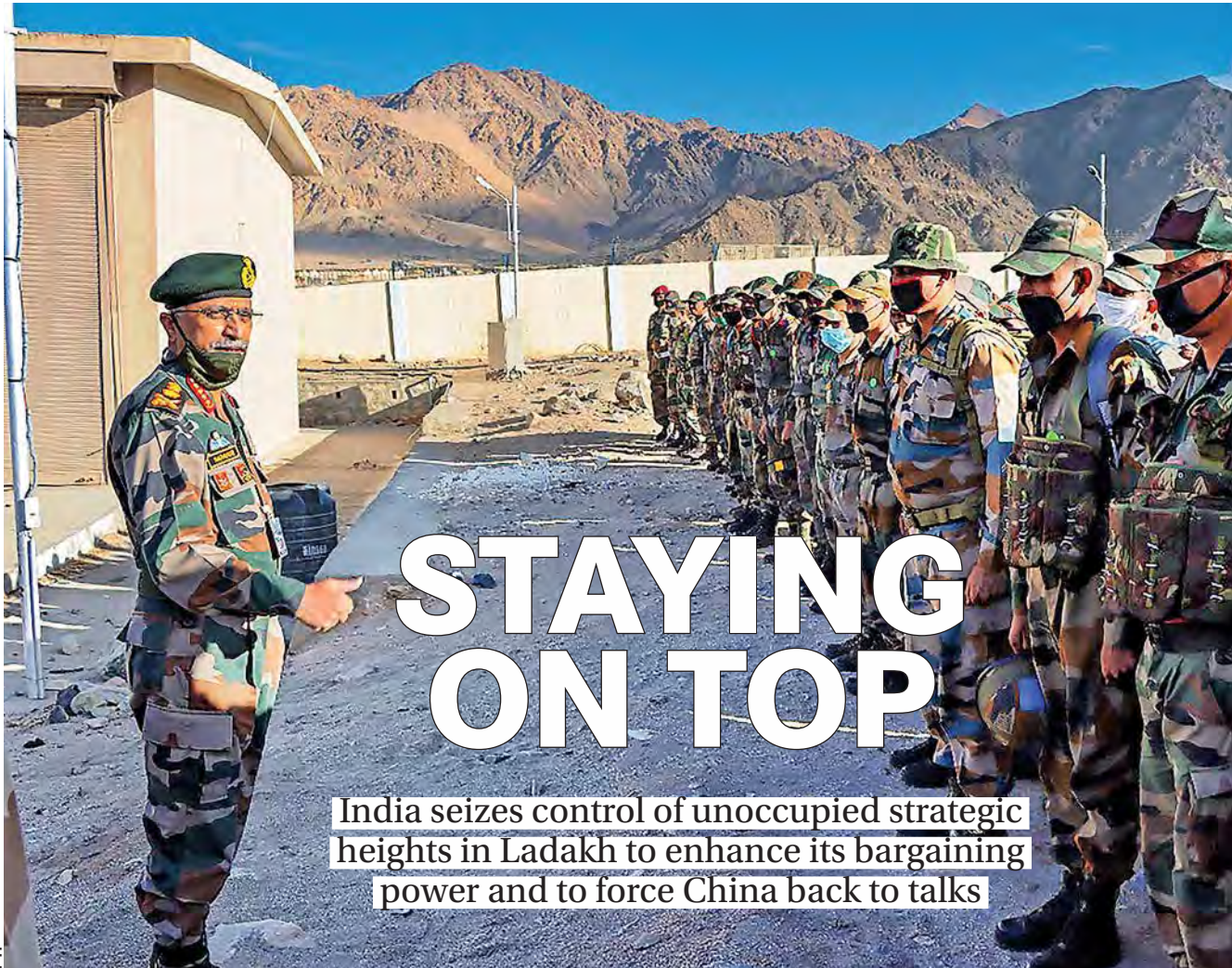
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STAYING ON TOP

India seizes control of unoccupied strategic heights in Ladakh to enhance its bargaining power and to force China back to talks

BY PRADIP R. SAGAR

ON AUGUST 29, when Indian troops thwarted an aggressive move by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) on the southern bank of Pangong Tso, Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying used a Chinese proverb to explain what happened. "A guilty man protesting conspicuously his innocence," she said. Hua's attempt to put the blame on India betrayed Beijing's nervousness about India's latest 'offensive' along the Line of Actual Control, the disputed Sino-Indian border.

China once again tried to paint India as the aggressor a few days later.

On September 7, shots were fired on the LAC for the first time since 1975 and China blamed India for attacking its guards patrolling the Mukhpari area in Ladakh's Chushul sub sector. India denied the charge and said it was the PLA which fired in the air to intimidate Indian soldiers.

The PLA appears to be in a state of consternation, especially after Indian troops managed to occupy a few critical heights in the Chushul sub sector, giving them the capability to engage the enemy's artillery guns, anti-tank guided missiles, rockets and other weapon systems. Indian units, reinforced by a regiment of T-90 battle tanks, have been de-

ployed in strength in the region, from where they can defend the vulnerable Spanggur pass.

General (retired) V.P. Malik, who led the Army during the Kargil war, said the latest moves on the LAC indicated a distinct change in how India dealt with China. "It is no longer a static policy," he said. India has the edge on at least six positions in the region including the strategic heights south of Pangong Tso and close to Spanggur Tso, Requin La, Rezang La, Thakung and Magar Hill. There are about 30 dominating heights along the 800km-long eastern Ladakh section of the LAC, and if Indian troops manage to capture those heights, it



CLOSE WATCH

Army chief General Manoj Mukund Naravane interacts with troops during his visit to review the security situation in Ladakh on September 4

posturing' in an attempt to seize the initiative and force China back to the negotiating table. The Army's new strategy is to capture the unoccupied heights in the region to enhance its bargaining power, something Indian military planners have advocated for a long time. They believe that the quid pro quo option will work for India as other tactical offensive measures like trying to dislodge the Chinese from their occupied territories could lead to an escalation.

Colonel (retd) Sanjay Pandey, an officer who had served in the mountains for almost two decades, said in mountain warfare, victory and failure depended on keeping the heights. "If you are dominating the heights, the entire area is yours. We have taken control of the ridgeline in the Chushul area, which allows our forces to dominate the Chushul bowl on our side and the Moldo sector on the Chinese side," said Pandey. "The entire Moldo garrison of the PLA is under our observation and it has rattled the Chinese. It also gives us a clear line of sight to the Lhasa-Kashgar highway, a critical artery for the PLA's logistics supply."

An officer said the mountains of the Himalayas were thick, sharp, high and steep, making any movement impossible, other than sticking to the valleys. India controls a 45km-long dirt track extending from the western bank of Pangong Tso to its southern bank near Chushul. The sector also contains a small plain which is nearly four kilometres wide, where the Indian Army has deployed its artillery guns, howitzers, infantry fighting vehicles and armoured tanks. It offers a clear view of the Spanggur gap, which China used in 1962 to launch its attacks. "Every army in the world is mortally scared of artillery. And, a range of 27km in deserts or in plains for howitzers can go upto 40km in higher altitudes. By capturing these dominating heights, vast areas controlled by China are now under the

range of Indian artillery guns," said Pandey.

After the 1962 war, the PLA had vacated some of these heights, as it was difficult to maintain them in harsh winters. With the availability of better infrastructure, the PLA has been planning to reoccupy those heights. But it was outwitted by the Special Frontier Force of India, which made a preemptive strike and took control of some of these heights.

"Taking control of these heights allows the Indian Army to destabilise the PLA. But it requires close to two divisions (40,000 troops) to sustain control, with adequate reserves to counterattack," said an officer. Surviving the winter will be an additional challenge. "If you are short of winter stocks, then your victory over the heights will go in vain."

With winter about to set in and with no resolution to the crisis in sight, both sides appear to be preparing for the long haul. "At the military level, there is a great deal of mistrust between the two sides," said Hooda. "In the past, there never was no difference in perception about the LAC in Chushul. We never heard of any transgression in Chushul. Incursions used to take place in other areas of Ladakh like Depsang, the northern bank of Pangong Tso and the Chumar area. So there was no requirement of holding each and every height. But now the Chinese have built up forces in the area. So there is nothing wrong in capturing those heights."

Hooda said the solution to the ongoing crisis depended on China as it was the PLA which was unwilling to compromise. With its new-found advantage in the heights of Ladakh, the Indian Army is preparing to stay put even in winter, when temperatures often drop below minus 30 degrees Celsius. "Staying in winter will be difficult, but not impossible," said Hooda. "We continue to stay on the Siachen glacier, which is much more difficult." ❶

will give them a definite advantage.

"It may trigger some kind of realisation among the Chinese that India is not going to accept the status quo and it may prompt them to come to the negotiating table," said former northern army commander Lieutenant General (retd) D.S. Hooda. He said the continuing standoff was not acceptable to Indian military planners. South Block officials said repeated military and diplomatic negotiations had failed to yield much as the PLA was against returning to the status quo ante of April.

As China continues to violate existing rules of engagement on the LAC, India has resorted to 'offensive



Tiger tackling dragon in style

India has banned 118 more Chinese apps, dealing another blow to China's earnings from the huge Indian market. These apps not only are profitable to the Chinese tech companies, but also pose serious issues of questionable collection of personal data of users.

In response, China said that India's 'discriminatory' measures violate World Trade Organization's rules, and it urged India to correct its "wrong practices". This is a sign that every single step taken by the government of India affects China.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's strategy to jeopardise the enemy, by cutting off its financial backing, has been successful and has already left Beijing sweating. The change in India's FDI policy in May 2020, to specifically filter out Chinese investments through automatic route, kept a check on China's domination in the Indian market. Based in a communist country, most Chinese companies have a political backing, and they have larger agendas than just profit-making. Capping FDI on Chinese companies saved the pandemic-battered Indian market from Chinese domination. The move was followed by banning 59 Chinese apps, and propagation of the Atmanirbhar Bharat campaign by the prime minister.

Approximately 14 per cent of India's imports, amounting to billions of dollars, come from China. As per Acuite Ratings & Research, India can substitute 25 per cent of these imports by locally made products in sectors such as chemicals, automotive components, bicycle parts, agro-based items, handicrafts, drug formulations, cosmetics, consumer electronics and leather-based goods. This, without any additional investment in infrastructure.

Xi Jinping sees India as an enemy, and his key foreign policy objective is to reduce India's role,

growth and presence on the international platform. It is also visible that China does not care for its international image. After a successful informal meeting of the two leaders in Mamallapuram last year, the Galwan Valley incursion is nothing short of a betrayal. China wants to wage a war against India on one hand and continue trade on another, but it will have to decide on its choices.

India's ban on apps and restriction on Chinese investment have led to similar demands in many European countries. Germany has already suspended an automatic route for Chinese investment. Japan, Malaysia and Australia have plans to divert their trade relations from China. The UK passed a new citizenship law for residents

of Hong Kong, thereby making it easier for them to get British citizenship. Australia is on its way to formulating a similar law.

With strong support from the US and other global players, and strengthening of the MSMEs, toy, leather and automobile industries,

India is capable of becoming self-reliant, and, more importantly, free from depending on China.

If the strategies were not working, the Chinese defence minister, General Wei Fenghe, would not have insisted on meeting his Indian counterpart thrice in the last 80 days. China's attempt to change the status quo on the southern bank of Pangong Tso, even as military-level talks are under way, is a clear violation of agreements and will not be tolerated at any cost.

Maintaining a peaceful yet firm relation with a neighbour as aggressive as China is like walking a tightrope, yet the tiger is tackling the dragon remarkably well. How can we trust the Chinese who are 'seeking peace,' when in reality they are working to get a piece of Nepal, Bhutan, Taiwan, Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, Pakistan, India, Bhutan and further more!



PLAN TO SUPPORT YOUR CHILD'S ASPIRATIONS

BY D.P. SINGH

Chief Business Officer,
SBI Mutual Fund

AS PARENTS, one thing that you would want for your child is for him/her to get the best of everything in life. The environment that kids are exposed to today is drastically different to what you experienced in your childhood. While there are many more opportunities for kids these days, the world is also getting that much more competitive and fiercer, be it in education or sports. That's why you would want holistic development for your child so that he/she is prepared for every future challenge.

Traditionally, you as a parent would only end up planning for your child's education. Given the kind of exposure that children get today, they are likely to explore unconventional career paths and aspire to become a coder, a gamer, an artist, an entrepreneur at a young age or make a career in sports. All these unconventional career paths do not yield immediate and regular income and thus need better financial planning at parents' end.

Today if your child wants to follow his / her passion of becoming a professional athlete or enter the creative field, it will require significant financial commitment on your end. The cost of the equipment's and training required for these career paths can be significantly high and is over and above the normal education cost. Moreover, the education landscape has also drastically changed. Today, online learning has become a norm and gadgets such as a laptop, a tablet or smartphone has become a necessity. And this becomes an ongoing expense as technology soon becomes obsolete and needs upgrades. Hence, you as the new age parents need to factor in a lot more than just school and college fees for your child. In order to give wings to your child's aspirations, financial support is of utmost importance.

But are you prepared for it?

While its essential to let your child dream and pursue his/her passion, it is equally crucial for you to have an

investment plan. Like for every other goal in your life, preparing an investment plan to meet the financial needs that may arise at different stages of your child's growth, can help avoid stress in future. For this it is essential that you start early and invest in appropriate investment avenues that have the potential for long-term wealth creation.

You may have planned for these expenses through traditional investment avenues but at the same time investments in market linked instruments such as mutual funds are also needed. That's not it, you should invest in your child's name so that you don't end up disturbing these savings in times of need and the money is only utilized for the intended purpose. Premature withdrawals from the fund allocated for your child can disturb the target corpus that you plan to achieve. Children's Funds offered by mutual funds are one avenue which can be looked at for long term wealth creation. These funds also have a lock-in period, say of 5 years, to discourage early withdrawals and to help you stay committed to the goal.

You should start investing at the earliest and in a systematic manner as it can help you build the required corpus by investing smaller amount on a regular basis. This is because the longer you stay invested, higher is the compound effect, eventually helping you build a higher corpus. In addition to staying invested for long-term, what can further accelerate the building of your target corpus is SIP Top-up. With rise in your income levels, the amount that you set aside for your child should also rise.

Children's Fund offer different plans which cater to different investor risk profiles. The decision to choose from either an equity-oriented fund or debt-oriented fund should be based on your risk profile, investment horizon and the corpus you intend to build. You can invest in these funds until the child turns 18. So, if you are starting early and have a longer investment horizon it is advisable to invest in a fund that has higher allocation to equities.

Rising inflation can adversely impact your investments plans. Therefore, investment in equities can act as a hedge against rising inflation by generating inflation adjusted returns. Historically, the education cost inflation has been higher than overall inflation. And now with education landscape rapidly changing, education cost is also expected to move up at a much higher pace. Thus, systematic and longer-term investments in equities can help in mitigating the adversities of rising inflation and also help beat short-term market volatility. It can also fulfil your dreams to be able to send your children to the best of schools, colleges, and foreign universities. So, applying what Swami Vivekanand said in the investment parlance "arise, awake and stop not your investments till your financial goal is reached". The need of the hour is to start investing now!



WORK &

In a pandemic-struck world, some jobs have faded out, while others have become hot property

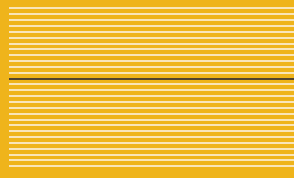
BY ANJULY MATHAI



SHANU PRAKASH CHANDRA

HOT JOB
Anitha K.V., an
agronomist from
Bengaluru

THE VIRUS



H

ashicorp CEO Mitchell Hashimoto recently asked his employees whether they knew

the difference between typing ok, ok, or ok.. Not knowing the difference in today's world, he said, is equivalent to being illiterate. According to him, ok. has a negative implication while ok.. reflects uncertainty. Chat literacy, like many other things, is probably a side effect of the pandemic. It is just one of the ways in which Covid-19 has turned the world topsy-turvy.

As a result, we have all gotten "cyber-struck". Zoom rooms, remote fitness and online concerts have become the norm. Education got interactive with video games teaching you the basics of trigonometry. Apps like Krisp and Muzzle streamlined video conferencing without screen pop-ups and background noise. Companies like Twitter and Shopify made remote working more or less permanent. Gaming platforms like JetSynthesys raised crores in funding.

In a way, the virus has proved to be the tipping point of digitalisation. "We have seen two years' worth of digital transformation in two months," said Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella in May. "If you embrace digital, then no matter what job you do, it will be a hot job," says Ashutosh Khanna, senior client partner, Global Consumer Markets, Korn Ferry International. "Take marketing. If you don't know how to run a digital campaign or organise your company's data, then you might know how to make the world's best television commercial, but you are not relevant anymore." According to Rohit Kale, who heads the India operations of

Spencer Stuart, the role of a chief digital officer is becoming redundant because digital has infiltrated every aspect of work.

The Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy estimates that 27 million youth in India lost their jobs in a single month (April). Hiring did pick up 35 percentage points from April to June, as per a recent LinkedIn report. However, the market recovery is expected to remain "fairly flat". Competition for jobs had doubled over six months, with an average of 90 job seekers on the platform in January increasing to 180 in June. Those in sectors like recreation and travel were 6.8 times more likely to look for jobs in a different sector. The most popular jobs were those of a software engineer, business development manager, sales manager, business analyst and content writer, with the top skills being JavaScript, Structured Query Language, sales management, team leadership and recruiting.

Khanna says that in future, everyone is going to have multiple careers. "If you are a journalist, you might not remain a journalist all your life," he says. "You are [essentially] a content person. If you don't have that perspective, you might have a career problem down the line. Increasingly, it is about knowing which skill-sets you want to acquire. If you are not investing in yourself, [you will become redundant]. Why is nobody spending money to re-skill themselves? Show me a post-graduate who came out of college in the 1990s and who, in the last seven or eight years, has expressed an interest in learning how to write code. If you don't know how to code, you will become a fossil in five years."

Hiring patterns, too, have changed.



DIGITAL BOOM

Supraja Ashok, who works with Social Beat, says that digital marketing is challenging and exciting because there are many verticals to it

Artificial intelligence and machine learning have revolutionised the hiring process and increased the competition for jobs. "With data-driven algorithms, multiple rigorous parameters can be set to learn extensively about a wider pool of candidates and proactively reach out to them early," says Vikram Ahuja, co-founder, Talent 500 by ANSR. NLP-powered chat bots are enabling recruiters to set up interactive sessions with multiple candidates and thus aiding 'contact-less hiring'.

Post pandemic, instead of hiring new talent, many companies are



hiring specialists as advisers or on a project basis, says Jyoti Bowen Nath, managing partner, Claricent Partners. Also, Covid-19 has raised the issue of ethical treatment of employees and gig workers (those hired temporarily). According to one survey, 70 per cent of gig workers were not satisfied with the support they received from their employers during the pandemic.

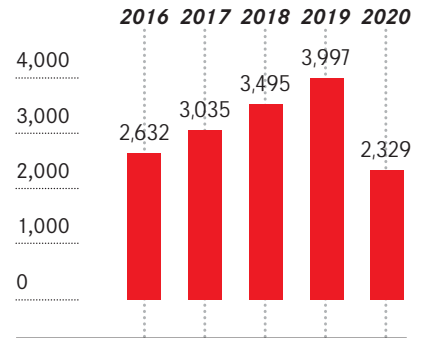
Another factor that is being widely discussed, especially as tech jobs take centre-stage, is the importance of man-machine collaboration. “The health crisis gave people a

greater appreciation for the fact that humans and technology are more powerful together than either can be on their own,” states a Deloitte report. “Consider how telemedicine, manufacturing, education and even grocery delivery drew on the power of integrated human-machine teams during the crisis.”

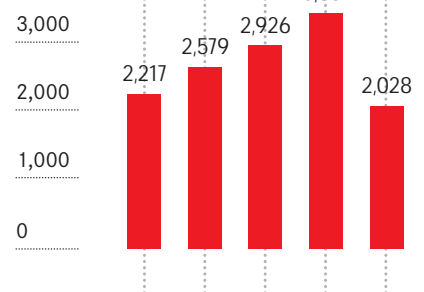
Professor Amit Karna, Chair – Placement, IIM Ahmedabad, says that what recruiters are looking for today are candidates with learning agility. “If there were two candidates, one with greater intelligence and the other who can adapt more, the

CENTRAL REVENUE (APRIL-JULY)

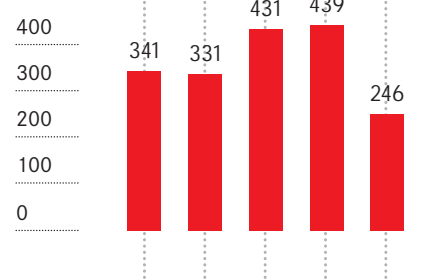
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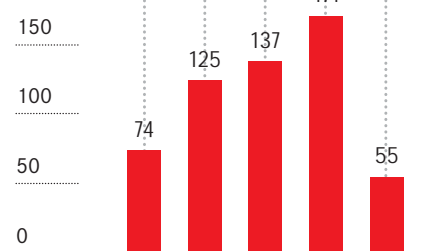
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NON-TAX REVENUE ₹ BILLION



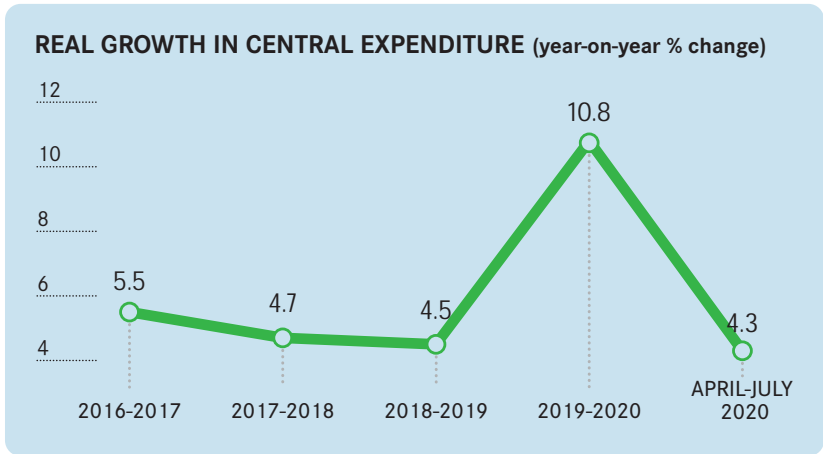
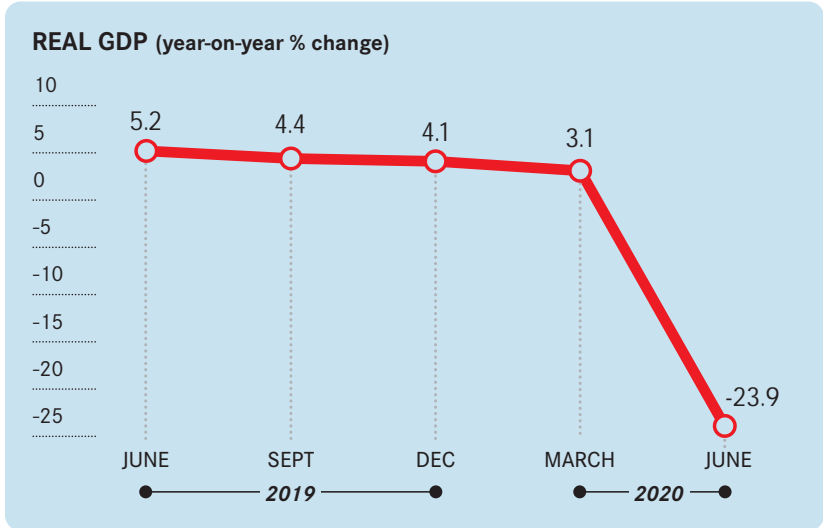
NON-DEBT CAPITAL RECEIPTS ₹ BILLION



second would probably get picked,” he says. In this uncertain scenario, students too are anxious about their future. “We are a little sceptical about the start-up space which, we feel, will take three to four years to recover,” says Akanksha Priya, a second-year student at IIM Ahmedabad. “As a batch, we prefer stable companies who will not revoke offers. Product management roles are in high demand, since tech has not been impacted much by the pandemic. Even those without a background in technology are taking courses to gain some experience. We are also optimistic about consulting. Registration for various competitions [on campus] has increased because students are hoping to get Pre-Placement Offers (PPO) from companies if they win these competitions. Even if they don’t want the job, they want a backup for more bargaining power. Everyone is focusing on building up their CVs.”

According to Manish Bahl, assistant vice president, Centre for the Future of Work—Asia Pacific, Cognizant, the pandemic will create a whole new category of jobs. “Covid-19 has disrupted every aspect of our work, life and society,” he says. “We still don’t know how this will end, but we do know that the world that emerges post-virus will look and feel incredibly different. The virus forced a reckoning of how we view, perform and reward work. The next five years will bring more change in employment trends than the previous 20.”

Some of the jobs he mentions are: Chief Cleanliness Officer (CCO): Covid-19 has changed how people see the world. With this new perspective, they suddenly realise that everything around them is unclean and potentially unsafe. The CCO will lead the global clean regime movement by leveraging AI technologies to monitor the cleanliness of physical assets and initiate automated cleanli-



SOURCE CMIE

ness actions as needed.

CEO—Cashless Society: Consumers are increasingly avoiding touching and using cash. The CEO will use AI tools to analyse and evaluate cashless data, prepare forecast reports, and take the necessary steps in moving us towards a cashless society.

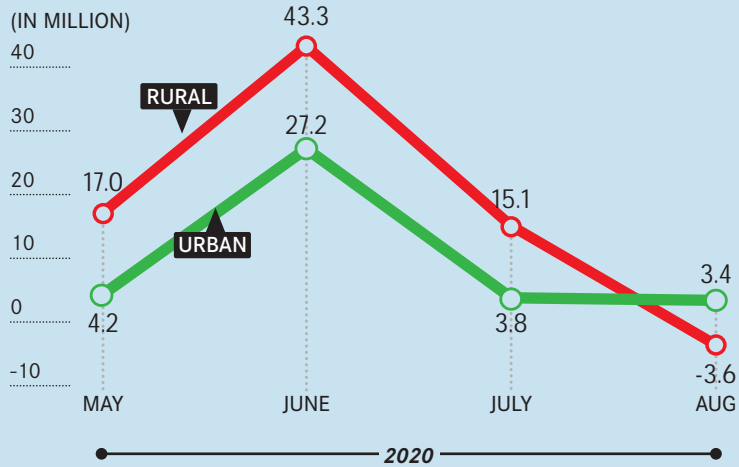
Financial Wellness Coach: People are already struggling to manage their finances and agonising over how to best plan for a post-Covid world. The financial wellness coach will use AI platforms to ensure the financial well-being of customers by translating their personal needs and

life goals into financial targets.

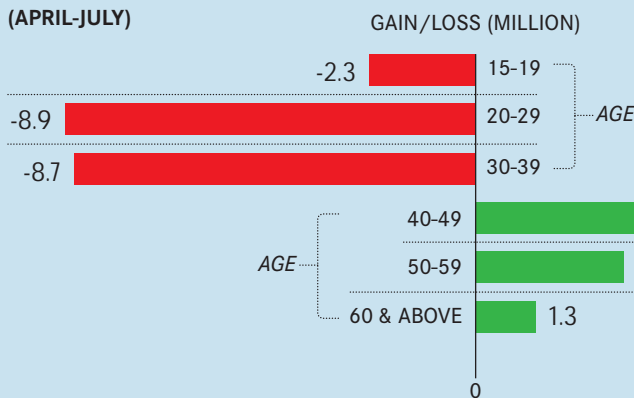
Give-to-Get Trust Manager: Give-to-Get is all about the data customers give about themselves—personal, financial and transactional—and what they receive in return from a company (better service and rewards). The role of a trust manager will be to develop and manage the positive give-to-get trust framework for customers to meet their expectations from brands.

WFH Facilitator: The work-from-home (WFH) facilitator will oversee the integration and engagement of the remote workforce. The facilitator will be responsible for ensuring

MONTH-ON-MONTH REVIVAL IN EMPLOYMENT (URBAN-RURAL)



EMPLOYMENT IN AGE CATEGORIES



SALARIED JOBS (IN MILLION)

2019-2020 JULY 2020

86.1 **67.2**

NON-SALARIED JOBS (IN MILLION)

2019-2020 JULY 2020

317.6 **325.6**

WAGE BILL

(BASED ON DATA FROM 1,560 COMPANIES)

INCREASE IN SALARIES
(year-on-year % change)

JUNE 2020

2.9

BANKS 16.6

SECURITIES BROKING COMPANIES 13.5

MANUFACTURING -7

TEXTILES -29

LEATHER -22.5

AUTOMOBILE ANCILLARIES -21

AUTOMOBILES -18.6

TOURISM -30

HOTELS AND RESTAURANTS -20.5

ROAD TRANSPORT -27.6

EDUCATION -28

REAL ESTATE -21

TELECOM 10.7

GRAPHICS SREEMANIKANDAN S./RESEARCH KARTHIK RAVINDRANATH

that we have the right technologies, HR processes and culture to make ubiquitous remote work a soaring success.

To some, these jobs might seem futuristic, but they are coming. In the meanwhile, based on our interaction with various business heads, industry experts and recruiters, THE WEEK lists 10 jobs that, in the post-pandemic scenario, have become highly desirable.

The logistics sector, for example, has seen an increase in job creation due to the boom in e-commerce, says Sumit Kumar, vice president, NETAP, TeamLease. According to him, there

is also an increased demand for health care professionals and, in the pharma and biotechnology sector, for more scientists for research and development.

In the education sector, the online learning boom has created a need for content developers, content writers and virtual trainers. The increase in digital payment transactions has led to more field sales professionals being hired for merchandiser enrolments. Greater adoption of technology and digitalisation means a greater demand for cyber-security specialists, data analysts, data scientists and AI and machine learning experts.

If you are in these jobs, Covid-19 might just have made your prospects brighter. If not, you might be hoping that things will go back to the way they were. They probably will not. Some changes are going to be permanently etched into the fabric of our society. During World War II, many people thought that wartime surveillance and encrypted communication would last only until the end of the war. They were wrong. And if you do not want to hear those two brutal words immortalised by President Donald Trump in *The Apprentice*, it is time you figure out ways to stay relevant in the curious world that is being birthed by a pandemic. 📌

THE BIG 10

Jobs that have become highly desirable in the post-pandemic scenario

01 DATA SCIENTIST/ DATA ANALYST

Every business generates large volumes of data. For enterprises to succeed in today's world, they need to know how to analyse data and find patterns in it. These patterns help predict future outcomes, says John Kurien, co-founder and CEO of Corz.io, a start-up focusing on cloud cost optimisation and management for enterprises.

According to him, there are two parts to this job. One is that of a data scientist in the purest sense of the term. These are specialised people who create "data models" or "algorithms" that determine how to identify patterns and predict future outcomes. The second part is that of a data science engineer. They are engineers who are well-versed with the technology behind big data and machine learning implementations. The second set implements the algorithms derived by data scientists.

Ajoy Raj, senior data scientist and co-founder of FieldNotes (PlanQube in India), a customer engagement platform that uses AI to manage leads and contacts, says that the demand for data scientists has exploded because now we have the tools to make it a viable business.

Tanmai Choudhary, 22, who joined the home improvement company Lowe's as a data analyst in August, says that what excites him about the job is the kind of possibilities it offers. "Job opportunities in data analysis are huge," he says. "You will never have a problem switching jobs if you are in this field."



Job opportunities in data analysis are huge. You will never have a problem switching jobs if you are in this field.

—Tanmai Choudhary, data analyst, Lowe's

02 DIGITAL MARKETING SPECIALIST

According to the World Economic Forum, an estimated 70 per cent of new value created in the economy over the next decade will be based on digitally enabled platform business models. Therefore, the scope for digital marketing is huge. A digital marketing specialist is responsible for organising online campaigns, performing consumer research and selling a product using social media, Web analytics, email marketing and search engine optimisation.

"My expertise is in creative ideation, and I believe creativity and my passion for marketing are what makes a career in digital marketing suited for me," says Supraja Ashok, 20, who completed her BCom with a specialisation in marketing from M.O.P. Vaishnav College, Chennai. She is currently working with the digital marketing agency, Social Beat. She says that digital marketing is challenging and exciting because there are so many verticals to it, whether it is

03 CHIEF HR OFFICER

In the post-Covid scenario, the role and scope of HR officers have increased multiple-fold. It is important for HR officers to know how to reorganise policies and processes to adapt to the new reality. "The pandemic has transformed HR and made companies go through a steep learning curve," says Shantanu Jha, senior vice president and HR Lead, Global Delivery, CDO and India HR, Cognizant. "It has put HR at the forefront of crisis management. At Cognizant, too, we have invested substantial effort to facilitate a rapid shift to seamless remote working and ensure business continuity. We have moulded robust contingency plans and expanded virtual tools to transition to a fully remote workplace where employees had the necessary infrastructure to work and deliver."

He says that HR leaders should be able to challenge the business and institutionalise core people processes. According to him, some of the skill-sets one needs to do well in HR are:

- Solution orientation
- Crisis management and creative problem-solving
- Data, analytics and technology expertise
- Business acumen and understanding of the digital technology market, especially virtual and augmented reality
- Design thinking with empathy and emotional intelligence
- Virtual communication



content creation, targeting clients through digital tools or working with a multitude of brands.

Consumer centricity is the key to digital marketing, says a digital marketing specialist with a multinational who did not want to be named. Consumers might be involved with one thing today and bored with it tomorrow. There is huge scope to cater to their needs. Digital marketing and data are changing the world. According to her, there will be no chief marketing or sales officers in future. These roles will be integrated into that of a chief growth officer, who will be responsible to bring about disruption which, in future, is going to be instrumental.

04 FULL-STACK ENGINEER

A full-stack engineer has expertise on the front-end (interface) as well as the back-end (logic and data) of an application. LinkedIn describes it as the Swiss army knife of tech roles. The position has become increasingly important over the years, says a full-stack engineer based in Bengaluru. Before the advent of cloud, a single programming language was used for both front-end and back-end to build monolithic apps. Then, user experience was not as important as functionality. Now, it has become immensely important. So, front-end and back-end roles have gotten segregated. With new-age start-ups, the front-end guys are responsible for the user experience and the data comes from the back-end. In this scenario, someone who is familiar with both front-end and back-end technology is of tremendous value.

Also, earlier, if a team was responsible for developing a software in six months, now they have to do it in two weeks. In something called agile methodology, decision making has become much more rapid. Therefore, the importance of full-stack engineers has increased multiple-fold.

While core technology companies may still prefer engineers with in-depth knowledge in a specific technology, start-ups and consulting firms want engineers who know a little bit of everything.

05 BLOCKCHAIN DEVELOPER

Edureka defines a blockchain developer as one responsible for developing and optimising blockchain protocols, crafting the architecture of blockchain systems, developing smart contracts and web apps using blockchain technology. According to the NASSCOM-Avasant Blockchain Report 2019, globally, blockchain revenue is concentrated in three key industries: banking, manufacturing and financial services. In India, BFSI (banking, financial services and insurance) is the leading industry using blockchain, but other industries like health care, retail and manufacturing are catching up. “The Indian blockchain ecosystem is at a vibrant and exciting stage—the government (in its dual role as consumer and regulator) enterprises, service providers, start-ups, academia and investors—are making significant efforts to evolve and enhance the blockchain value proposition,” stated the report.

Demand for blockchain is growing at over 40 per cent per quarter, it says. There is a shortage of skilled blockchain developers, with only 45,000 to 60,000 of them being industry-ready globally. There has also been a rapid growth in blockchain start-ups, with more than 3,100 of them emerging since 2009, focusing on areas like infrastructure, financial services, data analytics, mining, social network and content management. A blockchain developer should have a thorough knowledge of blockchain, its application and architecture, data structures, cryptography and web development.

“SSVM Institutions - Nurturing Learners into Future Leaders”

The focus on innovation and achieving excellence in education has resulted in a few institutions standing apart as torch bearers of excellence and occupying the pride of place in the academic landscape. SSVM Educational Institutions at Coimbatore have emerged as one such institution which has made a distinct mark in the educational ecosystem at the national and international levels.

The growth of SSVM is a saga of inspiration and perseverance. It had a humble beginning as a play school “Shree Sarasswathi Vidhyaah Mandheer” in Mettupalayam in 1998. In little more than two decades, it has emerged as a highly sought after educational brand much to the astonishment of the academic community.

The school has given birth to a day cum residential school affiliated to CBSE, then SSVM Matriculation Higher Secondary School and Athma-Seva-a Charitable organisation for differently-abled children at Mettupalayam. SSVM has further stretched its wings by starting SSVM World School and SSVM School of Excellence at Coimbatore.

To prepare the students for professional courses SSVM has put in place SSVM PREPVERSITY, handled by highly qualified and experienced professionals, for cracking NEET / IIT-JEE, CPT, NATA, AISE and AISSCE examinations. Smart class rooms and Language Labs stimulate the learners to get multifarious life-oriented skills.

The driving force behind this growth has been Dr. Manimekalai Mohan, Founder, SSVM Institutions.

“Children learn best by experiencing, exploring and discovering knowledge themselves. We continue to shape lives to the best and ensure that the students walk out of the portals of SSVM as enlightened and worthy human beings.”

- Dr. Manimekalai Mohan
Founder, Mg. Trustee & Correspondent
SSVM Institutions



Her clarity of vision and foresight have given shape to each and every aspect of learning. She has ensured that the Institutions embrace the evolving changes in the educational scenario with alacrity and offer an enriching teaching - learning experience.



According to her, the New Education Policy (NEP-2020) would be a game-changer to align with global standards. The SSVM Institutions are ready to adapt new policies meant to improve educational standards and enhance the human resources.

The focus has been on providing students a joyful learning experience. The school believes that students make progress in diverse areas at their own pace and space. It works closely with parents as learning partners to support their child's unique learning journey. The teaching-learning process is designed to instil self-confidence, individuality, leadership qualities, moral and ethical values among students.

Dr. Sri Goutham, an alumnus who is a Govt. Doctor and pursuing MD Community Medicine at PSG Institute of Medical Sciences and Research, says, “SSVM had been a phenomenal experience. Our teachers were always passionate & supportive. We got a lot of field experience from the very beginning and that has paved the way for us to deal with a wide range of situations at home and society.”

Picturesque Campus

SSVM Institutions are set in sylvan surroundings where total tranquillity prevails. The green and eco-friendly campuses gladden the heart and energise the mind for a relentless academic pursuit in the lap of nature.

The highly dedicated teachers of this institution are its pillars of strength. As part of their student-centric approach, faculty members pay individual attention to every student and help them cope with the demands of modern day education with ease and interest. They bestow parental care on all students on the realization that the Institutions are home away from home. They enable students to have strong roots in tradition, embrace modernism with ease, acquire national outlook and become global citizens.

The boarders have unique facilities in the well ventilated, brightly lit dormitories. Each mess is



Adding melody to learning with music classes

equipped with modern cooking devices to prepare nourishing, nutritious food in a scientific and the most hygienic way.

Pandemic preparedness

In the post-Covid-19 situation, SSVM Institutions are fully leveraging technology to continue academic processes without interruption. They are meticulously following the Standard Operating Procedure and protocols to make all the campuses safe and secure for one and all.

Each of these Institutions has a dispensary where regular staff nurses are permanently posted and a doctor makes a daily visit to the Residential Campus twice a day. In case any intensive medical attention is needed, the students concerned will be immediately referred to a specialty hospital situated in Coimbatore city, close by.

All-round personality

The futuristic facilities at the campus complement the single-minded focus on the holistic development of learners. Outdoor and indoor games like basketball, archery, swimming, horse-riding and chess are designed to mould students into all-rounded personality. Their students have won many laurels in State, National and International sports events.

Another alumnus Ram Balaji doing his Aero- Physics at - IIT Chennai has this to say: "SSVM is a place where I found my niche. I have experienced a community of support, enduring friendships, a chance to enjoy personal success in numerous campus activities and explore national and international culture with values."

Yoga and meditation classes prepare students to cope with challenges and bring out spiritual nature.



Enabling innovation and joyful learning

Academic Achievements

SSVM Institutions have consistently achieved excellent results in AISSE & AISSCE (CBSE X & XII) Board Examinations and scaled new heights in terms of achieving academic accolades.

It is captured in the following statement of alumnae: Sitara Karthikeyan & Agasthiya Karthikeyan, ace Photographers "We love what we do, and we are doing what we love. The best thing about SSVM is knowing you are preparing yourself to make a difference in the world. Thank you, SSVM, for what we are today. "



Celebrity Abhishek Bachchan interacting with SSVM Students

SSVM Institutions provide National and International exposure to students through organizing expeditions within the country and beyond like STEM, International MUN-Conferences, International Summer-School Programmes, University visits, Uniform-Services, Republic-Day Camps-New Delhi, and so on.

Their alumni and alumnae vouch for their performance and act as their torch-bearers of glory.

SSVM caters to every student's learning needs and provides a happy and purposeful introduction to learning. Just as each child has different interests, so is an individual's learning style. "The goal of education for the future is to focus on ensuring that learners would be problem solvers, decision - makers and enablers. SSVM shares such a vision to shape our learners into Innovators" says the Trustee, Mr. S. Mohandoss.

For details contact :

SSVM[®] Coimbatore & Mettupalayam,
INSTITUTIONS Tamil Nadu, India.

Ph : +91 93444 51888, 93644 54884 & 93645 11111
www.ssvminstitutions.ac.in

E-mail: info@ssvminstitutions.in

06 LEAD GENERATION SPECIALIST

A lead generation specialist is responsible for identifying and attracting potential clients to an organisation. It was one of the jobs listed in India's Top Emerging Jobs 2020 report on LinkedIn. "Online lead generation includes everything from search engine prominence to social media and email marketing," stated the report. "A lead generation specialist will weigh the best approach and deliver the best value

to the business."

The responsibilities of a lead generation specialist include handling enquiries from clients, ensuring business goals are met and comprehending the products and services of a company. Some of the skill-sets one requires are an understanding of key communication techniques, strong strategy-building and verbal skills and an ability to find digital solutions to complex problems. Good problem

solving and critical thinking skills, too, will come in handy.

According to LinkedIn, lead generation, which involves both marketing and sales, now ranks among the highest priorities for many organisations. "The higher the quality of the leads that are identified, the more efficiently a good sales team can convert them into paying customers," stated the report.

07 VIRTUAL TRAINER

Online learning has witnessed an unprecedented boom since the pandemic. The online education market is expected to grow by \$14.33 billion from 2020 to 2024, as per a market research report by Technavio. In such a scenario, the demand for virtual trainers has increased in leaps and bounds.

Virtual trainers need to constantly keep themselves updated about the latest technology innovations in education, says Dr Indira V.M.D, an educator with the online learning platform, Lido. She says that the number of virtual trainers has gone up post pandemic and schools are witnessing a higher attrition rate of teachers because many of them are moving online.

There is also a higher standard for virtual trainers set by several ed-tech companies. "All our teachers are rigorously screened with less than 1 per cent acceptance rates," says Aamit Khanna, who heads corporate communications at Lido. Teaching is highly personalised with advanced algorithms matching the child to the most suitable tutor. It is no longer static, with child engagement levels and retention metrics giving teachers real-time feedback on their performance.

08 SPECIALIST IN DATA PRIVACY LAW

The need for privacy specialists has increased greatly in a short span of time, even though data privacy and protection laws in the country are at a nascent stage, says Supratim Chakraborty, partner, Khaitan & Co, and a specialist in data privacy law. Post Covid-19, advice relating to aspects of data privacy and new-age technologies has seen an exponential rise as there has been a major shift in most organisations to the digital way of transacting business.

According to him, the job involves training members of an organisation on planning and execution of privacy programmes; understanding products, services and organisational plans; providing inputs to ensure compliance with data privacy and protection requirements; and helping organisations respond to regulatory queries. "It is an exciting and challenging role," he says. "One has to be abreast of domestic and international developments. An understanding of foreign laws from jurisdictions having mature privacy laws plays a key role in honing the skills of a specialist."

"With the Personal Data

Protection Bill 2019 and several other legislative developments in the works, there will be a massive change in the way organisations will need to ensure compliance with the new legal regime," says Chakraborty. "This will undoubtedly create a great demand both in law firms as well as companies which will translate into a mammoth requirement for specialists in this field. In fact, many organisations are already staffing people to meet these demands. We also observe a great deal of re-skilling happening in order to meet the present and upcoming requirements."



The need for privacy specialists has increased greatly in a short span of time, even though data privacy and protection laws in the country are at a nascent stage.

—Supratim Chakraborty,
partner, Khaitan & Co

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HEALTH CARE MANAGER

The health care sector is on the brink of an explosive growth. One of its pioneering concepts is digital health, including testing, diagnostics, health cards and telemedicine. As all the medical records and diagnostic results are becoming digitised, hospitals need administrators to handle the data. In this scenario, the role of a health care manager, who can handle medico-legal concerns, administrative responsibilities and doctors' accessibility, becomes exceedingly important.

"Health care administrators are responsible for the [smooth functioning] of medical programmes, optimising costs, fulfilling doctor requirements, handling public relations and patient needs," says Ambili Vijayaraghavan, COO, Aster Medcity. "For example, are patients discharged quickly without having to wait? It involves a lot of interacting with patients, doctors and team members to plan how to take the hospital to the next level."

According to her, hospital administration has become more streamlined. Over the last 15 years, many institutes like IIHMR and Tata Institute of Social Science (TISS) have started offering specialised courses in health care management, she says.

Vijayaraghavan says that post Covid-19, there has been some changes in the management of process flows. Stricter infection control measures and proper zoning of the hospital have been instituted. Many new protocols have come into force. "We also need to be trained in-house to know how we need to change processes," she says. As Dr T.R. John, chief of medical services at Aster Medcity, says: "The role of a health care manager is a relatively new concept in India unlike in the west. Earlier, we used to have doctor-managers. Now, it has become more professional. It is definitely an up-and-coming field."



I want to become an entrepreneur in the farming field ultimately, but right now, I am looking to get a job, maybe as a lab analyst, to earn money.

—**Shweta K.**, student,
University of Agricultural
Sciences, Dharwad,
Karnataka

10

AGRONOMIST

An agronomist is responsible for cultivating crops, protecting plants and ensuring a higher yield. Talking about how the pandemic will create new opportunities in this field, Subramanyam Sreenivasaiah, CEO, Ascent Consulting Services, says, "Globalisation, until now, meant procuring any commodity from anywhere in the globe and cost seemed to be the only driver and not the supply chain. The new normal will bring in challenges for governments to keep adequate food grains and other associated commodities. Production needs to be doubled globally to meet hunger needs and would get further complicated when supply chain restrictions are in place, more so when the goods are perishable."

There is going to be a high demand for manpower in this field because agriculture is still the main occupation of a majority of the population and we need more quantities of food for internal consumption, says V.R. Kumar, editor-in-chief of the agricultural magazine, *Agro India*. "Agricultural production is now happening in a more scientific manner with students trained by agricultural colleges and research institutes under the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR), the coordinating body," he says.

"I want to become an entrepreneur in the farming field ultimately, but right now, I am looking to get a job, maybe as a lab analyst, to earn money," says Shweta K., 23, who is doing her MSc in Soil Science from the University of Agricultural Sciences, Dharwad, Karnataka. Anitha K.V., an agriculture student who is doing her PhD on the impact of different levels of the NPK fertiliser on brown-top millet, says that it has always been her dream to pursue a research job in agriculture. "I used to help my father with sowing and transplanting ragi and paddy, and weeding and harvesting them," she says. During the pandemic, though, she was in a quandary. "I wondered whether I should give up my PhD and try for a job, because I was scared I would not get one."

Lives without livelihood

Pandemic-induced job losses have thrown lakhs of middle-class Indian lives into disarray. The only redemption is a quick economic turnaround

BY K. SUNIL THOMAS

Ravishankar Gopal (name changed) thought all was hunky dory when lockdown was announced and he was asked to work from home. Working for a leading IT firm in Chennai on a project, he was paid his March salary in full and on time. Things will be fine in a couple of weeks as the lockdown controls the spread of Covid-19, he thought.

He could not have been more wrong. Once his project got over in April, HR gave him two options. Either wait on the bench (IT industry parlance for employees who are not working on any project) without salary or take three month's salary and quit.

Gopal put in his papers. His home and vehicle loans and daughter's school fees were all hanging above his head. "Waiting on the bench was like working and then going home without salary," he said. "Compared with that, the three month's salary was far better—I managed my expenses with it till July." Gopal is hopeful of finding another job soon,

even if the pay is three-fourths of what he was drawing earlier.

Multiply Gopal's woes by millions, across India's towns and villages, and you have a very big, very human tragedy unfolding. A whopping 12 crore jobs were wiped out right after the lockdown was imposed in late March. While the numbers have been 'improving'—job losses came down quickly to nine crore in May, 2.6 crore in June and around a crore in both July and August—the bigger worry is the story in between. A survey by the Tamil Nadu government a couple of months ago found that in 53 per cent of households at least one person had lost his job since the pandemic hit. Worse, average monthly household income had fallen by half.

There is more bad news in the fine print. The jobs that did come back are mostly in the informal sector. This means that many white collar or "office" work that sustains India's middle class, on a steady prospering trajectory since liberalisation in the early 1990s, have been wiped out. And many would find it difficult to



AYUSH GOEL

UNCERTAINTY AHEAD

Many white collar jobs have been wiped out during the lockdown phase

find a matching job quickly.

"Loss in salaried jobs are mounting," said Mahesh Vyas, MD & CEO of the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy, in an exclusive interview with THE WEEK (see interview on page 48). "It would be difficult to see a recovery in salaried jobs till such time as investments pick up."

There is not much good news on that front. Despite the realisation that the Indian economy will suffer because of the effects of the lockdown when the figures finally came for the April-June quarter, it was still a penny drop moment. While the GDP decline was expected, what has dismayed North Block, where the Union finance ministry is headquartered, has been the scale of contraction—at nearly 24 per cent, India's performance was the worst among all major economies during the



pandemic.

Moreover, the downswing seemed to unilaterally reflect across India Inc as well. Combined revenues of more than 2,000 listed companies were down 24.3 per cent year-on-year in the April-June period. Manufacturing and services sector (excluding banks), mainstays of the India success story over the past three decades, was worse, at -27.44 per cent.

“About one quarter of the gross domestic output... has been wiped out,” lashed out former Union finance minister P. Chidambaram in an essay earlier this week. “Note that when output is lost, the jobs that produce that output are lost, the income that those jobs provide are lost, and the families that depend on those incomes suffer.”

The suffering is very real. Ronak Kotadia, 40, who was manager in the



SHIKHAR JAITLEY **33** INHOSPITABLE SECTOR

Jaitley was a senior marketing manager of a luxury hotel chain in Bengaluru when the pandemic struck. There was no salary in April, and he was fired in May. With more than a decade of experience in the hotel industry, including stints in MNC hotel chains, Jaitley had had a smooth run until now. So the sudden job loss came as shock.

“Since my wife is also employed [as an HR professional], I did not face any sudden financial problems [after the job loss],” he says. “Plus, I have the support of my parents who are currently staying with me. My father retired from a semi-government firm. Also, I do not have any loans, as I am yet to invest in a property in Bengaluru.”

Jaitley is aggressively searching for a new job, but there are hardly any opportunities in the hospitality segment now. “Many of my friends who are in hospitality have either been laid off or have had salary cuts,” he says. “However, I still hope that this, too, will pass, and I will find a job sooner or later. As I am from the marketing field, I feel that I will get a job in other sectors as well.”

—Abhinav Singh

DURGESH SONAR
MEDIA MIRE

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Sonar, output editor in a regional television channel, was laid off overnight. The company had already initiated 50 per cent salary cuts across brackets for a few months, citing a steep decline in revenues. In August, Sonar and several other senior employees were asked to leave.

“I had gone to office for some work, but was instead called in and asked either to resign right away or be prepared to get terminated,” he says. “I had been part of the team for over 13 years, right from inception. So, this shocked me.”

Sonar’s wife is working with a few non-governmental organisations. So, he has not had to worry about the day-to-day expenses of his family, at least for now. “My savings will help me pay the home loan instalments. But, then again, I was saving money for other things, which will now take a backseat,” he says.

Sonar is not keen on joining another media organisation until there is an improvement in the overall situation. Instead, he feels now is the time to embark on an entrepreneurial journey—perhaps, a small production company.

—Nachiket Kelkar



JANAK PATEL

BAD PHASE

Ronak Kotadia (standing) had to cancel his father’s cataract operation because of his job loss

export department of a garment firm in Ahmedabad, had to cancel his father’s cataract operation, after he was fired one day before the procedure. “Under Mediclaim, we can get reimbursement of only ₹24,000,” he said. “I have no capacity to arrange the rest of the amount.”

Kotadia added: “Our family is suffering because of the job loss. My father, too, is suffering. But what can we do!” He got the pink slip after working for a couple of months on half salary. His wife, a teacher in a CBSE school, is only being paid 30 to 40 per cent of her salary. The family of six, including his parents and two children in classes I and VI have to manage with that income. Kotadia also has

to pay a monthly EMI of ₹14,000 on his home loan.

In an ironic twist, even as the urban economy slumped, the rural economy picked up. For example, incomes from the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act doubled during the summer months—the government had raised allocation for the scheme, which guarantees at least 100 days of unskilled work for rural workforce—from ₹60,000 crore to more than ₹1 lakh crore to take care of the pandemic’s economic woes and the reverse migration of workers from cities to villages. Helped by a good harvest and the government largesse, agriculture and rural spending has been the only silver lining to Indian economy’s accumulating clouds.



SUNIL PATIL **40** BENCHED BRAIN

Patil was a consultant with an IT company in Mumbai. He was part of a team that provided software services and support for an international airport. In early March, he and many others were released from the project as the client had announced budget cuts. Though Patil was kept on the “benched” workforce initially, in July he was asked to resign.

Patil’s family includes his wife and son; his parents live next door. He was the only earning member in the family, and has a housing loan. “I was saving a part of my salary every month, which has helped me tide over the crisis over the last month and a half,” he says. “But if I do not get a job soon, the savings will not be enough, particularly since I have my home loan to pay.”



Barring the essential food and grocery requirements, he has cut down on most of his spends right now. Patil, who has a specialisation in geographic information systems, is now putting in long hours searching for new jobs. “I did get responses from a few firms,” he says. “But they say I will have to wait for a few months, may be until late December, before they decide on hiring. That is a long time.”

—Nachiket Kelkar

However, any economic revival depends on urban consumption, and a reciprocal pick-up in productivity in businesses and industries. That is caught in the veritable ‘chicken-and-egg’ situation—factories and plants across the land have been reducing production (which also means lesser contract staff and wages) as they do not expect demand. And demand is not picking up, or picking up very slowly, as those who have lost their jobs or those still holding on to their jobs both limit their expenses to bare essentials.

From giant factories to small cottage industry units, this has meant lesser output. “We have revised working hours corresponding to the workload,” said Harkirat Singh, managing director of the firm that makes

Woodland shoes, “As [demand] picks up in line with the governmental policies, things will start coming back to normal.”

And on the consumer side, it has translated into below capacity consumption in retail stores (except essential items) and shopping malls, flights, trains and restaurants, while cinemas are still closed on government diktat—all sectors where a sizeable chunk of discretionary spending by urban Indians takes place.

This dip in consumption is part of the problem, as Gautam Duggad, head of research (institutional equities), Motilal Oswal Financial Services said: “Sectors which are doing well are essentials—consumer staples, FMCG, pharmaceuticals and IT. Still not doing well are discretionary (are-

as) like retail and aviation.” Restaurateur Zorawar Kalra, whose restaurant chains include Farzi Cafe and Masala Library by Jiggs Kalra, agreed. “Restaurants that have opened are running at very low volumes and thus staffing is not at 100 per cent levels.” According to the National Restaurant Association of India, more than 30 per cent of restaurants and bars have permanently shut down over the past five months.

“Nobody gauged the distortion in value chains caused by Covid-19,” said Navneet Sharma, dean at IFIM Business School, Vijayabhoomi University. “How goods and services are produced and distributed is in a state of flux.” The only way out, as the experts would have it, sounds rather simple. “A lot of government

TUSHAR SHELAT

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RETIREMENT EXTENDED



JANAK PATEL

After 20 years of service in a pharma major in Ahmedabad, Tushar Shelat, was looking forward to retire at 60. It was all going smooth, until the pandemic. For three months, he was paid half his salary. Then, the company paid him one-month advance salary and fired him. Thus ended his journey from chemist to assistant manager (production).

Shelat's daughter is doing her BSc, and his younger son had just secured admission in a university in Canada. His five-member family, which includes his mother, was totally dependent on his salary.

"My mother does get pension.

However, that is for her own use," he says. What worries him most is the education loan of 09 lakh taken for his son; monthly EMI of which is around 010,000.

Shelat, however, is among the lucky few who have found another job—though it pays only half of what he was earning. "I got this job through friends," he says. "Many others, who were shunted out with me, are still scouting for jobs. Had I been in my previous company, I would have worked till 60. Now, I have no option but to work till I am 65."

—Nandini Oza

DAYS OF DISRUPTION

The pandemic may change the very nature of jobs in the long run

BY K. SUNIL THOMAS

The churn during and after the lockdown may have implications on the very nature of what we consider a job to be. It has also not been equal in wreaking its misery—all round statistics show that most pink slips were handed to young professionals.

"Companies chose to lay off lower level as well as entry-level staff, people who they could

spending, promotion of entrepreneurship or start-up activity through the removal of entry barriers, and lessening of compliance or regulatory burden on business," Sharma said.

Some sectors may need particular handholding, considering the walloping they received. India's tourism and hospitality industry may have seen job losses of up to 70 per cent of its workforce, according to an estimate by KPMG.

The industry's ask? Deferment of taxes, reduction in GST and auto-renewal of licences and waiver of dues from the lockdown period, according to K.B. Kachru, chairman emeritus (South Asia), Radisson Hotel Group and vice president, Hotel Association of India. "Unless domestic travellers are incentivised, no major growth should be expected," he said. "Any stimulus will go a long way in protecting jobs and businesses."

easily get back once the situation got better,” points out Sahil Sharma, co-founder of GigIndia, an on-demand job platform. Neha Bagaria, founder and CEO, JobsForHer, says that companies are hiring employees with experience, considering that getting freshers trained in the current scenario is challenging.

The present situation has been both a boon and a bane for women professionals. As Bagaria points out, “The double burden of work plus family duties may have contributed to many women dropping their existing jobs, or even losing their jobs, when their productivity got affected.” But as the pandemic threw opportunities like work-from-home (WFH) and gig projects, women have come forward. According to GigIndia statistics, women gig workers on the platform went up from just 12 per cent before Covid-19, to 29 per cent in September. Work applicants from small towns



have risen from 5 per cent before the pandemic to 58 per cent presently, with a 115 per cent spurt in WFH jobs.

The pandemic may change the very nature of jobs in the long run. “What does job security mean?” asks Sharma. “It means that in a moment of cri-

sis, your job will be safe. But last few months we saw that nobody’s job was secure!” Sharma says the definition of “job security” has now changed to “holding multiple jobs—one or two or even three part-time ‘gig’ work or assignments at the same time.”

After rounds of meetings, right from the Economic Task Force to NITI Aayog and the chief economic adviser, the government is said to be looking at another fresh stimulus, as a follow-up to the five tranches of measures announced by the finance minister back in May, this time aimed at the middle class. The Kamath panel’s blueprint to rejig loans, announced this week, should also help.

Meanwhile, if not the real thing, there are at least ‘green shoots’ of optimism. The finance ministry is adamant that the economy is witnessing “a sharp V-shaped recovery”, as per its monthly report for September. Former RBI governor C. Rangarajan a few days ago said in a paper in the Indian Public Policy Review that despite all forecasts of the annual GDP declining this financial year, “a small positive growth may not be

ruled out for the Indian economy in 2020-2021”. The reason? Sectors like agriculture, public administration, defence and other services might still perform well.

There are also expectations that public consumption will pick up, which in turn will lead to an overall recovery in the economy—the upcoming festive season will be the crucial barometer. “Shopping and retail business are growing by every passing week,” says Yogeshwar Sharma, CEO and executive director, Select Citywalk, one of the biggest malls in the country. “Festive season will be close to 75 per cent of last year.” On the job front, the likes of LinkedIn and naukri.com are reporting fresh hiring, even if the number of applicants has gone up. LinkedIn said hiring on the platform has gone up 35 per cent since the nadir of April, when it plunged 50 per cent

year-on-year.

Then, of course, there are hopes that pin everything on what the heart, not the head, tells you. “Indians are eternally optimistic, it is in our nature,” said Kalra. “We also like to buck international trends, so we are hoping that recovery will be quicker here as compared with other parts of the world.”

Until that redemption arrives, ‘tomorrow is another day’ is the credo by which those burnt by the job massacre are taking it. Applying for fresh jobs, circulating their CVs, hoping for a turnaround in their fortunes... and minimising expenses. Kotadia gives an example, “If my son asks for a ₹500 T-shirt, I will convince him to settle for one that comes for ₹100-₹200 and tell him that we will buy the one he likes during Diwali.”

—With Lakshmi Subramanian and Nandini Oza

INTERVIEW



Mahesh Vyas,
managing director and CEO,
Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy

Loss is not only of jobs but also of incomes

BY K. SUNIL THOMAS

Q/Your latest numbers on job losses are alarming. Would you say this was expected considering the stringent lockdown?

A/As of August 2020, we estimate the net job loss to be 10.9 million. As against a total employment of 403.5 million in 2019-2020, the estimated employment in August 2020 was 392.5 million. The lockdown was the surprise. Its length, its initial stringency and then its uncertainty have all been surprising. Given such a lockdown, the job losses are not surprising.

Q/With the implementation of “unlock” measures, do you see the job situation improving quickly?

A/In terms of jobs, there have been some very quick improvements. India lost 121 million jobs in April 2020. Since then, the losses have steadily declined. It was down to 90 million in May 2020, then 26.5 million in June, 11 million in July and also in August. There was a very quick and substantial improvement in May and in June. Then, the recovery slowed down in July and stagnated in August. Much of what could be recovered quickly

has been so. The remaining recovery could be a long haul.

Q/What are the factors you feel are required for an uptick on the job front?

A/Jobs will recover the remaining lost ground when the economy opens up further and enterprises are allowed to function. The recovery of jobs has reacted well to the unlock process. Beyond this repairing of lost jobs, jobs will improve only when the productive capacities are expanded from where they are. New factories and offices need to open up for new jobs to be created. This implies the need for new investments into new productive capacities. An important ingredient in the recovery process is a pick-up in demand. The lockdown has led to a contraction of consumer demand. Till consumer demand does not pick up, it may be difficult to see investments recover, and till investments do not recover an uptick on the jobs front is unlikely.

Q/You have also said that middle-class urban Indians who lose their salaried jobs would find it

difficult to get another one.

A/The recovery till August has been confined to mostly informal forms of employment. Losses in salaried jobs are mounting. It would be difficult to see a recovery in salaried jobs till such time as investments pick up.

Q/What kind of lag are we seeing before things improve as compared with previous situations of economic distress?

A/The lockdown is unprecedented. We have no history to guide us out of a situation where the economy shrinks by 24 per cent or where the unemployment rate shoots up to 24 per cent. Shocks of this kind, if left unattended, leave a long-term scar on the economy. In 2007-2009, the Union government took the lead in spending its way out of the impact of the global financial crisis. This time, the government is reluctant to put money on the table. The recovery from here is unlikely to be automatic and it is unlikely to come anytime soon. The loss is not only of jobs but also of incomes. Incomes of even the employed have been hit. Incomes matter as much as employment.

consultant (gynaecology), Kokilaben Dhirubhai Ambani Hospital, Mumbai

Pregnancy amid the pause

How to take care of a new mother and child during Covid-19

Whenever there is a complete shutdown of general health services, women suffer the most. During the initial few months of the lockdown, many women had unplanned pregnancies and came in for medical termination of pregnancy (MTP). We are expecting a baby boom in the coming months in India because of the unplanned pregnancies. We are hoping there will not be too many cases of complications associated with these pregnancies.

Contraception, pregnancy and abortion

If the woman is physically fit, condoms or pills as means of contraception will do and there is no need to visit the doctor. If there are health issues, online consultations should suffice. One must try and avoid visiting hospitals as much as possible. If a woman does get pregnant

and does not wish to continue the pregnancy, then she must visit a health care provider at the earliest because the treatment will change as the pregnancy advances. A pregnancy can be terminated up to seven weeks easily with a pill. Beyond that, surgery is required. So, a woman must reach out within two weeks of missing her period, preferably to a certified gynaecologist at a registered MTP centre.

Ensuring zero impact of Covid-19 on foetus

A pregnant woman automatically falls into the moderate risk category. Even if she has slight cold or fever, she must approach her gynaecologist. It is important for expecting mothers to stay away from crowded places, maintain hygiene at all times, have supplements and stay hydrated. There is no proof



“There is no proof yet of the spread of Covid-19 from mother to child. But it has been proven that it can cause clotting in the placenta, which can then increase the chances of hypertension during pregnancy.”

yet of the spread of Covid-19 from mother to child. But it has been proven that it can cause clotting in the placenta, which can then increase the chances of hypertension during pregnancy.

Covid-positive during pregnancy

Pregnant women who have tested positive for Covid-19 but are mildly symptomatic can remain in home quarantine and need not be admitted. If found Covid-positive while in an advanced pregnancy stage, we have to monitor the mother and the growth of the baby at regular intervals.

Issues with breastfeeding

The new mother must prioritise breastfeeding over everything else. Being Covid-positive does not disrupt breastfeeding in any way and the mother can continue nursing her child.

Mental health during lockdown

Lockdown has taken an immense toll on the mental well-being of women, especially those in charge of an entire household. We see a lot of patients with anxiety, insomnia, depression and stress. It is necessary that the woman approaches a therapist and spares time for herself. We have to learn to live with Covid-19 and cannot stay confined inside the four walls of the house any longer. Move outdoors, exercise, meditate and practise yoga.

—As told to Pooja Biraia Jaiswal



It is important for expecting mothers to stay away from crowded places, maintain hygiene at all times, have supplements and stay hydrated.



Pregnant women who have tested positive for Covid-19 but are mildly symptomatic can remain in home quarantine and need not be admitted.



Being Covid-positive does not disrupt breastfeeding in any way and the mother can continue nursing her child.



To watch the interview with Dr Pawar, scan the QR code

COVID-19**PLASMA THERAPY**

IT IS A CENTURY-old way of treating viral diseases. In Covid-19, though, the use of antibody-rich convalescent plasma (CP), has been controversial given the lack of strong evidence.

“Ours is the world’s largest trial [of its kind] on plasma therapy,” Dr Balram Bhargava, director-general, Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), said in response to THE WEEK’s query on the plasma therapy (PLACID) trial. “The trial has been conducted on 464 patients, where 235 patients with moderate Covid-19 disease were given plasma, the rest were given best standard care. This was done in 39 hospitals across India, and we looked at whether it led to severe disease or death over 28 days.” The results of the open label, randomised controlled trial (RCT) published as a pre-print (peer-review pending) suggest that there was no difference in 28-day mortality or progression to severe disease among those studied.

“The study also indicates that the key point here is the high titre [levels] of neutralising antibodies for it to work, if at all,” said professor Sunit K. Singh, head, molecular biology, Banaras Hindu University. “Besides, we have to be sure that the donor does not have any viral RNA in their blood.”

The results of the PLACID trial only prove the doubts that have prevailed in the scientific community over the enthusiastic use of plasma therapy across the world. In August, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) granted emergency use authorisation (EUA) for plasma therapy amid a sharp debate around sufficient available evidence around its benefits. After experts like Dr Anthony Fauci and Dr Francis Collins argued that the data supporting its efficacy were too weak, the agency temporarily halted the approval, only to resume shortly after, presumably caving in to political pressure.



Plasma puzzle

The popularity of plasma therapy to treat Covid-19, despite lack of evidence of its efficacy, has experts worried

BY NAMITA KOHLI

In India, CP therapy was approved for clinical trials in April, and the Union health ministry’s clinical management of Covid-19 protocol lists its use under “investigational therapies”. It allows for CP therapy to be considered in patients with moderate Covid-19 symptoms, who are

unable to improve despite the use of steroids. Doctors have to ensure that the donor plasma matches with that of the patient and that neutralising antibody levels are appropriate, and patients are closely monitored for transfusion-related adverse events, it says.



AFP

LIFE LINE

A plasma donor at the plasma bank of the Institute of Liver and Biliary Sciences, Delhi

The side effect of the therapy can be severe, causing transfusion-related acute lung injury, besides the dangers of blood clotting that has been a major issue in Covid-19.

The EUA by the US FDA was based on the encouraging results of the US-based Mayo clinic-led plasma therapy trial. But the trial, suggest independent experts and the latest ICMR study, is not impressive, despite being a large one with 35,000 patients. “It was only an observational study, and not an RCT that is the gold standard in evidence-based medicine,” said Dr S.P. Kalantri, department director-professor of medicine, Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Medical Sciences, Sevagram, Maharashtra. “In this open-label trial, the therapy was tested on the sickest of patients. The researchers found that plasma therapy was associated with a decline in death rates, but only if the therapy was used in the first three days. However, since an observational study lacks a control group, we do not really know if the benefit was due to the therapy or some other reason.”

Besides Kalantri says that a patient

lands up in the ICU or is put on ventilator after the cytokine storm has set in. “This typically happens in the second week of illness. So how did half the patients land in the ICU within three days of admission?” he said. To know if a drug or therapeutic intervention works, one needs an RCT, which is not difficult to do, he said.

Although plasma is hugely popular and many hospitals are offering it, Kalantri says most centres administering plasma therapy in India do not have the facility to test the levels of neutralising antibodies. “It is like not knowing how much antibiotic is present in an injection before giving it. Unless we know for sure the precise concentration of neutralising antibodies, how do we know if it is enough to block the virus?” he said.

Given the lack of strong evidence, the WHO, too, advises the therapy only in clinical trial settings. In the wake of the EUA authorisation, Dr

Soumya Swaminathan, chief scientist, WHO, said that the available evidence was “low-quality”. The treatment, she told the media, is difficult to standardise since people produce different levels of antibodies and plasma must be collected individually from recovered patients.

The WHO has also warned of the numerous side effects ranging from a mild fever and chills to more severe lung-related injuries.

Dr Sumit Ray, head of critical care, Holy Family Hospital, Delhi, said that both RCTs on plasma therapy done in India and China showed no significant benefit. Besides, Ray points to the issues in selecting patients for administering the therapy. “Once a patient gets a severe disease, they are experiencing a cytokine storm, where the virus has been cleared, but the immune system has gone into overdrive. Giving antibody-rich plasma may just worsen the disease. Though the therapy may benefit one subset of patients, where it can be given early, how does one select those patients? That aspect still needs to be studied,” he said.

The side effect of the therapy can be severe, causing transfusion-related acute lung injury, too, besides the dangers of blood clotting that has been a major issue in Covid-19, said Ray. Instead of using resources to finding a donor, filtering the antibody-rich plasma and monitoring for side effects, crucial resources should be diverted to improving critical care units, ensuring skilled manpower and conducting good trials, Kalantri said. ●

Splits wide open

The after-effects of Scindia's entry into the BJP have muddled the bypoll campaign

BY SRAVANI SARKAR

WITH BYELECTIONS due in 27 assembly seats in Madhya Pradesh, the BJP and the Congress are caught in a deep political quagmire. The depth of it was evident from two political developments in the last fortnight. On September 8, the BJP's powerful leader in Gwalior, Satish Singh Sikarwar, joined the Congress in the presence of state Congress president and former chief minister Kamal Nath.

Sikarwar resented the BJP's decision to induct Jyotiraditya Scindia, MP, and his supporters in March. "We have always fought feudalism, and the person against whom we had been struggling for years is now in the BJP. It was not possible to continue there. The struggle against feudalism will now continue through the Congress," he said.

Sikarwar is considered close to Union Minister Narendra Singh Tomar, who is also from Gwalior. Interestingly, a few days before Sikarwar joined the Congress, Tomar and state BJP president Vishnu Dutt Sharma had held a series of coordination meetings with party workers in nearby Guna and Shivpuri districts. The workers were told to wholeheartedly support Scindia and his followers in the run-up to the bypolls. Sikarwar's move, say observers, could be Tomar's way of indicating his displeasure at Scindia's growing clout.

Sikarwar had contested the Gwalior East assembly constituency in 2018, but lost to Munnalal Goyal of the Congress. Goyal is in the BJP now, and he is assured of the party ticket to contest the bypoll in Gwalior East. Sikarwar's entry into the Congress means he would again take on Goyal; only the poll symbols would change.

Some of the other 26 seats, too, are likely to witness similar fights. "The resentment against the Scindia camp is very much there in the BJP, and it extends from ground-level workers to top-rung leaders," said political commentator Manish Dixit. "This internal issue is sure to harm the BJP in the bypolls. Sikarwar's is the first big direct move of displaying the displeasure openly."

The first incident that hinted at the troubles in the BJP and the Congress

“

Unrest has been brewing in the BJP after Scindia's entry. Party veterans like Jaibhan Singh Pawaiya have tacitly made their displeasure known.

”



PTI

happened two weeks ago. On August 26, the Congress sent a delegation of former ministers to Gwalior, three days after the BJP claimed that it had inducted as many as 75,000 former Congress workers in the presence of Scindia, Tomar and Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan. The delegation's task was to counter the claim and attack the government. But, with big leaders like Kamal Nath and Digvijaya Singh keeping away from the event, the Congress could not attract even a fraction of the media attention that the BJP had secured for its event.

"The BJP's show and the Congress's response are the best examples of the political situation in the state now," said political analyst Girija Shankar. "The opposition cannot go on pitching [former minister] Jitu Patwari



UNEASY PARTNERSHIP

Jyotiraditya Scindia (right) with Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan

in party programmes despite being a minister from the region. Home Minister Narottam Mishra, who hails from Gwalior, has also been keeping away from events featuring Scindia.

Sources say the Scindia issue has so touched the BJP workers on the raw that the party has decided to keep him away from the coordination meetings held by Tomar and Sharma. BJP leaders, however, say the meetings are a routine affair. “There is always a need to motivate party workers,” said the party’s chief spokesperson Deepak Vijayvargiya. “We also conduct post-poll meetings to analyse the party’s performance down to the booth level and discuss strategies. So nothing should be read into these meetings.”

Jitu Patwari said the Congress was preparing for the bypolls by strengthening its organisation and taking up issues. “We cannot make the same mistakes as the BJP, which has been putting people’s lives at grave risk by conducting mass programmes despite the Covid situation,” he said. “But if the elections were to be held tomorrow, we are completely prepared.”

Kamal Nath said he was confident of a thumping victory. “The Congress can get, and is getting, as many leaders into its fold as it likes,” he said. “But we don’t make everything a media event. Surveys show that we are winning all seats. People may not stand with the Congress or Kamal Nath, but they will definitely stand with truth.” ●

against Chouhan, or [legislators] Sajjan Singh Verma and N.P. Prajapati against Scindia and Tomar, if they are serious about the polls.”

The bypolls, which have to be held before November 29, are as crucial as assembly polls. The revolt of 22 Congress MLAs under Scindia’s leadership had helped the BJP topple the Congress government in March. Three more Congress legislators later joined the BJP, while two seats fell vacant after the incumbents died. The bypolls in 27 seats will now decide the fate of the Chouhan government, which is nine seats short of majority in the 230-member assembly. “Elections are won solely on management, and the BJP is far ahead in this department,” said Shankar.

According to Dixit, Congress faces

the difficult task of finding effective candidates in a region dominated by Scindia. “Digvijaya Singh has some support, but Kamal Nath does not have much hold in the Gwalior-Chambal region, where 16 seats will go to the polls,” he said. “Also, the party is unable to put the BJP government as much in the dock as they should, despite issues like fuel price hike, a collapsed economy, farmer suicides, large-scale unemployment and the Covid-19 crisis.”

Unrest has been brewing in the BJP after Scindia’s entry. Party veterans like Jaibhan Singh Pawaiya have tacitly made their displeasure known. According to Dixit, even Yashodhara Raje Scindia, who had welcomed her nephew’s decision to join the BJP, has not been taking part

Saffron onslaught

With state elections round the corner, the BJP steps up its attack on Periyar and, in turn, the DMK

BY LAKSHMI SUBRAMANIAN

As chants of “Jai Shri Ram” rent the air after Prime Minister Narendra Modi laid the foundation stone at the Ram Temple in Ayodhya, his supporters in Tamil Nadu were chanting for a different deity—Lord Murugan. It was the state BJP’s latest attempt to take on the DMK and Dravidian ideologue Periyar E.V. Ramasamy, and it had turned to the son of Lord Shiva for help.

It all began in June, when a Tamil YouTube channel called Karuppar Koottam posted a video allegedly disparaging the devotional song, ‘Kandha Sashti Kavagam,’ which praises Lord Murugan. A slew of complaints was filed against the channel; its founder Surendra Natarajan and associate Senthil Vasam were detained under Goondas Act.

With assembly elections due next year, the BJP-led Hindu right, looking to find a foothold in the state, milked the Karuppar Koottam. A day after Natarajan and Senthil Vasam were arrested, BJP workers sang ‘Kandha Sashti Kavagam’ outside their homes. Next, they trended “Vetrivel Veeravel” (victorious vel, courageous vel) on social media, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh workers went from door to door pasting stickers of Lord Murugan’s *vel* (a divine spear), and the BJP organised a *vel* puja.

All these were part of an attempt to unite Hindus against those inimical



R.C. SASTHAA

to their faith; the DMK and Dravidar Kazhagam, its ideological parent, were the targets. The month-long campaign influenced many, including a 21-year-old in Coimbatore who threw saffron paint on a statue of Periyar. Though the man, a right-wing worker called Arun Krishnan, was arrested and charged under the National Security Act, the BJP helped out his family with ₹50,000.

The party also took the fight to the DMK’s doorstep, asking president M.K. Stalin to explain his party’s stand on the Karuppar Koottam controversy. A defensive DMK said it was “not anti-Hindu” and that at least 70 per cent of its members were Hindus.

Though the right wing had been attacking Periyar for some time, it was especially emboldened after the deaths of J. Jayalalitha and M. Karunanidhi, two giants of the Dravidian movement. The victory in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections and the silence of the ruling AIADMK further strengthened the right-wing forces.

“The Periyar ideology is just a myth,” BJP national secretary H. Raja told THE WEEK. “He was a stooge of the Christian missionaries. He was a womaniser and there is evidence to prove this. The Dravidian ideology of Periyar is anti-Hindu. So, we will have to cut the roots of this core ideology. The DMK has turned apologetic these days only because it wants the Hindu vote.”

We are talking to many people in the DMK. At least 40 of its MLAs and MPs will soon join our party.

V.P. DURAISAMY,
who recently left the DMK
for the BJP



PTI

The BJP recently asked DMK president M.K. Stalin to explain his party's stand on the Karuppar Kootam controversy.

So ingrained is Periyar in the Tamil psyche that any party hoping to make inroads into the state's politics has to address him. Said political commentator Professor Ramu Manivannan: "To engage with Tamil politics, you have to engage with Periyar, because his ideologies have addressed a wide spectrum of political culture, religion and gender. In Tamil Nadu, the Dravidian movement is not a political but a social movement, and Periyar was instrumental in contributing to the [growth of] reasoning."

It is a social movement that stands in sharp contrast, in crucial aspects, to what the *sangh parivar* has been preaching. "Rationalism is the reason the RSS hates Periyar," said filmmaker and Dravidian

thinker Karu Palaniappan. "He was the man who taught us to reason out everything. But now he is being reduced to a person who was anti-God. The RSS and the BJP are doing this particularly among Hindus, using emotions to uproot rationalistic thinking."

Notably, the DMK has often taken the bait. A day after Ganesh Chaturthi, when right-wingers asked why Stalin had not wished the people of the state, his son, Udhayanidhi, tweeted a picture of a clay Ganesha with a garland. He got trolled. Later, he explained in a two-page statement: "I am an atheist. I did it because my daughter wanted a photo with the statue my mother had got. My mother is a believer."

Political observers said the young Udhayanidhi was hurting the party through such antics. It was like walking into the trap the BJP had set.

"This will only lead to a disaster as we could lose the minority and dalit votes," said a senior DMK leader close to the Stalin family. He even took up the issue with Stalin. "He told me that everyone says we should reply to these issues. But he is firm that these are not required, as it might hamper the prospects of the party during elections."

Apparently, Udhayanidhi put out an explanation for his Ganesha tweet only because Stalin had told him he was wrong. The scion, said party sources, is known to clash with his father at times. Incidentally, on the day of the Ganesha tweet, Stalin had sent out two statements against the Union and state governments, but these did not get enough attention because of the tweet. Sources said Stalin, who has been waiting for years to become chief minister, is most worried about his son.

Another headache for the DMK is that many volunteers of strategist Prashant Kishor's I-PAC (Indian Political Action Committee), which is helping the party's campaign, have quit in recent weeks. The reasons for doing so are unclear at the moment. Recently, though, Kishor had met Stalin in Chennai, and had reportedly asked him to rein in Udhayanidhi.

The BJP has used such distractions shrewdly. During the pandemic, senior leader V.P. Duraisamy and Thousand Lights MLA Ku Ka Selvam joined the BJP. Selvam's was a highly embarrassing defection, and the BJP celebrating it only signalled that all was not well within the DMK. Sources in the party said that the rise of Udhayanidhi and his friend MLA Mahesh Poyyamozhi has been at the expense of party seniors, many of whom are miffed. According to BJP sources, several DMK leaders,



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including E.V. Velu and S. Jagathrakshagan, are said to be in talks with the saffron party.

Apparently, it was Udhayanidhi's move to make political novice Chitrarasu the party's Chennai west district secretary that drove Selvam away. While Selvam does not have a cadre following, his defection did hurt the DMK in the battle of perception. "Selvam is like a child. He was shown a piece of chocolate and he left," said Udhayanidhi.

The BJP, which has under 3 per cent votes in the state, has been working overtime to poach DMK leaders, including the senior ones. "We are talking to many people in the DMK," said recent jumper Duraisamy. "At least 40 of its MLAs and MPs will soon join our party."

DMK insiders said the BJP had been approaching every MLA, MP and district office-bearer through powerful industrialists in the region. "They have sent feelers to at least 45 of our district functionaries in recent

The rise of Udhayanidhi and his friend MLA Mahesh Poyyamozi has been at the expense of party seniors, many of whom are miffed.

days," said a DMK MLA who also got an invitation. He said the BJP had been poaching DMK members who were fighting legal cases.

And the BJP is unlikely to relent anytime soon. In fact, if it wants to make an ideological dent in the prevailing political thinking in the state,

it might even have to strengthen the vitriol.

Amid all this, there have also been changes in the DMK hierarchy. Party leaders Durai Murugan and T.R. Baalu were recently elected as general secretary and treasurer, respectively.

The DMK has also intensified its campaign against Hindi imposition, following an incident in mid-August; a Central Industrial Security Force personnel reportedly asked DMK MP K. Kanimozhi if she was Indian after she did not speak to him in Hindi. A month later, T-shirts with anti-Hindi imposition slogans are selling like hot cakes among celebrities and the public in Tamil Nadu. The AIADMK has also taken up the cause, strongly opposing the new education policy. On September 7, in a letter to Union Education Minister Ramesh Pokhriyal, Tamil Nadu Higher Education Minister K.P. Anbalagan said Tamil Nadu would continue with its two-language policy, which had already proven successful. ●



Let's look to our *aukaat*!

So, in one of the new, ever-plummeting lows that have taken over our national discourse, the Bihar Police has sneered at Rhea Chakraborty for not possessing any *aukaat*. To be exact, Bihar DGP Gupteshwar Pandey has stated: 'What is her *aukaat* that she dares to question the Chief Minister of Bihar?'

And Rhea, wracked with grief, weakened by badgering and as caught up in the circus as the next Indian, proudly replies, "My *aukaat* is that Sushant Singh Rajput—whom everybody claims to love—loved me."

Sweet, I suppose. Very sound-bitey, and Kabir Singh-ki-girlfriend-ish. But, incorrect.

Because, no, Rhea, you do not need to be loved by Sushant Singh Rajput or any other major movie star to possess *aukaat* (an obnoxious, very north-Indian word, impossible to translate into English, but loosely meaning social status/power/wealth)—this is still a democracy and your *aukaat* as an Indian citizen and a human being is enough for you to question the chief minister of Bihar, or the prime minister of India or the Supreme Court of the country for that matter.

In today's gangland style Kalyug, *aukaat* has become who we are loved by, or protected by, or in whose 'camp' we are. And as Rhea's *aukaat* provider, ie, Sushant, is unfortunately dead, she is mobbed and grabbed and vilified every time she steps out of her house, a mere girlfriend in a nation where every man, woman and child is acting like a shrill, betrayed housewife, a shiny, helpless pawn in a much larger game of distract and misrule in a misogynistic story that is rapidly becoming about Mumbai versus Bihar—even as the economy spirals downwards, Kashmir continues to bleed, Ladakh is endangered, and all national institutions go slowly to hell.

These are crazy times.

And so the hour has come, ladies and gentleman, for all of us to look to our *aukaat*.

How much do we have? How do we assert it, protect it and project it?

I would urge all of you to take Kangana Ranaut as your role model. Here is a middle-class outsider who has earned some hefty *aukaat*! From being a defiant nobody who toed nobody's line but her own, she has gone to being an obedient somebody who loyally toes the GOI line, and for her pains, she has been awarded with Y-plus security. (Because, you know, of all the death threats she has been getting.)

What is that you say? Swara Bhasker, Barkha Dutt and Rana Ayyub all get rape and death threats on a daily basis? Perhaps more than Kangana does? Yes, but clearly they are neither loved by somebody important, nor protected by a powerful camp.

Hmmm... now I am starting to wonder if *aukaat*

equals Y+/Z+ security. Maybe stepping out of a vehicle surrounded by a posse of heavily armed and uniformed guards is what it means to signal that one is important. I mean, look how much *aukaat* the Gandhis have lost ever since they were stripped of all their fancy security!

Maybe, like the recent story in the *Economist* about billionaires paying to have a herd of skimpily-clad elite supermodels accompany them to every party so that they look all sexy and happening, the thing to do now, to have *aukaat* in India, is to hire a posse of sunglasses-wearing, buff and tough security guards dressed all in black, and take them with you wherever you go, preferably with Yo-Yo Honey Singh or *Badshah* songs playing from portable speakers.

Like, walk into your PTA meeting surrounded by them, or go to get milk from the Mother Dairy booth surrounded by them, or saunter into your boss's cabin surrounded with them. Heads will turn, whispers will fly, your *aukaat* will be magically enhanced. And you will create so much employment, too.

It is a clear win-win. Do it for Mother India.



Far from over

Kishore Biyani may have retreated from the retail wars, but his future is on solid ground

BY NACHIKET KELKAR

During a retail industry summit in September 2016, Kishore Biyani, founder of Future Group, said: “We would love to be seen as a consumer goods company having its own distribution.” Four years hence, Biyani, who was the king of modern retail in India, has been left with just that—his consumer goods company, apart from apparel merchandising and a small furniture retail business. He agreed to sell much of his retail business to Mukesh Ambani’s Reliance Industries.

Biyani’s entry into retail business was in 1987, when he launched Manz Wear. It was renamed Pantaloon Fashions, one of the few fashion and apparel retail chains in the 1990s. The first Pantaloons store opened in 1997 and the brand soon became popular. In 2001, Biyani launched Big Bazaar, among the first modern big box hypermarket chains. Over the next two decades, he would go on to establish an empire that spread across fashion, lifestyle, grocery and consumer electronics retailing.

Along the way, he made many marquee acquisitions. But, as his empire grew, so did his debt. In 2012, as the debt rose to ₹7,800 crore, Biyani sold Pantaloons to Aditya Birla Group. That would not deter his

ambitions, though. The same year, he acquired Big Apple, a convenience store chain in the National Capital Region and, two years later, Nilgiris, a retail chain in South India.

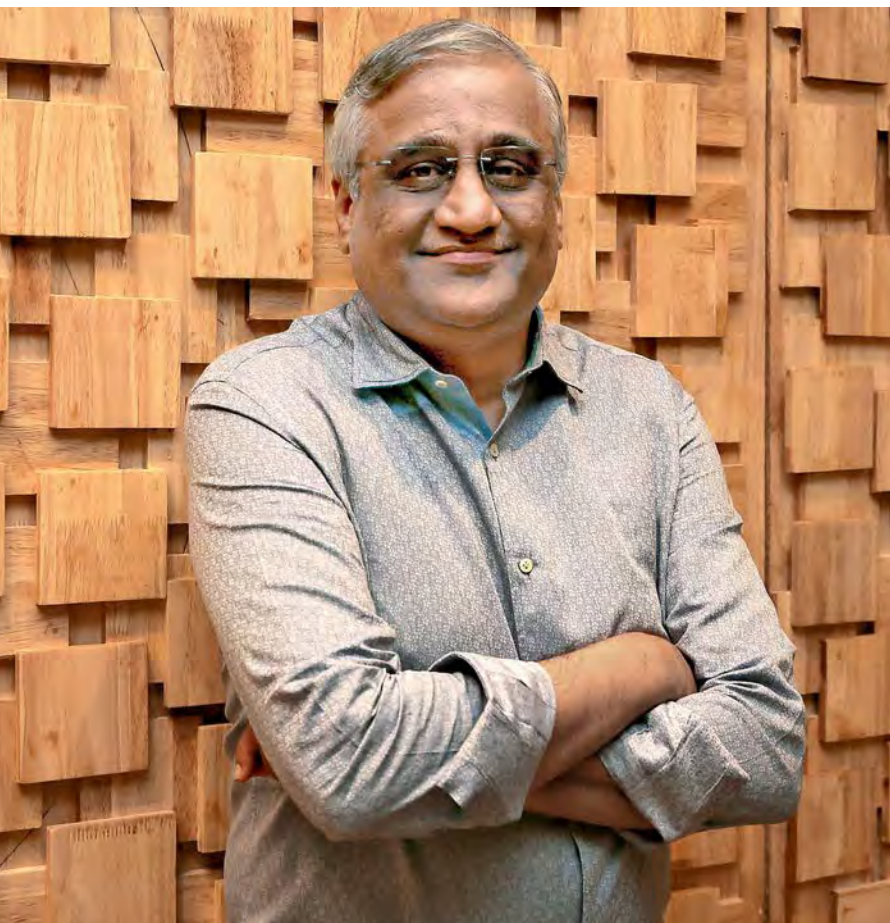
The biggest move was in 2015, when he acquired the retail business of Bharti Group. In 2016, he acquired the retail business of Heritage Foods, a company promoted by former Andhra Pradesh chief minister N. Chandrababu Naidu. The next year, Future Retail acquired hypermarket chain HyperCity from Shoppers Stop.

But, the debt continued to rise. It is estimated to be around ₹13,000 crore now. After earnings took a hit because of Covid-19, servicing the debt became a challenge and Biyani was left with little choice but to sell the retail business. Future’s key group companies—Future Retail, Future Lifestyle Fashions, Future Consumer, Future Supply Chains and Future Market Networks will merge into

Future Enterprises Limited. The retail and wholesale business, which includes key formats like Big Bazaar, fbb, Easyday, Foodhall, Nilgiris, Central and Brand Factory, would be sold in a slump sale (for a lump sum without values being assigned to individual entities) to Reliance Retail. Future Group will also sell the logistics and warehousing business to Reliance Retail. The deal is worth ₹24,713 crore.

OVER THE YEARS, FUTURE GROUP HAS INVESTED IN SETTING UP LARGE FOOD PARKS THAT WOULD HELP IT STRENGTHEN AND EXPAND ITS PRIVATE BRANDS.





REUTERS

The deal will help Reliance expand its already large, albeit electronics-heavy, retail business and become India's largest grocery and fashion retailer, in terms of revenue. As per broking firm Sharekhan, its total store area would increase by 83 per cent to 52.5 million square feet. Reliance Retail will also invest ₹1,200 crore in the preferential share issue of Future Enterprises for a 6.09 per cent stake and ₹400 crore in warrants convertible into equity shares, which when converted upon payment will result in a further 7.05 per cent stake.

"As a result of this reorganisation and transaction, Future Group will achieve a holistic solution to the challenges that have been caused by Covid-19 and the macro economic environment," said Biyani. "This transaction takes into account the

interest of all its stakeholders including lenders, shareholders, creditors, suppliers and employees, giving continuity to all its businesses." But, what does this deal leave Biyani with?

Much of the proceeds will be used to repay debt. There are also dues pending to suppliers, vendors and landlords. As per a letter by Dhairyashi Patil, president of The All India Consumer Products Distribution Federation, written to Biyani, the outstanding "is in hundreds of crores." Biyani is learnt to have told suppliers that part of the deal's proceeds has been set aside to repay all such dues.

Post this, Future Enterprises will be largely debt-free. It will retain the manufacturing and distribution of FMCG goods and integrated fashion sourcing and manufacturing busi-

ness and its insurance joint ventures with Generali and the joint ventures with NTC Mills. The company has been in talks to sell the insurance ventures.

Future Enterprises has said the deal with Reliance will help it expand with a focused business model and a stronger balance sheet. "There will be around ₹4,000 crore of food manufacturing and ₹3,000 crore of fashion and garment manufacturing that will remain in Future Enterprises," said a source in the know. More importantly, there is a supply agreement with Reliance Retail and Fashion. So, Future Enterprises will be manufacturing the brands for the Reliance ecosystem, which will be a strong revenue stream. Future Enterprises will also be able to create new brands in the fashion and consumer goods space and ink supply deals with other firms.

Biyani is not one to remain quiet. People who have known him a long time say he remains gung-ho about the opportunities that lie ahead. Retail industry veterans say that Biyani's knack for building brands will help him emerge in a new avatar. "Biyani is a brand man," said Govind Shrikhande, former managing director of Shoppers Stop. "So, brand manufacturing and FMCG manufacturing, the huge food parks that he has built will be with him; that is a big opportunity." Over the years, Future Group has invested in setting up large food parks that would help it strengthen and expand its private brands. Future Consumer Ltd, which is headed by Biyani's elder daughter Ashni, now houses close to 25 FMCG brands and it has in the recent past inked deals with global consumer goods firms like New Zealand's dairy major Fonterra, US-based organic food maker Hain Celestial and beverage brand Sunkist. Biyani will come back strong on the brands, manufacturing and FMCG fronts, said Shrikhande. ●

Proximity shopping is the new normal

BY ABHINAV SINGH

A century-old company with an annual revenue of more than ₹9,000 crore, Britannia Industries is a household name in India and more than 60 other countries. Its products—ranging from biscuits and bread to beverages and dairy products—are available in five million retail outlets across India.

For the quarter ended June 30, Britannia posted a net profit of ₹543 crore—more than double what it earned in the corresponding period last year. Managing director Varun Berry, who had joined the company in 2013, has helped the company weather the Covid-19 lockdown. A mechanical engineer by training, he has more than 27 years of experience in companies such as Hindustan Unilever and Pepsico. In an exclusive interview with THE WEEK, he talked about the company's growth strategy.

Excerpts:

How has the pandemic affected the packaged food segment in India?

Some sectors like FMCG have stayed more resilient than others, despite operational challenges. Steady demand kept consumer product companies relevant through this period. Britannia was categorised within the essentials goods category and we were

given permissions to operate even during the lockdown. In the initial weeks we were restricted by supply chain blockages, shortage of labour and insufficient transport facilities. We set to iron out the operational hazards.

With people cooking at home and children staying indoors, demand for ready-to-eat and ready-to-cook foods shot up. People were restricting their movements to the neighbourhood grocery stores and stocking up essential supplies. We focused on our staple brands like Good Day, Marie Gold, Milk Bikis and Nutrichoice. With the exception of some of the more 'on-the-go' categories, such as salted snacks and dairy drinks, all others saw solid growth.

What factors contributed to your growth in the lockdown period?

In disruptive times like these, consumers seek out brands they trust. So our brand equity

proved to be a strong asset. The biggest contribution to [Britannia's] growth came from our teams across the country. They enabled sales orders in real time, ensuring a close connect with our customers, distributors and retailers.

We facilitated picking up of stocks from distributor points, wherever stocks could not be delivered to retailers. We also facilitated direct supplies to distributors from our warehouses, despite it being a bit expensive [from our] standpoint. Such measures ensured that our products were available in the market ahead of others. We were able to service 100 per cent of our distributors within the first fortnight of the lockdown.

Quick digital interventions were also key. We partnered with Dunzo and launched a 'Britannia Essentials Store' to enable seamless delivery of products. We also launched a WhatsApp-based store locator service. These timely tech solutions helped us respond swiftly

<p>Britannia Industries posted a net profit of ₹542.68 crore in the first quarter—an increase of nearly 120% year-on-year.</p>	<p>Staple brands like Good Day, Marie Gold and Milk Bikis recorded "unprecedented growth".</p>	<p>Investments of over ₹1,000 crore in the pipeline.</p>
	<p>Britannia managed to reach about 90 to 100% of the pre-Covid levels of distribution in May and June.</p>	<p>Plans to expand existing plant in Maharashtra; new manufacturing facilities in UP, Tamil Nadu, Bihar and Odisha.</p>



to the surge in demand.

Have things stabilised on the production front?

We were quick off the block to resume production and the labour situation has been streamlined. We are producing to capacity now and meeting demand across all geographies.

What new products are in the pipeline?

Our R&D centre in Bengaluru is working on some very exciting innovations. In the next six months or so, we will look at launching products that cater to the demand for health and boosting immunity. These will be in the biscuits and dairy segments.

What kind of new normal are you expecting in the processed food segment?

Our revenue growth in Q1 this year can be attributed in large measure to the increase in home consumption. In the last couple of months, we have seen unprecedented growth for highly salient brands such as Good Day, Marie Gold, and Milk Bikis. Our cheese portfolio is also riding the trend of in-home cooking, and we are doing a YouTube series with Saif Ali Khan on [making] cheese-based dishes.

Increased home food consumption, coupled with an increased interest in health and immunity products, would be here to stay. Consumer preference for proximity shopping

“
Our R&D centre in Bengaluru is working on some very exciting innovations.

“
Our revenue growth can be attributed to the increase in home consumption.

“
New facilities will increase Britannia’s capacity by 10 to 15 per cent.

[will be] the new normal. Neighbourhood mom-and-pop stores have always been the backbone of India’s retail economy. They have ensured a steady supply of essentials in the country. E-commerce is also emerging as a grocery platform of choice, predominantly in cities.

What new expansion initiatives are you planning?

We are looking at a capital expenditure of around ₹700 crore over the next two and a half years [to build] green-field facilities and expand capacities in our existing plant in Ranjangaon, Maharashtra. New manufacturing facilities are also being planned in Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Bihar and Odisha. These new facilities will increase Britannia’s capacity by 10 to 15 per cent. We have also mapped an additional ₹300 crore for new launches.

What are your interests and hobbies, and how do you spend your free time?

I enjoy a good game of golf, as it helps me re-centre and focus on the day’s priorities. Also being a movie buff, I enjoy some quiet downtime in a fully-fitted home theatre.

When I joined Britannia in 2013, there was a lot of anticipation. With a remarkable team by my side, we have been able to transform the company into a leading global total foods company. Agility, adaptability, consistency and resilience are the traits I hone in the team. Safeguarding consumer trust and delighting them with good products are our endeavour. 🍪



The Bong of Bong

Nobody projected the best of ‘Bongness,’ as much as India’s former president, Pranab Mukherjee. When he passed away on August 31, at age 84, after slipping into a coma, the heartfelt tributes from across the board said it all.

People from different strata of society, and representing diverse political ideologies, wrote the most moving tributes to the gentleman universally called and referred to as Pranab *da*. *Da*, or big brother, is not just a respectful way to address a family member, it also implies a great deal of affection for the person. Not every political leader from West Bengal gets to be called ‘*da*’ by the people. In that sense, Pranab *da*, who has been dubbed ‘the people’s *rashtrapati*’ by the media, occupied a special place in the hearts of citizens, much like another former president, the late Dr A.P.J Abdul Kalam. Perhaps, their humble beginnings and spectacular rise to the top had a lot to do with the widespread admiration enjoyed by them.

Pranab *da* was born to freedom fighters in a small village called Mirity, and went on to acquire degrees in political science and history, followed by law. But far more than his academic qualifications and early career as a college teacher and journalist, it was Pranab *da*’s prodigious memory and incredible scholarship that impressed all those he interacted with.

I was all set to pull out my Bong Card (Bong through marriage) the only time I met Pranab *da*—at a tea reception organised by fashion designer Ritu Beri in a wing of the Rashtrapati Bhavan. It was a small group of mainly Delhi folks—and there was me! The protocol was amusing and I was tempted to giggle as officious members of the president’s team assigned specific ‘spots’ to each one of us, with instructions

not to move an inch, or try to make conversation with the great man. That was a bummer! I had been practising my Bengali for a week, hoping for a minute or two with someone I genuinely had regard for.

The *Delhiwalas* were most blasé, like they were totally used to hanging out with eminent personalities in grand settings. But even they were sweating, as the countdown began, and we stood to attention, waiting for gigantic doors to be ceremoniously opened. Voila! There he was, a diminutive man with a bemused expression. He looked like he wanted to be anywhere but in that beautiful salon, doing *namaste* to a bunch of strangers he might never lay eyes on again.

An over eager man next to me stepped out of line—figuratively and literally—trying to impress Pranab *da* by throwing the name of West Bengal’s most prominent media man, and claiming proximity. Pranab *da* barely made eye contact with this corporate loudmouth who was crudely showing off his Punjabi-Bengali. Then it was my turn! Pranab *da* stopped and semi-smiled. I swooned! Wow, the president of India was actually smiling at me! Encouraged and emboldened, I stammered something in my far-from-immaculate Bengali. He smiled some more and declared, “It’s berry berry hot today!” And moved to the next person.

We were herded to an area just outside the salon for a group picture. Strictly no selfies, we had been warned by a stern ADC. There, under the blazing Delhi sun, for a few brief moments, all of us felt wonderful being Indians, and that sentiment had a lot to do with Pranab *da*’s unpretentious presence. And about how a person with Pranab *da*’s extraordinary grit, determination and wisdom came to occupy the highest position any citizen can dream of. RIP.



DEATH OF THE AUTOGRAPH

It took a pandemic for fans and celebrities to buy personal acknowledgment and goodwill

BY SNEHA BHURA



PRECIOUS COLLECTION

Autograph collector Santosh Kumar Lahoti with his collection



Playback singer Kailash Kher recently received a handwritten fan letter by post. Inscribed in green ink on a pink handmade slip, the heartfelt missive by Priti from Pune proclaimed how the singer's tunes transport her to a whole new dimension and deepen her reverence for her own god. One cannot put a price on his voice, his music and his craft, she writes. "*Sab annmol hai* (all of it is priceless)," she adds. On a phone call from Mumbai, Kher points to the letter as an example of true devotion in a fan.

The conversation began around how the simple, in-person autograph is dying a slow death. Kher rues how technology has killed respectfulness in fans, who now have bigger egos than the celebrity. "They used to be shy and hesitant, and so polite. Now, they have technology and knowledge, but no manners," he quips.

But for all the talk on technology's corroding effect on fandom, Kher forgets to mention that he is also selling video messages. On a platform called GoNuts, fans can book personalised video shoutouts from the Padma Shri awardee for ₹15,000.

It was in May 2014 that former Australian leg-spinner Shane Warne tweeted: "After doing five selfies with people this morning before 8am on my morning run/walk, I've come to the conclusion that the autograph is dead!"

The Oxford Dictionary had already declared "selfie" as the word of the year in 2013, heralding a new era of narcissism. In this spectrum of egomania, from seeking and flaunting selfies to accepting celebrity challenges on video apps, in-person

messages in cursive writing have withered into collectables from another age. "I remember practising my signature behind notebooks as a little girl. I did not know that a day would come when people would ask for my autograph," says actor-producer Dia Mirza. "The connection between an artist and a fan is most wonderful. And a request for an autograph is high; an exchange so cherished. I look back to so many wonderful people and moments I had the opportunity to meet."

"Autograph collecting is as valuable as stamp or coin collecting now," says Kolkata-based Santosh Kumar Lahoti, cofounder of Autograph Collectors Club of India. The club, started in 1993, has many members who hold Limca Book of Records titles for having the most autographs. Purists at heart, the 2,000-plus members often hunt in groups with pen and paper, and sometimes exchange their hauls and hold exhibitions.

"What is more valuable? A signature by [Mahatma] Gandhi or a selfie with him?" asks Lahoti.

The 50-year-old has been encouraging members to send letters to their beloved celebrities even



SUPER FAN

(Clockwise from left) Santosh Kumar Lahoti with former prime minister Chandra Shekhar, industrialist Ratan Tata and actor Kamal Haasan

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN AN ARTIST AND A FAN IS MOST WONDERFUL. AND A REQUEST FOR AN AUTOGRAPH IS HIGH; AN EXCHANGE SO CHERISHED.

—Dia Mirza, actor and producer



during the pandemic. Lahoti received a signed autograph from Hollywood star Judi Dench on June 10. When he was a record holder from 1994 to 2000, he had over 5,000 autographs from people like Benazir Bhutto, Yasser Arafat, Manmohan Singh and Amitabh Bachchan. Shah Rukh Khan, he says, is one of the most generous autograph givers in India. “He himself collects autographs! When I met him, he left his dinner to sign 15 to 20 autographs for my club members,” he says.

Saroj Ranjan Kar from Lahoti’s club has cricket memorabilia with signatures going way back to 1932, when the Indian team made its Test debut. Kar says he has only once paid for an autograph—for Don Bradman’s signed bat at an auction. The Cuttack-based 49-year-old is certain he will get a decent haul from the IPL this year. “My sister and friends live in Dubai. I have told them everything I need. We have a good network of

autograph hunters there,” says Kar.

But if there is one kind of celebrity that can still wield a pen with style it is the author. “Getting a book signed is very important for a reader,” says bestselling author Ravinder Singh. “They shy away from lending copies with signed autographs. People come back to me if I forget to handwrite their names.” Singh released an audiobook on StoryTel called *The Runaway Groom* on 8 September. While he is happy with social media fandom, a minority of fanatics with unusual requests and remarks do bother him on Twitter and Instagram.

For 26-year-old sport shooter Anjum Moudgil, paying for video messages has no personal touch. “It is a paid job,” says Moudgil. She was touched by the show of support when she won the silver medal in women’s 10m air rifle at the ISSF Shooting World Championships at Changwon, South Korea, in 2018. “A group of excited Korean kids mobbed me for autographs just because someone had won, not because they knew me,” she says.

But the pandemic has ushered in unprecedented changes, including a battery of apps from which one can purchase celebrity video messages. Govind Gupta, a techie from Pune, got singer Shaan to sing him the birthday song for ₹15,000 on GoNuts, and he will buy more one-minute videos for his father, a friend and his own upcoming anniversary. “My father lives in a small town in UP and he cannot listen to singers live, even if there is no Covid-19,” says Gupta. Neelambara, who works in a Delhi-based law firm, bought a minute-long video of Saina Nehwal talking words of encouragement for ₹26,000. “I bought it for my office’s weekend badminton team. We have all been working from home. Even Saina is stuck at home,” she says. “Sure, in-person always has more impact. But then what is in-person these days?”

Fine-tuning the future

Legendary singer Ustad Rashid Khan, who might be the last of an era, on training a new generation of classical musicians to take over

BY RABI BANERJEE



In the early 1980s, a teenager went to the prestigious Dover Lane Music Conference in Kolkata to listen to the legendary Pandit Bhimsen Joshi. A student of classical music, he sat in the front row of the gallery. Before long, however, the organisers of the show had banished him to the back. The front row, they told him, was for VIPs. Insulted, the boy took a pledge that one day he would become a classical musician of renown and, when requested to perform at the conference, he would decline.

In the end, however, he did not reject the organisers and, many years later, performed there as Ustad Rashid Khan, one of the greatest Hindustani classical musicians of all time. Two decades after the incident, his renown had spread so far and

wide that his idol Joshi himself acknowledged him to be “the future of Hindustani classical music in India”. He received the same adulation from other legendary musicians like Ustad Ali Akbar Khan and Ustad Vilayat Khan, with whom he has performed jugalbandi concerts. Today, at 52, he

TODAY, KHAN IS FULLY FOCUSED ON IMPARTING CLASSICAL TRAINING TO THOUSANDS OF ASPIRANTS THROUGH HIS MUSICAL SCHOOL.

is probably the last of the Hindustani classical vocalists and perhaps the last Mogul (in what sense?), though he refuses to accept it.

“He is one of the greatest singers of our time and I am proud of him,” says Pandit Bickram Ghosh, percussionist and childhood friend of Khan. “We are like brothers. Our families are close, too, and we have done many jugalbandis [together].”

Today, Khan is fully focused on imparting classical training to thousands of aspirants through his musical school, The Fifth Note Global Centre, which he started two decades ago. During the lockdown, he taught students across the globe through video conference, with the help of music maestros like singer Hariharan and Pandit Vishwa Mohan Bhatt. What is unique about his school



SALIL BERA

is that it is not just about imparting musical skills, but also about helping students with branding and making a living. After seeing the poverty and hardship of youth at his village in Uttar Pradesh, he realised the need for music to be able to provide a livelihood.

“I am happy that my academy is helping build the career of talented students,” he says. “I am proud to say that even during this trying time, the academy has ensured smooth sailing for all our performers.” To turn a talented music student into a professional musician, Khan and his team have come up with a strategy called “performance grooming”.

“Performance grooming is one of the most important aspects while giving the final touches to the performers,” says the maestro. “My

academy provides three consolidated grooming courses whereby students are taught subjects like music management, image building, media and stage handling, emceeing and much more.”

He says his academy has produced innumerable performing artistes over the last two decades. Like Om Bongane from Mumbai who won the Classical Voice of India contest in 2015 and appeared on the popular music show, Kingfisher Strong Backstage; and Nagesh Adgaonkar, one of the rising stars of classical music from the Rampur-Sahaswan gharana.

The idea of a musical finishing school came to Khan when he looked back at his own life. “There were no counsellors to chalk out a route map for my career,” he says. “I was deceived and cheated by many show organisers.” Today, one cannot survive in this industry without knowing the art of the game, he says. And he is determined to rescue future generations of musicians from the trap he himself fell into.

“I used to be camera shy and could never handle interviews with élan,” he says. “I was clueless about what I should wear even for a simple photo-shoot. So, whatever you see in me today is the outcome of trial and error. I ensured that my students never face these critical situations without being [properly] equipped. This is how we set up the grooming department.” He says he has roped in experts to develop each of these fields.

Born to a musical family in Badaun, Uttar Pradesh, Khan’s grandfather Ustad Nissar Hussain Khan was his guru. Although he had a gifted voice, he wanted to become a cricketer—a hope that was dashed when his voice got affected by hours of practice in the scorching heat. His grandfather forbade him from playing cricket. “The first part of my musical learning was not through conscious effort,” he says. “It was

more out of the fear of being reprimanded for not doing my homework well. But later on, in my teens, my only focus and dream was to become a musician, which drove me harder towards achieving my dream.”

When his grandfather moved to Kolkata to join the ITC Sangeet Research Academy, he took Khan with him. After a series of interviews, he was selected as an exponent of classical music. Since then, he has become an icon and an integral part of the cultural life of Kolkata, the city that was home to another classical music great in the 1930s—Bade Ghulam Ali Khan.

Khan’s open throat voice is not similar to Ghulam Ali’s, but when he sang songs like *Kya Karu Sajni Aye Nah Balam* and *Yaad Piya Ki Aye* in Ghulam Ali’s thumri style in his own bandish (a fixed melodic composition in Hindustani vocal or instrumental music), the audiences were mesmerised by the style and range of his voice. Swiftly, Khan proved his mettle.

Though originally belonging to the Rampur-Sahaswan gharana, which his own guru and grandfather initiated, Khan did not confine himself to it. He believes that listening to music is as important as reading books which are outside those prescribed. But only listening will not make one a singer, unless the person is also acquainted with various rhythms and other aspects of music, like thumri (a vocal genre or style), *dadra* (a classical vocal form), *kajari* and *hori* (genres of semi-classical singing), bhajan (devotional song) and ghazal (Urdu poetry). Over a period of time, he mastered all of this and today, his music is popular in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and other parts of South Asia.

“He is a great vocalist with a God-gifted voice,” says eminent flautist Pandit Ronu Majumdar. “He can bring out the true soul of a raga. What makes him special is that he



GREAT MINDS
Ustad Rashid Khan with the late singer Jagjit Singh

SALIL BERA

can change his singing style according to the different formats of music." Renowned santoor player, Tarun Bhattacharya says, "Rashid is certainly one of the foremost vocalists of the Hindustani classical gharana. He has achieved mammoth success through sheer struggle."

Though he believes in gurukul or gharanas, Khan is clear that Bollywood and Indian popular music do not harm them. In 2007, when his singing in the super-hit film *Jab We Met* broke all records, he was met with a flurry of offers. Khan was cautious in accepting them. He brought out his debut ghazal album, *Ishq Lamhe*, in 2013. According to him, Bollywood has helped Hindustani classical music reach the masses. "The immortal melodies of Lata ji, Mohammed Rafi saheb and Manna Dey, to name a few, have helped preserve a number of Hindustani ragas," he says.

In these days of digitalisation, he

is appreciative of covers made by youngsters with influences of classical music. "They so efficiently turn beautiful melodies by subtly incorporating a few improvisations on their own," he says. "This is possible because of their training in classical music. In this way, they give their audience something fresh to listen to." He is also not critical of fusion music threatening the purity of classical

music. "Do you know that 65 per cent of the [music] videos posted on social media during the lockdown is that of classical music? I can vouch for the bright future of Hindustani classical music, keeping in mind that it has been in existence for the last 300 years or so," he says. "All other music genres have emerged from this. So there is no question of Hindustani classical music losing its shine in another 300 years."

He has himself often mixed music genres to an equally packed auditorium. For Khan, the survival of Hindustani classical music depends not on how much of the basics it retains, but rather on how much improvisation it can make while retaining the basics. Fusion and orchestration are part of that process, he says. The music of those like Pandit Ravi Shankar and Ustad Ali Akbar Khan, according to him, will remain for a thousand years because of the way it has been improvised—without losing its heart. 🎵

THOUGH HE BELIEVES IN GURUKUL OR GHARANAS, KHAN IS CLEAR THAT BOLLYWOOD AND INDIAN POPULAR MUSIC DO NOT HARM THEM.

TWO WORLDS COLLIDE

Fitting into the royal fold was always going to be difficult for Meghan Markle, say the authors of a new book on the royal couple

BY MANDIRA NAYAR

This is a happy ending that begins when the prince drops his title. The negotiations for Brexit deal are being ironed out. “Megxit” is over and is so far a success. Prince Harry and Meghan Markle have repaid \$2.4 million to British taxpayers, which was spent on the renovation of Frogmore Cottage. They have bought a \$14.7 million seaside home in California. And, like everything that spells the perfect career for the famous, they have signed a deal with Netflix to produce content like the Obamas.

Finding Freedom offers a glimpse into why this might just be the ever-after they dreamt of. It is a breathless account of the romance that became a worldwide obsession and the marriage that finally led to the couple leaving the royal fold to make a living as commoners.

“Few things remain secret between royal households,” write Carolyn Durand and Omid Scobie. There are a few that spill like the inside story of Meghan wanting a different tiara to wear on her wedding day that made news.

Meghan did not have only to contend with the in-laws in a family that can only rival an Indian one—in terms of its expectations—but also

**Finding Freedom:
Harry And Meghan
And The Making Of A
Modern Royal Family
By Omid Scobie And
Carolyn Durand
Published by
HarperCollins
Price ₹599, Pages 354**



the “forces within Buckingham Palace”. Little incidents had built up, convincing Harry that they would never be happy in the palace. Their story has just the right amount of family drama to make the book a compelling read.

Fitting in was always going to be difficult for Meghan, according to the writers. She was a different kind of royal—a celebrity from Hollywood, who was outspoken and valued having a voice. The royal protocol of not responding when attacked was not easy for her. When they were dating and a picture of her wearing a gold chain bearing the initials M and H went viral, she got a phone call from a senior Kensington Palace aide. “She was advised that wearing such

a necklace only served to encourage the photographers to keep pursuing such images—and new headlines. She said little during the call, choosing instead to listen to the counsel,” say the authors.

Pieced together and filled with confidential sources, the book paints a picture of a stuffy world for Meghan, the kind that Princess Diana had found herself trapped in. She did, however, make an effort, including taking survival skill classes where a kidnapping is staged and she is taught how to become friends with the enemies, claim the writers.

There is insight into Harry’s sensitive nature, the friction over money, the relationship between Prince Charles and his sons and what hap-

pened at the “Sandringham Summit,” where Harry, Charles, William and the Queen met to find a way to help the Sussexes stop being working royals.

The relationship between the brothers had been tense since Harry started dating Meghan. When William sat his brother down to discuss his new relationship, he told Harry: “Don’t feel like you need to rush this. Take as much time as you need to know this girl.” According to the writers, “In those last two words... Harry heard the tone of snobbishness that was anathema to his approach to the world.”

The book makes no pretence of where the authors’ sympathies lie. Scobie is dubbed Markle’s “mouth-piece” and Durand covered the royals for 15 years. Unabashedly supportive of the couple forging their own path, this is about independence.



Excerpts from the chapter ‘Leaving Toronto’:

Meghan was feeling a little emotional as she looked around the boxed-up living room of her Toronto home. With endless late nights on the *Suits* set and so many farewells, it took more than three weeks to pack her life into the boxes that now surrounded her in early November 2017. A moving team had just left, marking furniture with different labels for overseas shipping or storage, and sheets were wrapped around her white cotton sofas, leaving nowhere left to sit.



She knew that the moment she gave up her role on *Suits* and moved to London, her acting career would be over. Forever. No turning back. In some ways, it came as a relief. As she got older and saw more of the world and saw she had more power to help change it with her platform, she began to think about moving away from acting and toward a career that was more meaningful.



Leaving acting, something she had spent so long working to achieve, was also “terrifying,” as she admitted to friends. At one point she had dreamed of moving into movies and meatier roles. As she moved into her mid-thirties, however, her dreams and aspirations started to change. A voice inside her kept telling her she could be doing so much more with her platform. That was one inspiration behind *The Tig*. But she also looked up to actresses like Angelina Jolie, who had become a force of her own in the charitable space, focusing mostly on humanitarian projects that she interspersed with the more

commercial ones, and funding her life with the occasional brand deal. At one point that was Meghan’s career model. But then she met Harry. If she was going to have a real future—and family—with him, she had to give up acting altogether.

Meghan was ready now.

On November 20, Meghan landed in London, knowing the British capital was no longer just where her partner lived. It was now her home. While the past few weeks had been challenging, this felt right. She was excited.

Harry felt guilty that she had to give up so much—her home, her



REUTERS

HAPPIER TIMES

Harry and Meghan with Prince Charles, Camilla, William, Catherine, George, Charlotte and Louis on the 70th birthday of Charles in London

career—to fit into his world. He was always worried about disrupting her life. Privately he harboured fears about the road ahead. What would the press be like? Would he have to deal with prejudice from more people in his own circle and the institution? He wanted to protect Meghan, to wrap her up and shield her from all the negativity, but he knew that was impossible. He worried about her turning to him one day to say, “I love you, but I can’t live like this.” Meghan assured him she was strong and ready to “become a team.”

After she moved her things into her new home with Harry, the cosy three-bedroom Nottingham Cottage,

the plan for the days ahead were shrouded in secrecy. For Harry, as a working member of the royal family, it was business as usual as he continued to attend regular engagements, including a reception for Walking with the Wounded on November 21, the day after she arrived, at the Mandarin Oriental hotel, which was just a few minutes up the road from the home he now shared with Meghan. A big supporter of the veterans’ charity since 2010, having taken part in their treks to the North Pole in 2011 and the South Pole in 2013, Harry told the organization’s co-founder Simon Daghish after he delivered his remarks to the room, “Life is very good.”



Meghan extended her personal touch beyond the walls of their cottage. She kept a box of disposable hand warmers she ordered from Amazon in the house so that whenever she went past the security gates on cold winter days, she could give a few to the guards.

Meghan always liked to make the places she lived in as comfortable and chic as possible, and she’d moved often due to the nature of her work. This time, however, her domestic bliss was partly a way to cope with the major shift her life had taken, both geographically and internally. She felt at home at Nott Cott with Harry—she’s always been able to bloom where she was planted, but she hadn’t moved to

London to start a new job. She had moved to London to start a new life. And although she was used to living thousands of miles from her mother, her constant source of support, there was something about being in London that felt just that little bit farther away. They spoke on the phone or via text message most days, but it wasn’t as easy because of the eight-hour time difference. Plus, she hadn’t moved to the UK like any typical member of society; she was going to become a member of the royal family, and that was a change that no one can truly be prepared for.

With Harry and Meghan holed up in their love nest, rumours of their engagement hit a frenzy—chatter not quieted by the fact Kensington Palace aides were more tightly lipped than ever. Media requests for comment on their engagement status were met with no response or a promise of “nothing to report.” But the evidence was mounting. When Harry and Meghan took a sudden two-hour meeting with Jason, Harry’s head of communications, and Ed Lane Fox, his private secretary, on November 22, it was clear that something was happening.

Something had happened. But one thing was for sure: no one in the couple’s circle was about to leak the news early—especially after keeping it secret for so long. The only ones who Meghan had explicitly told were her parents and her best friends, including Jessica, Markus, and Lindsay Roth. To some of her closest girlfriends, she had more recently announced the news simply with a photo of her hand bearing her engagement ring.

“Keeping it a secret was easy for Meghan,” a long-time friend said. “It was something she could keep to herself with Harry. And an opportunity to enjoy the moment before it became public news.”

(Excerpted with permission from HarperCollins.) ●

Spy scores high

Christopher Nolan's *Tenet* garnered \$20 million in the US and is inching towards \$150 million globally, making it the biggest hit during the pandemic. "There is literally no context in which to compare the results of a film opening during a pandemic with any other circumstance," stated Warner Bros, the studio behind the film. "We are in unprecedented territory, so any comparisons with the pre-Covid world would be inequitable and baseless." The espionage thriller, starring John David Washington and Robert Pattinson, is about an agent going on a mission to prevent World War III.



PTI

Sisters without misters

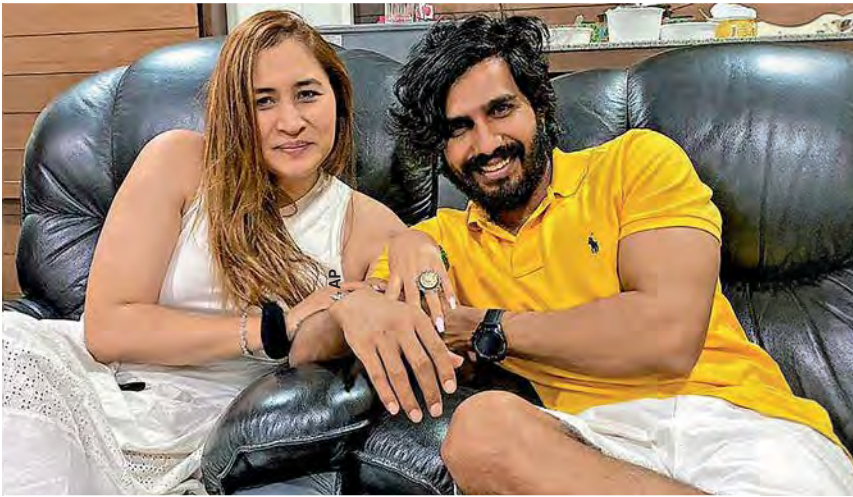
The film *Dolly Kitty Aur Woh Chamakte Sitare* is completely an all girls' show, and **Bhumi Pednekar**, who stars in it, feels that is the best part about it. "I think just the idea of an all-girls team spearheading *Dolly Kitty...* was super cool," she said. "Women who are vocal and all for progressiveness were headlining the project, be it Ekta (Kapoor, producer), Alankrita (Shrivastava, director), Konkona (Sen Sharma, co-actor), me and even the other members of the cast. We are all such empowered women and the experience was so satisfying and beautiful and just easy." The film is set for a digital release on September 18.



GETTY IMAGES

Soldiering on

Actor **Amit Sadh** shared a photo of him holding a clapper board on Instagram to indicate that he had started shooting for his upcoming digital show, *Zidd*. The Zee5 series is being directed by ad filmmaker Vishal Mangalorkar and co-produced by Boney Kapoor. "*Zidd* is a great human story of valour and determination set against the backdrop of the esteemed Special Forces of our great Indian Army and these are the times when this story is even more relevant," Kapoor had said earlier. Sadh was last seen in the Amazon Prime Video series, *Breathe: Into the Shadows*.



Courting outside the court

Badminton star **Jwala Gutta** got engaged to actor Vishnu Vishal on her 37th birthday. "N dis happened last nite n what a beautiful surprise it was," she tweeted. She seemed to be in an introspective mood, recalling her journey so far and how much more there was to look forward to. Gutta and Vishal had announced their relationship around two years ago. Both of them were married before—Gutta to badminton player Chetan Anand and Vishal to costume designer Rajini Natraj.

Colour blunder

Recently, **Ananya Panday** appeared in a song from the film *Khaali Peeli* titled Beyonce Sharma Jayegi. One of the lines in the song goes: "Tujhe dekh ke goriya, Beyonce sharma jayegi." (Your fair skin will make Beyonce feel shy.) In no time, social media went into overdrive, criticising the song for its blatant colourism. One user tweeted: "Beyonce sharma *jayegi*? Yes. Of second hand embarrassment."



GETTY IMAGES





Word's worth

I have been a bit bemused by the reputation I have acquired in our country for wielding difficult words, especially because most of the time I was not doing so deliberately or for effect. I happened to know the words in question and thought they were the most apposite for the thought I was seeking to convey. But after my usage of 'farrago' spiked a huge surge in searches on the Oxford English Dictionary website, the label stuck. And one enterprising publisher suggested I make a book out of it.

The title—*Tharoorosaurus*—was coined by Meru Gokhale of Penguin India, who proposed the idea for this book in the rear seat of a taxicab in Jaipur as we were heading to an event of the famed literary festival there. It was her idea of pitching me a book whose title would combine my name with the words 'tyrannosaurus' (since so many are terrified of difficult words) and 'thesaurus' (since people want to be able to look them up). I laughed it off then, but she persisted. I began to think it might be fun to do after all, and the result is my latest book.

It is not a scholarly work; I am neither a trained linguist nor philologist, and I have no pretensions to being a qualified English teacher either. It is rather the work of someone who loves words, has loved them all his life, and whose cherished childhood memories revolve around word-games with a father who was even more obsessed with them than I am. My father, Chandran Tharoor, was everything to me—teacher, guide, research adviser, imparter of values, my source of faith, energy and self-belief. My enthusiasm for life and appetite for learning are inherited from him; so is my workaholicism, and my love for words.

My father was a Scrabble addict and played every word game that had been invented, including Boggle and the acrostics in newspapers. He would play games with my sisters and me where we

would try to see how many words of four letters or more we could make from the letters in a nine- or ten-letter word. He invented word games for family car journeys, where one passenger had to imagine a five-letter word and the others had to guess it within 20 attempts by trying out five-letter words and being told how many letters matched with the secret word. His fascination for words had to rub off on his eldest child—me!

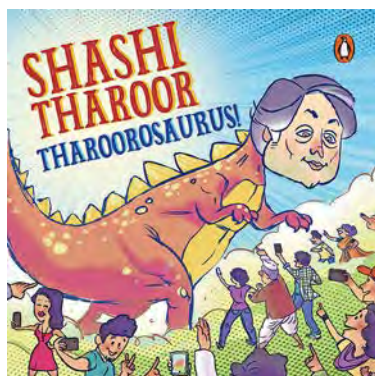
But it was not just words for their own sake. My father instilled in me the conviction that words are what shape ideas and reflect thought, and the more words you know, the more precisely and effectively are you able to express your thoughts and ideas. In addition, he delighted in the way words could be put together, their origins and shape and letters of

which they were made, and how they could be used. I collected words the way another kid might collect stamps, but not by looking up a dictionary—quite simply, by reading. My whole life I have read as widely as possible, and when you see the same word being used in multiple contexts, you start to get an idea of its meaning through the way it is situated in the text.

There are 53 short essays in my book that delve into the etymology

of each word and narrate anecdotes about its usage, literary citations and nuggets of history. There was no particular reason for the final choice of 53 words—they were either words I had recently used in a tweet (like 'farrago' and 'kakistocracy'), or words that the country was suddenly hearing a lot more often than usual (like 'pandemic' and 'quarantine'), or words in the news (like 'impeachment' and 'apostrophe'), or just words that I could tell interesting stories about (like 'curfew' and 'defenestrate'). I have tried to make each word interesting in its own right.

If *Tharoorosaurus* imparts to its readers some of the pleasure and delight that words have long afforded me, its purpose will have been amply served.



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