

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW KANE WILLIAMSON
I DON'T ENCOURAGE MANKADING

MODI'S LETTERS TO MOTHER GODDESS
'MY EXCHANGES WITH HER CALMED ME'

JOURNALISM WITH A HUMAN TOUCH

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Mauris Noronha, the Covid-warrior

With Covid-19 cases on the rise, India is still battling the unseen. Maharashtra, one of the worst-hit states of India, has been battling the pandemic since the beginning. Citizens have reached out to help one another, however, the heroic act put together by one man since March has been noteworthy. A businessman by profession and a philanthropist by passion, Mauris Noronha, a resident of Borivali's I.C. Colony has dedicated himself to the task of caring for society's most vulnerable segments.

As the impact of the lockdown on society's weakest sections became apparent, Mauris has made it his mission to reach out to as many in need as possible, drawing solely from his savings that he was accumulating to migrate to the United States. Besides, he was also planning to clear his housing loan, which has now been postponed.

He initiated a door-to-door campaign in the worst-hit slums of Mumbai. By September, this initiative had provided vital rations to more than six lakh individuals in every corner of Mumbai. Residents of other cities of Maharashtra like Ahmednagar, Shirdi, Pune, and Nasik also received essential supplies from him.

Working tirelessly throughout the day, Mauris has also begun to extend his aid in other ways. He has begun to distribute vital medical supplies and protective equipment to ambulance staffers and auto-rickshaw drivers in the region and helped stranded migrants from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar navigate the bureaucratic requirements necessary to return to their homes. He has also not hesitated to extend his support to lawyers and advocates, helping a few out, whose income was affected owing to the courts being shut. Furthermore, he has also bought a fully equipped ambulance that can be used by citizens in case of an emergency.

As on September 8, on the occasion of Mother Mary's birthday, Mauris started to preach fellow Mumbaikars as he continued by foot from his IC Colony, Borivali residence to Mount Mary's Church, Bandra, urging them to follow the norms, while distributing masks and sanitisers.

Through his selfless efforts, Mauris has proved himself to be the hero, our nation so desperately needs, serving as a shining example of all that is good about the human spirit.

One can reach out to *Maurisbhai* on Facebook and Instagram to seek support.



It is too early

CAN WE REALLY say that Delhi has become one of the biggest success stories of Covid-19 containment in the country? Every state can claim so ('Governments need to avoid imposing arbitrary lockdowns', September 13).

There was time when south Indian states were tackling the virus more effectively than north Indian states. But that is not the case today, with Andhra Pradesh becoming the second worst-hit state in the country. Cases continue to spiral even in Kerala, which had shown promising results early on.

There is definitely a slowdown in cases in Delhi. But, who knows, it could surge again. That is the problem with Covid-19. Nobody is sure when it will peak.

Arvind Kejriwal deserves credit for adopting plasma therapy in Delhi, which other states have followed. He needs to continue the good work and make sure there are no unnecessary disagreements with the Centre on managing the pandemic.

**Tapesh Nagpal,
On email.**

Kejriwal handled the crisis in Delhi very well, and made sure that Covid-19 cases came down considerably. Hats off to him.

Kejriwal set aside his ego and took suggestions from the Centre. The Centre was also flexible in its approach, and revised its stand wherever necessary.

One must not forget that it was Union Home Minister Amit Shah's timely intervention that helped the Delhi government come out of the crisis. He was mostly on the field, inspecting all the work that was being done. Precisely why he tested Covid-19 positive a few days later.

Kejriwal and his team cannot afford to be complacent now. So much more needs to be done.

**Gaurav Thakur,
On email.**

I agree with Kejriwal that governments need to avoid imposing arbitrary lockdowns. Many states are imposing it on a regular basis. Also, the lockdowns imposed by states are not as effective as a national lockdown, and there is confusion galore.

**Tigin Thomas,
On email.**

Take care of stray dogs

It is always a pleasure reading R. Prasannan's column, on any topic he writes.

Whilst on the subject of dogs, we should give a thought to stray dogs in our country, who survive on garbage found on the streets ('Hark, hark, the native bark', September 13).

If we care for dogs, there is an urgent need to work out a comprehensive and time-bound strategy to rehabilitate stray dogs and house them in shelter homes.

Such a project would also complement the Swachh Bharath Mission that the prime minister launched a few years ago. The situation right now is pathetic not only for these hapless animals but also for people at large due to the hazards caused by strays.

Perhaps, the Centre could take the initiative to guide the states and concerned authorities towards this end.

**K.S. Medappa,
On email.**

Careful, Swara Bhasker

Swara Bhasker, you are precisely doing what you have been objecting to; namely,

making slanderous allegations, albeit from the other side of the fence ('Public decency has just perished', September 13).

Public decency works both ways, isn't it? So, it was in bad taste to see Rhea Chakraborty talk about Sushant Singh Rajput's mother's mental health. Rhea had never met Sushant's mother.

Swara, if you cannot fathom the distress of Sushant's family, can you at least maintain a dignified silence and wait for the investigating agencies to conclude their investigations in any which way? Walk the talk, Swara, and refrain from using your column for your own brand of latent voyeurism.

**Nivedita Honnatti,
On email.**

Pranab da the great

If I have to list the ten politicians in the period after Independence, from Jawaharlal Nehru to Narendra Modi, I would include Pranab da. A learned man, he was a great negotiator and manipulator like the great Chanakya ('Man for all seasons', September 13).

If he had been an orator and knew Hindi well, he would have become the prime minister of the country, irrespective of Sonia Gandhi's plans.

**K.V. Jayaram,
Bengaluru.**

Pranab da will be remembered for his outspokenness and oratorical skills, which were based on logic and delivered in crisp, pre-

cise language tinged with abundant witticism. One of the main leaders of the Congress, Pranab da nourished and nurtured the party, winning the confidence of successive Congress presidents, and emerged as one of the prominent firefighters in the Congress during a crisis.

As president, he would be remembered for his swift decisiveness in rejecting the maximum number of mercy petitions.

**B. Suresh Kumar,
On email.**

Your package on Pranab was brilliant. His contributions to the country are laudable. He showed much interest in initiating different projects in the Rashtrapati Bhavan, which no president had done before.

**Ragavan R.,
On email.**

Well analysed

Mani Shankar Aiyar deserves appreciation for bringing to light the mindset of V.D. Savarkar, that led to even chaste Hindus to transform themselves into the violence-prioritised hindutva brigade ('Can violence be sacred, democratic?', August 30).

Even the lynching of Muslims in the garb of cow protection appears to stem from this kind of dangerous indoctrination.

**Tharcus S. Fernando,
On email.**

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Saurabh Kirpal,
senior advocate, Supreme Court

Decision on judgeship deferred because I am gay

BY SONI MISHRA

SENIOR ADVOCATE Saurabh Kirpal, one of the lawyers in the landmark Navtej Singh Johar case that led to the Supreme Court decriminalising homosexuality in 2018, thinks that his sexuality could be the reason behind the apex court collegium deferring a decision on appointing him as a judge in the Delhi High Court.

The High Court had recommended Kirpal's appointment as a judge in 2017, and the proposal had come up for discussion before the collegium thrice, but a decision on his file was deferred every time.

The 48-year-old, however, says the court has been ahead of the times in its judgments. Kirpal has edited a collection of essays—*Sex and the Supreme Court: How the Law is Upholding the Dignity of the Indian Citizen* (2020)—on the judgments passed by the apex court on issues ranging from sexual autonomy, gender rights and privacy.

Excerpts from an exclusive interview:

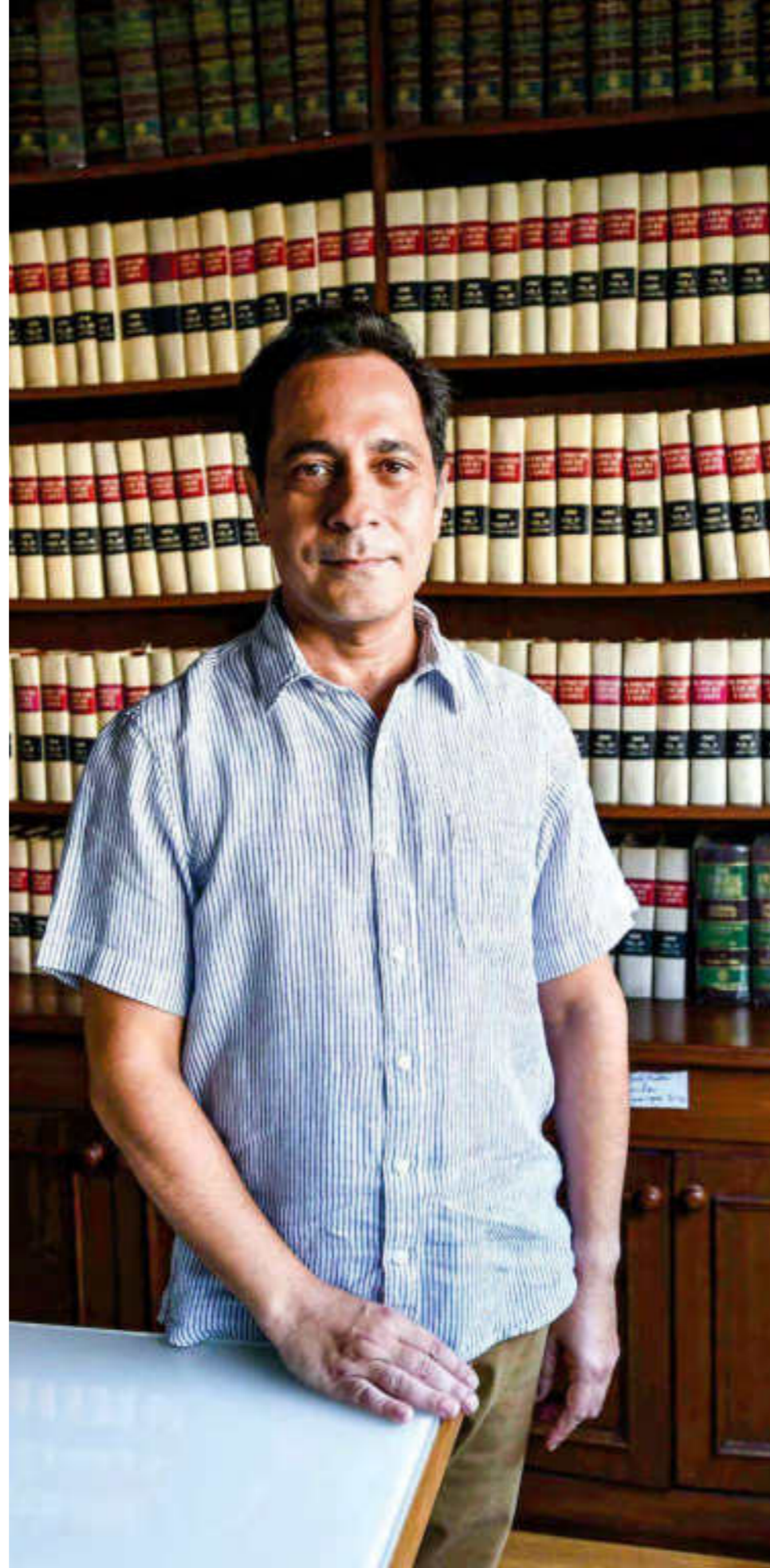
Q/How important was it to chronicle the progressive judgments given by the Supreme Court?

A/It was interesting that it was the same bench of five judges that gave three judgments—the adultery judgment, the Section 377 judgment and the Sabarimala judgment—all fairly progressive. The Supreme Court behaves very differently when it sits in benches of five judges, what is known as the Constitution Bench, because then it is aware that it is speaking to history.

These judgments caught the public imagination. But when the hearing was on, people were not commenting about it the same way they comment about how the court carries out its judicial function nowadays. Hence it was important for these judgments to be explained to the common person in relatively simple terms.

Q/These judgments tackle issues from sexual autonomy to gender rights to privacy and dignity.

A/The Supreme Court is not one court.... And different chief justices have different priorities. I think it was a case of the Chief Justice [Dipak Misra] also wanting to take up these issues, which



SANJAY AHLAWAT

were probably dear to his heart. It cannot be a coincidence that he was close to his retirement and there were these matters that were of interest to the common man and which were progressive and liberal.

Q/Has the court been ahead of the times?

A/The court does lead from the front and is often ahead of public opinion. And that is the role of the court as the guardian of the Constitutional rights of the minorities and other communities. It has to be counter-majoritarian....

Q/What difference has the Section 377 judgment made to the lives of the people?

A/There has been quantitative as well as qualitative change. In terms of quantitative change, [it is] the sheer number of people who are standing up to be counted, the number of petitions that are being reported every day about same sex couples going to court and asking for protection.

Even more important has been the qualitative change—how LGBTQIA persons look upon themselves and how the society looks upon them now.

Q/It is said that the recommendation to appoint you as a judge of the Delhi High Court has been hanging fire because you are gay.

A/Part of the problem is the complete lack of transparency on what the reason for my file hanging fire is. The typical course for the collegium is to either accept or to reject it. And that is their right and domain. But to defer something not only for three years but on three separate occasions causes one to wonder what the reason may be.

There are several media reports and I have no reason to disbelieve those in the absence of any evidence (to the contrary). The reason ostensibly is that the powers that be or the Intelligence Bureau wanted further information about my partner with whom I have been for 20 years and they were unable to get [it]. He has been living in India for the last

16 years and is employed with the Swiss embassy. They could get whatever information they wanted.

Q/So the issue is that you have a non-Indian partner?

A/If I were a straight person, and had I been married, there would have been no such problem. Justice Vivian Bose of the Supreme Court had an English wife. Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar has a Japanese wife. Why is it a problem for me other than the fact that I am a gay man who cannot get married to his partner? I would very much like to, the moment this country permits it. But in the absence of the ability to get married, there is no other explanation for me than that this is because of my alternative sexuality. The court has given me no other reason and the media reports stand un rebutted....

The judgment in 2018 is a great charter for LGBTQIA rights. In my case, the court has not belied that promise because it has not taken a decision yet. But I think the court is more reticent than need be.

Q/Do you feel disappointed, especially since judgeship for you would have meant a lot for the LGBTQIA community?

A/I come from a family where I have seen what a judge's life is. I know the sacrifices that a judge has to make and the restrictions it puts on your freedom. The judge's salary—what they earn in a month, I probably earn in half a day. So when they asked me to become a judge three years ago, I was very, very reluctant.... But I felt that if I was not willing to give up the money and the freedom and accept a responsibility and be a role model for the community, then that would have been wrong on my part.

If there was a member of the LGBTQIA community on the bench, not only would there be diversity on the bench, [but also] for that young, gay child or that young trans child in school, there would be a feeling that they, too, could reach great heights. ●



■ APERITIF ■
THE BIG PICTURE

SIP AND SOAR

A retired Airbus 330 aircraft has been converted into a coffee shop near Pattaya in Thailand. With Covid-19 curtailing air travel across the world, airplane cafes in Thailand—which offer customers a chance to pretend they are in the sky—seem to have taken off.

PHOTO BY AFP

POINT BLANK



World history will tell you when you increase vulgarity in society, two things happen: sex crimes increase and the family system breaks down.

Imran Khan,
Pakistan prime minister

I don't really see myself as a cricketer. I see myself as quite a cultured person.

Adam Zampa,
Australian cricketer

I met Yamaraj [the lord of death]. Today, he himself escorted me back home. He said, 'You still have to make more films. If you don't make films and if these films are not boycotted by idiots, their lives will be meaningless.' He left me back on earth so that I can help them find meaning in their lives.

Anurag Kashyap,
filmmaker, on a recent death hoax

Psychiatrists may wonder whether the private self in fact conforms to the public image. Why would a man with 56-inch chest so fear an unscripted press conference that he has not held one in six years in office? Could it be that his inner conviction is somehow less robust than the outer projection?

Ramachandra Guha,
historian, on Prime Minister Narendra Modi



My hard work sustained me, and my respect for my work nudged me forward. My enthusiasm on sets aided me. My hunger to learn propelled me. Here I am, 10 years down the line, so grateful for every film, every experience—good or bad, every person I have ever worked with!

Sonakshi Sinha,
actor

WORD PLAY

Philantourism is all about travelling for a good cause, and industry experts say that it will be one of the top tourism trends in 2021. Portmanteau of philanthropy and tourism, philantourism refers to the act of going on holiday to places where the tourist industry needs financial support. It will be the buzzword to bolster the industry when travel restrictions are lifted post Covid-19.

MILESTONES

FIERCE FIGHTBACK

Austrian Dominic Thiem became the first man in 71 years to win the US Open after losing the first two sets in the final. Thiem beat German Alexander Zverev 2-6, 4-6, 6-4, 6-3, 7-6 in the final to win his first grand slam title.



FILM LIONESS

Chinese-born filmmaker Chloe Zhao's *Nomadland* won the prestigious Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival. Zhao is the first woman director to win the coveted prize in a decade.



GOOD SIGN

An international team of astronomers found a potential sign for life in the atmosphere of Venus. The astronomers detected the presence of the chemical phosphine, which could be produced by terrestrial organisms like bacteria, in the planet's atmosphere.



POWER POINT

SACHIDANANDA MURTHY



Redrawing red lines

When External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar made a virtual address to the US-sponsored multinational convention on Afghanistan in Doha recently, India crossed a self-imposed red line. The convention attended by representatives of many countries had nominees of the Afghanistan government and the Taliban. Two decades after the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government decided not to have dealings with the Taliban, in the wake of its support to the hijackers of the Indian Airlines flight 814, New Delhi has boldly altered its anathema list of governments and entities. The message is that India does not mind the Taliban in the Afghan tent, as long as the elected Afghan government is also there.

Even while dealing with China's transgression on the border, Jaishankar has found time to promote the new vision of Indian foreign policy through his new book based on his long experience as a diplomat. He has indicated that it is time for India to respond quickly to changes in global power. He wants to abandon the old black-and-white perception of foreign policy where friends and non-friends were clearly identified, and policies remained immutable.

The alternative is either grey or technicolor, depending on one's pessimism or optimism. But, India has agreed with interlocutors like the US, Qatar and the European Union that the talks between the Afghanistan government and the Taliban should be given a chance, while keeping an eye on Pakistan's puppeteering of the Taliban through the integration of the dreaded Haqqani Network into its leadership.

The foreign ministry also feels the participation is a necessary recognition of India, which had been left out of earlier conferences on Afghanistan during the 18-year war by the US. Pakistan had always tried to circumscribe India's role in its western neighbour. The US has its own objec-

tives now—ensure Indian security participation and use India to bring out the erstwhile northern alliance groups opposed to the Taliban.

India's red line has evolved since independence because of the hostility of certain governments and entities or because of India's own ideological impulses. The government did not recognise or deal with countries which practised apartheid like South Africa and Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), rather supporting leaders like Nelson Mandela and Robert Mugabe who led movements to liberate those countries. The Pakistan army and its offspring, the Inter-Services Intelligence, which are accused of sponsoring terrorism, have been



anathema. After initial support to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka, the government has shunned the LTTE ever since the assassination of former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991. Specific issues like Khalistani activism (Canada), non-extradition of Purulia bomb drop convict Kim Davey (Denmark), opposition to the scrapping of Article 370 (Turkey) and non-extradition of wanted

preacher Zakir Naik (Malaysia) have put countries on the negative list, too. Portugal, which for long was avoided after the liberation of Goa, is now an enthusiastic India supporter in Europe.

Israel was on the no-go list because of India's strong support for the Palestinian cause. It was given diplomatic recognition by the Narasimha Rao government after the Cold War ended, and in turn helped to soften American sanctions after the Pokhran nuclear tests in 1998. The wisdom in the government is that alterations to the red line, like taking Israel off the negative list, have been helpful in many ways. If talking to the Taliban is a departure from past policy, the self-imposed restraint not to displease China can also be reworked, if Beijing does not relent on the Line of Actual Control.



FIT FOR OFFICE

Politicians rarely are role models for fitness. But Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister Pema Khandu is defying this notion. The 41-year-old trekked 24km in 11 hours to reach an inaccessible village—which has only 10 houses and is at a height of 14,500 feet. Three days later, he ran 11km on a misty village road with two security men. He participates in volleyball matches regularly and had ridden his Royal Enfield motorcycle for 122km last year to promote tourism. Looks like there is no better champion of tourism and healthy living in the state than the chief minister himself.

ILLUSTRATIONS JAIRAJ T.G.

SOLEMN PRAYER

Former Union minister Pon Radhakrishnan was seen crying as he offered prayers at the famous Murugan shrine in Thiruchendur in south Tamil Nadu. Although it is not known why the senior BJP leader was moved to tears, it was his first visit in a long time to a temple he used to frequent before it had closed during the lockdown. Perhaps he was praying earnestly for a victory in the upcoming Kanyakumari bypolls. The seat had fallen vacant after his rival and current MP H. Vasanthakumar died of Covid-19.

HIGH DEMAND

As soon as the name of a Tollywood actress cropped up in the Rhea Chakraborty drug case, Hyderabad went into a tizzy. The most prominent reaction was from the state unit of the BJP, which demanded that the TRS government probe the nexus between local stars and the drug mafia. While other parties remained mum, the BJP called it ironic that the same actor was the brand ambassador for the state's anti-drugs campaign. Time will tell whether it was plain politics or a genuine demand.



PARALLEL WARS

Kangana Ranaut has been taking on the Maharashtra government, and unlikely allies have emerged for her in Ayodhya. A few of the city's saints have supported the 'daughter of the country' while warning Maharashtra Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray to stay away from the temple town. In turn, the Sri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust hit back, saying it was not within anyone's power to stop the Shiv Sena chief from visiting. This is the latest example of a salvo fired by the VHP and the old order which is finding itself side-lined by the new trust. From crying over the Palghar lynching to supporting Ranaut, it seems the saints will have to take their fights to the gods.



ROYAL GESTURE

The Naik Nimbalkars, the erstwhile royal family from Phaltan, Maharashtra, were known to be benevolent rulers. The tradition seems to continue to this day, as evident by the actions of Ramraje Naik Nimbalkar, chairman of the Maharashtra legislative council. The senior NCP leader, who was the principal of a law school before entering politics, recently temporarily gave two palaces to the district administration of Satara. The famous Mudhoji Palace and the Vikram Vilas palace will now be turned into Covid-19 care centres.

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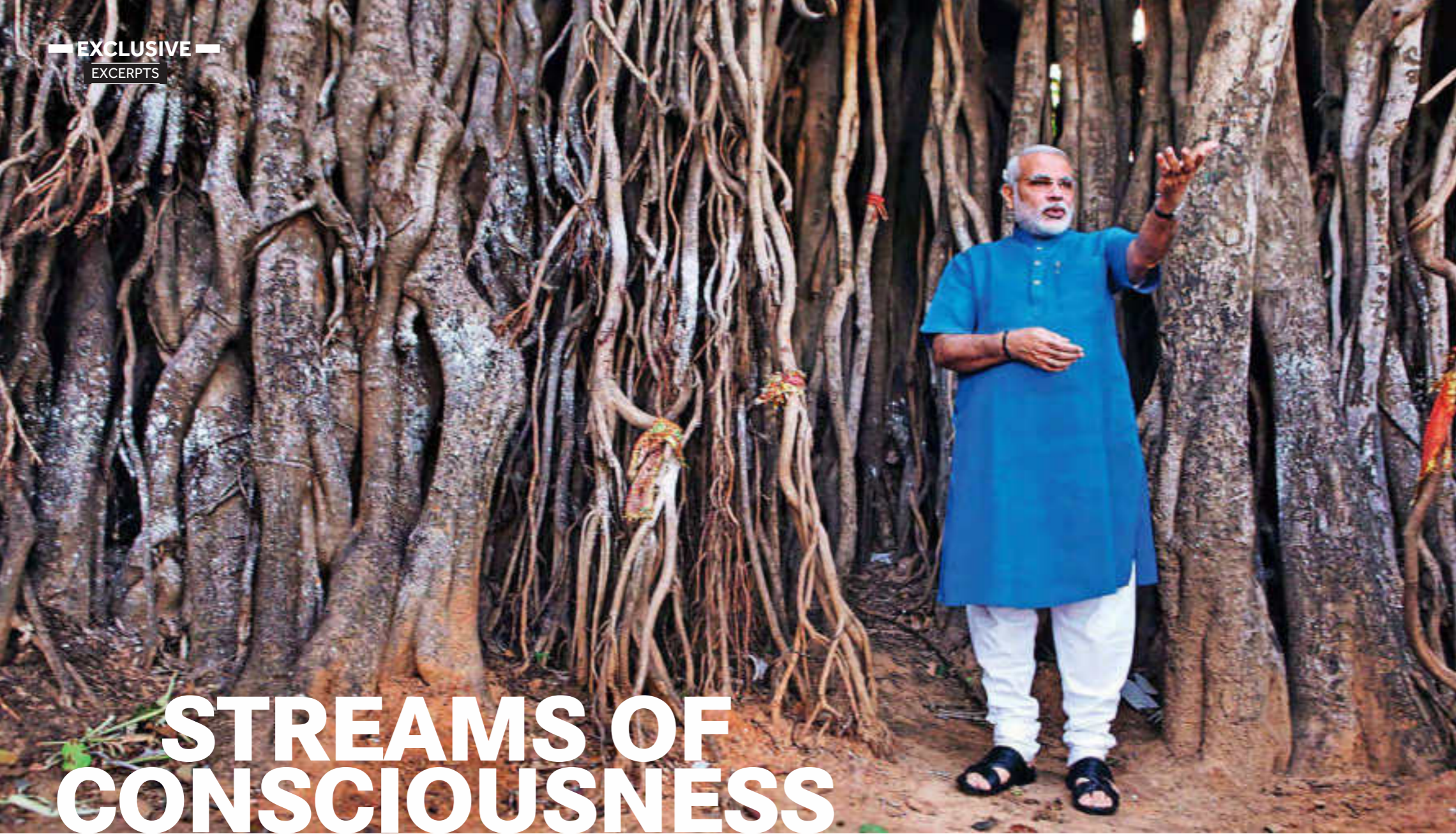
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THE WEEK
JOURNALISM WITH A HUMAN TOUCH



STREAMS OF CONSCIOUSNESS

BY MANDIRA NAYAR

Prime Minister Narendra Modi turns 70 this month with a new book. *Letters to Mother* is a flashback 34 years to 1986, when Modi had not established himself in the hurly-burly of mainstream politics. As an RSS *pracharak*, he began jotting down his innermost thoughts “when the pressures became insurmountable”. Every night before going to bed, he would share his hopes, aspirations and fears as letters to *jagat janani*, or the mother goddess. Every few months, he “systematically tore up all the pages and threw them into a bonfire”. A friend’s intervention, “emphasising the importance of documentation”, ensured that Modi kept the notes. In 2014, some of them were published in Gujarati as *Saakshi Bhaav*. The English translation, *Letters to Mother*, has now been released by HarperCollins India.

This is Modi’s third book. His first—*A Journey*, a book of poems translated into English—was published in 2014. “All of us are entitled to self-expression,” writes Modi, “and that is exactly what I have done.”

FOREWORD BY NARENDRA MODI

This is not an attempt at literary writing; the passages featured in this book are reflections of my observations and sometimes unprocessed thoughts, expressed without filters.

A public figure is always judged by his position; irrespective of what he says or does, his persona becomes so exaggerated that it is difficult to

trace the man behind the image or, let me put it this way, there comes a time when there is no desire in us to search for the individual behind the mask.

To live an ordinary life is a privilege and deep within, all of us are but ordinary mortals affected by the positive and the negative showering bestowed upon us by the universe. None of us are above vices, virtues, hope, disappointment, love, yearning, expectations or ambitions.

Like you, I am an ordinary mortal with some strengths and some weaknesses, and like everyone, I

I SEEK STRENGTH FROM MEMORIES, HAVE FAITH THAT ALL THE JOYOUS MOMENTS WILL LINGER AND THAT SORROWS WILL WITHER AWAY.

am constantly struggling to become more aware and evolved.

Sometime in the past when the pressures became insurmountable, I got into the habit of writing letters to the Mother Goddess, whom I address as *Jagat janani*. I shared my innermost thoughts with her every night before going to bed, and this exercise had a strangely calming effect on me. I looked forward to everyone falling asleep, so that I could retire to a quiet corner with my notebook.

The intention was never to get published, the jottings were for myself. I am not a writer, most of us are not; but everybody seeks expression, and when the urge to unload becomes overpowering there is no option but to take pen to paper, not necessarily to write but to introspect and unravel what is happening within the heart and the head, and why. The exercise proved cathartic, and even though it was a one-way communication with the Mother Goddess, the discipline of rewinding my daily thoughts healed me in a strange, unique way, like I was being shielded by a bigger force.

I wrote every single night, for years; and every few months, I systematically tore up all the pages and threw them into a bonfire. I have lost count of the number of pages I have consigned to the flames. Then one day, while I was in the process

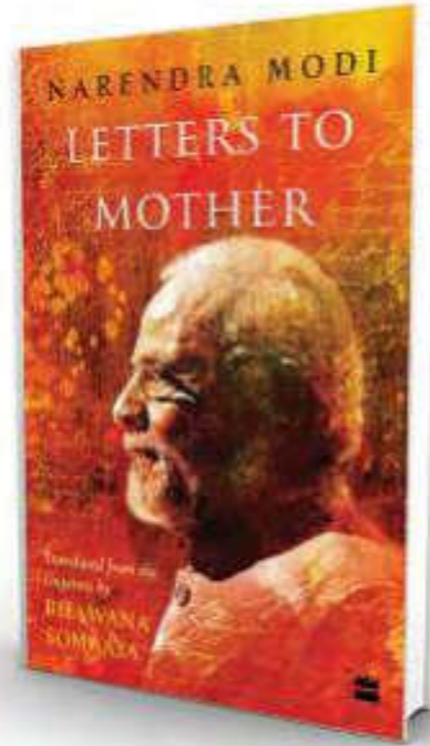
of igniting the flames, my dear friend and respected colleague from the RSS, Narendra *bhai* Panchsara visited my home unannounced. He was led to the garden where I was busy tearing up sheets of paper. Panchsara *bhai* snatched the remaining pages from my hand. He was angry and admonished me for destroying my valuable jottings, emphasizing the importance of documentation. “That you wrote them and preserved them all this while is proof that these are precious to you; to destroy them is to disrespect your instinct,” he said.

His words impacted me and I promised him that I would revere my instinct and stop lighting my quarterly bonfire. Years went by and one day, I still don't know how, Image Publishers got wind of my journal and wrote to me seeking my permission to publish these writings as a book. I declined, but once again it was Panchsara *bhai* who insisted I agree to the offer—probably because he feared that if they weren't published, I might try to destroy the pages again! The remains of those diary pages comprise *Saakshi Bhaav*, which was published in the year 2014.

I owe these letters and the book to my respected friend Panchsara *bhai*: had he not visited me that day, had he not intervened, had he not admonished and awakened me, I would have lost the opportunity of sharing my intimate conversations with the *Jagat janani*, wherein I present her my innermost feelings of fear, sorrow and conflict, the ordinary feelings of an ordinary man. I'm aware that my expressions are often abstract; perhaps when the heart is overwhelmed the mind races faster than the hand on paper, and so, yes, my expressions are sporadic and at the same time overflowing. I am not a professional writer, I don't understand structures and formats, but I do understand emotions—and I write because I feel strongly and cannot contain myself at that moment.

The Mother Goddess understands this, I am sure; she does not judge me, does not grade me by my choice of words or phrases—it does not matter to her whether I write prose, poetry, essays or random thoughts. She understands my intent, understands what is expressed and also what is left unsaid. And if I understand all this, why did I destroy all that I created? The only logical explanation I can offer is that probably because it is painful to revisit suffering.

Today, however, I seek strength from memories, have faith that all the joyous moments will linger and that sorrows will wither away. If the mind is positive there's always hope. I love books and read a lot, I am attracted to art and culture, but I don't fancy myself as a litterateur. I was reluctant to get



Letters to Mother
By Narendra Modi
Translated from Gujarati
by
Bhawana Somaaya
Published by
HarperCollins
Price ₹299, pages 112

the Gujarati version of *Saakshi Bhaav* published but was coerced into it by close friends, and the English translation after six years is a pleasant surprise.

It feels strange to read what you wrote many years ago, because you are not the same person anymore and your circumstances are different too; and yet, it is all a part of you, your journey, and I will not shy away from my outpourings. I wrote then what I felt at the time and I write now what I feel today. People judged me then; people continue to judge me today. I wasn't seeking endorsement many years ago and I am not seeking validation today.

All of us are entitled to self-expression and that's exactly what I have done. 🙏

PAIN IS NOT AN ORPHAN

28 December 1986

Unbearable anguish
Insurmountable surroundings
It is said that in every creation
You sense the suffering of the creator

Then why is it that
Despite my immense suffering
There is no trace of creation?
Then is it compassion not anguish
That compels creation?
For pain is the aftereffect of sorrow

Usually it is negativity
That ushers pain
Erodes your senses
And paralyzes you

Pain has no lineage
Its presence, growth, intensity
Is dependent on emotions
Therefore, pain isn't an orphan

Nor is pain always barren
There's no guarantee of
Creation
Pain can be destructive
It can be productive
It is difficult to predict

Compassion exhales fragrance
And it is unmistakable
Compassion is never barren
It has effects, no aftereffects
It is inbuilt
It is only about affirmations

Compassion is its own creator

Alphabet-formed words
Require boundaries
To be glorified as literature
Or certified as knowledge

What is created out of fervour
Is free, unrestricted
It travels beyond horizons
It is ongoing
All around
And collective in destination

Compassion is inclusive
Of everyone's dreams
In my experience
Compassion is the root of creation

When pain is moderate
Compassion is modest
When pain becomes suffering
Compassion becomes passion
And when its presence, potency,
severity
Becomes unbearable
Compassion unwittingly
Transforms into creation

Yes, at times
Anguish is capable of suffocating
Compassion
That's because
Compassion disapproves of struggle

My only plea to you, Mother
Is to bestow me with patience
That someday
The existing darkness dispels
Someday
The ongoing conflict ceases
Someday
Enlightenment will prevail

Women on watch

The Army has deployed riflemen near LoC—a first—to check narcotics and arms smuggling from across the border

BY TARIQ BHAT

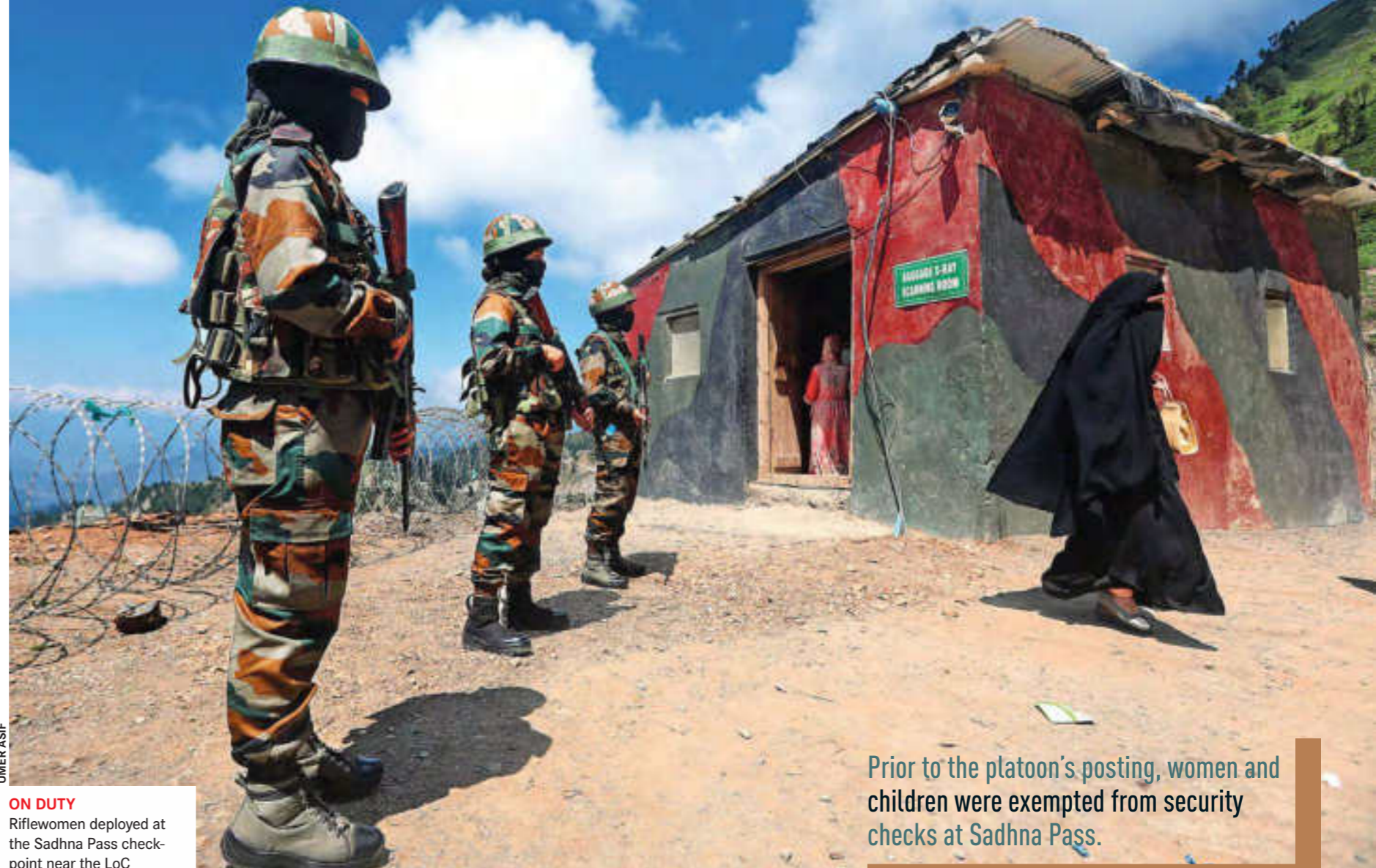
AN INSAS RIFLE strapped to her shoulder, T. Lian Khan Ching is clad in military camouflage with a bullet-proof vest, helmet, ankle-high service boots and a scarf that doubles as a face mask. Only her eyes are visible. And, they seldom stay still, darting from one woman or child to another as they disembark from vehicles for a security check at Sadhna Pass in Kashmir's Kupwara district. Ching is part of an all-woman platoon from Assam Rifles deployed by the Army at the strategic Sadhna Pass since July 25. The purpose is to deter smugglers from using women and children to sneak in arms and narcotics into Kashmir from across the Line of Control. Prior to the platoon's posting, women and children were exempted from security checks. This is the first time the Army has deployed women soldiers near the LoC in Kashmir.

Sadhna Pass lies 150km northwest of Srinagar. Located 10,000ft above sea level, it is surrounded by the LoC on three sides and connects one lakh residents of Tangdhar-Teetwal villages with the rest of the Valley. Locally, Sadhna Pass is called Nathi Chapa Gali or the pass that leaves one's nose numb owing to the icy cold winds during winter; 20ft snow blankets the pass in winters when the temperature drops to -25°C. After the

1965 war, when Bollywood superstar Sadhna visited the pass to boost the morale of the troops, it came to be known as Sadhna Pass. Black-and-white photographs of the film star adorn the walls of the meeting hall at the pass alongside photos from the 1965 war and of soldiers in action against tribals from Pakistan who tried to annex Kashmir in 1947. There are also photos of India's first defence minister Baldev Singh interacting with troops at the pass and at Teetwal after the tribals were pushed back.

Most of the nine riflemen in the platoon hail from the northeast. Deployment near LoC comes with its own set of challenges—Pakistani artillery shelling, inclement weather, inhospitable terrain, minimum amenities and no recreation except watching television. But they have taken it all on the chin.

On August 7, they had their first brush with shelling from Pakistan that killed one civilian and injured six others at Tangdhar. As soon as they heard the shelling, Ching and three others of her platoon—all members are in their 20s—rushed to the underground bunker some distance away from the check-post. "We stayed in the bunker for some time and then resumed our duty," said Ching, who is from Nagaland. The shelling did not scare her, she said. "This is part of our job and that



ON DUTY
Riflemen deployed at the Sadhna Pass check-point near the LoC

is what we have been trained for," she said. She struggles with Hindi but is fluent in English. She applied for a job in the Army with four of her childhood friends, but only she got in. The opportunity to serve near the LoC has been a thrilling experience for her. "I tell myself, beyond those mountains is Pakistan," she said.

Riflemans Mevish Rongmei from Manipur has been serving in the Army for three years. "But this is the best experience to date," she said. Her father, also in the Army, inspired her to don the olive greens. While the local people are cooperative, she said they had trouble understanding her Hindi at times. Joining the Army was L. Khongsai's childhood dream.

Her brother is in the Border Security Force, and that made it easier for her to join the Army after class 12, said Khongsai, also from Manipur. The platoon is led by Captain Gursimran Kaur of the Army Service Corps. She regularly interacts with the soldiers and also acts as a guide. To unwind, the soldiers watch television or surf the internet on cellphone. Sadhna Pass has good internet connectivity, thanks to a mobile network line close by.

A senior Army officer said the women soldiers adapted well to the situation near the LoC. More washrooms were made available in view of their deployment, he said. The platoon's deployment, he added,

had helped curb the use of women and children to smuggle arms and narcotics. They had also addressed "the gender sensitivity concerns of the female travellers," the officer said.

A day after the deployment of the platoon—on July 26—10kg of brown sugar, an AK-47 rifle, two pistols, 20 grenades and other ammunition were recovered from three persons who were travelling in two vehicles.

An Army officer said that the narcotics and arms were seized during a routine checking of vehicles at night. He said the riflemen work in shifts of three hours, from 6am to 9pm. "After that, all the checking is done by male soldiers," he said. The presence of riflemen seemed to have put

pressure on the smugglers, he said, and that is why they were trying to smuggle drugs and weapons at night when women and children seldom travel.

Before deciding to post the women platoon at the pass, there were suggestions to deploy a contingent of policewomen at the check-post. However, the Army decided to bring in women soldiers, till the time the 100 women it plans to induct in the Military Police complete their training.

The women soldiers, meanwhile, are on watch. But guess what they are looking forward to? Snowfall in November. Said Rongmei: "It is going to be fun to witness snowfall here." ●

Prior to the platoon's posting, women and children were exempted from security checks at Sadhna Pass.

SPACED OUT

While other space agencies have busy schedules, ISRO's launches, including Gaganyaan, slip into 2021

BY REKHA DIXIT



ON THE BACKFOOT
File photo of Sriharikota. There has been no launch from here this year

MISSION GAGANYAAN will not take off this year. However, Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) is still hopeful that the last of the three flights in the mission, the one with Indian astronauts, should make it to the 2022 deadline, to coincide with the 75th anniversary of independence.

The first of the three flights of Gaganyaan was to have taken off this December, followed by another unmanned flight next year. The delay has been conveyed to the Space Commission.

Gaganyaan, India's human space flight mission, is a three-flight programme, with only the third actually carrying the astronauts into a lower earth orbit. Given that India is not sending any animals to space before launching the astronauts, the first two flights are important for testing the organisation's capabilities, including the life-support systems.

Instead of astronauts, the first two flights will have on board Vyommitra, a "half humanoid" (as she does not

have legs) to help check the systems in the crew module in situ, including temperature, pressure levels and oxygen availability. She will have some level of autonomy to communicate with the ground station.

ISRO's launch calendar has been heavily impacted by the pandemic, and there has been no launch from its spaceport, Sriharikota, this year. In fact, the only ISRO launch this year was G-SAT 30, but it was carried by a French rocket, Ariane, which took off from French Guiana on January 17. Although officials confirm that there may be around three to four launches before the year is over, they admit that the deadlines of several launches planned for the latter half of this year may slip into the next calendar year. This could have a cascading effect on the next year's plans, too.

"We are hopeful that the final manned mission will take off as per the planned schedule, since we still have some time cushion for it," said Vikas Singh, spokesperson, ISRO. At the time the project was announced

in 2018, chairperson K. Sivan had said that it was possible to do the mission even earlier, given that the organisation had already done enough R&D on it, and developed prototypes. However, that confidence had not taken into consideration the Covid-19 pandemic, which brought work to a complete halt initially, and even now, it is not business as usual.

Apart from Gaganyaan, ISRO was scheduled to launch Aditya, its first probe to study the sun's corona, too, this year. Chandrayaan-3 is listed for next year. This apart, there are several routine satellite launches, too.

S. Somnath, director, Vikram Sarabhai Space Centre, Thiruvananthapuram, said that two rockets were already at the space port in Sriharikota, waiting to take off since March, but with lockdowns and restricted movement, it has been impossible to do anything. One of these is the first Geo-imaging satellite (GISAT 1), which was to be launched upon a GSLV rocket. The other is a PSLV.

The GISAT is the first of the earth

observation geostationary satellites. So far, India has only had polar satellites for earth observation. It is meant for continuous, real time observations, and has applications for weather forecasts, disaster management, as well as military uses. The launch, scheduled for March 5, was called off mysteriously a day before, with ISRO citing technical reasons, and not specifying anything else. The secrecy over the cancellation led to a number of conspiracy theories.

"The technical issues are resolved," Singh said. "We are just waiting for travel to become easier." Almost all of ISRO's centres are involved in a launch, and it takes a minimum of a month's work at the spaceport to "integrate" a rocket for take off—stacking the satellite, evaluating, testing and then when the countdown starts, fuelling. The components come from various places—rockets come from Thiruvananthapuram or Mahendragiri. The satellites

are manufactured in Bengaluru, while the payloads may come from various other centres. "This requires the travel of officials to Sriharikota in various batches, across weeks, from different states. Sometimes, we also need international travel to our ground stations in Brunei and Indonesia," explained Somnath. For weeks, the rocket manufacturing centre at Thiruvananthapuram itself was under triple and critical lockdowns.

While ISRO managed to shift a lot of its research to the work-from-home schedule, there are certain things that simply cannot be done from home. Launching a rocket is one of those. Interstate restrictions was one hurdle, the fact that many of the organisation's own staff is affected by the infection, or in quarantine, creates further problems.

Somnath said that the rocket for Gaganyaan's first flight is almost ready. However, other technologies are not in the same phase of readiness, yet, say sources. A lot of the hardware manufacturing contracted to the private sector, too, has been affected by the pandemic. In fact, even the four test pilots of the Air Force, who were sent to Russia, for astronaut training in January, had to twiddle their thumbs for weeks with Russia itself under lockdown. The training has, since, resumed.

Meanwhile, from other spaceports across the earth, some very interesting launches have happened. China has so far had 22 missions since January and reports say it is aiming for a record 40 launches by December. Its best year was 2018, with 39 launches, the highest in the world. China's most prestigious mission, this year, was the July 22 launch of its Martian probe, Tianwen 1. This probe includes an orbiter, lander and rover.

The United Arab Emirates, too, sent a probe to Mars, the Hope Orbiter, from Japan in July. NASA launched its Mars 2020 mission, which included the Perseverance rover

and the Ingenuity helicopter, the first to attempt rotor blade flying in an alien atmosphere. All three spacecrafts are expected to reach Mars next February. They took advantage of a short window that happens every 26 months, when the two planets are closest to each other.

Earlier in June, NASA and private player SpaceX did the first human space flight from the US since 2011, sending astronauts to the International Space Station (ISS). NASA has just announced that the next SpaceX flight to the ISS will take off in late October, taking seven astronauts to the 20-year-old orbital laboratory. In October itself, NASA plans to send a probe to the asteroid Bennu, to return to the earth with a sample.

The Russian space agency Roscosmos, too, launched a Proton rocket with two satellites from its Baikonur spaceport in July and is planning, among other things, a flight to the ISS in September.

Experts say that unlike other countries, where facilities are in one place, India's space centres are spread across several states, and the lockdown restrictions have made it impossible for such heavy interstate transport of components and humans. The European Space Agency (ESA) has not been able to do any launches, officials point out, since its spaceports are far away from the headquarters in Paris and their launches will require international travel, even more difficult in these times.

Singh added that a lot of work has resumed in various centres as the country has begun unlocking in phases, and unless there is no other unforeseen event, ISRO should manage three to four launches by the year end. However, he said it was not possible to say which these launches would be, since they are all being readied simultaneously. It would depend on which gets ready, and also on the scheduling. ●

Ladakh ready for the winter challenge

BY NAMRATA BIJI AHUJA

With Indian troops engaged in a tense standoff with the People's Liberation Army on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Ladakh, people in the Union territory are facing multiple challenges going into the long and harsh winter. The alarming security situation and the problems posed by Covid-19 could make this winter far more challenging for them.

Leading from the front is Lieutenant Governor R.K. Mathur, who says his administration is prepared to tackle the challenge head on. As Ladakh does not have an elected legislative assembly, the role of the lieutenant governor is all the more crucial. Speaking exclusively with THE WEEK, Mathur says his administration is countering the Chinese infrastructure push on the LAC and the challenge posed by the impending winter by upgrading infrastructure and by ensuring the uninterrupted supply of essential goods such as food, water, power and medicines. Excerpts from the interview:

The Union territory of Ladakh was formed last winter. What were the major challenges you

faced back then? How are you preparing for the upcoming winter?

The onset of the usual harsh winter soon after the formation of the Union territory was a major challenge. The administration took a number of measures to deal with it. We provided 58 diesel generator sets to remote, unconnected areas, increasing power supply by about six to eight hours a day. Additional water tankers were arranged to supply about 3.5 lakh litres per day.

With the help of the Indian Air Force, 415 metric tonnes of fresh vegetables and essential commodities were airlifted. The IAF moved 2,125 passengers and patients in and out of Ladakh, primarily from Kargil, during the winter and the Covid-19 lockdown period. Remote areas which used to be cut off during winters were issued 18 satellite phones to ensure communication for evacuation of patients and availability of essential supplies. From February this year, we have 24x7 power supply.

Looking ahead, the co-operatives maintain a steady supply of perishable items, the power department and all other con-

cerned departments are working full time to stock up. Taking into account the Covid-19 pandemic, the medical department has been directed to procure all essential items such as medicines and equipment. We are also making sure that the snow-prone health centres across Ladakh are sufficiently equipped with essentials (to fight Covid-19).

With China building roads on its side, what are the steps taken by the new administration to upgrade infrastructure?

The Leh-Srinagar highway, which was closed due to heavy snowfall at the Zojila Pass, was opened on April 11 by the Border Roads Organisation, almost a month before the normal time, giving great relief to the people. The Manali-Leh Highway was also opened a month earlier

than usual, on May 18. Early opening of internal roads like the Darcha-Padam road, which offers an alternate route to the Zaskar region, and the Khaltsi-Lingshed road, too, was ensured. Road connectivity is the base for any development in Ladakh and is being pursued with utmost importance. So far, there are only two entry/exit points connecting Ladakh with the rest of the country. We are looking

at developing other routes. Within Ladakh, major works on roads and bridges have been initiated under the special development package provisions.

What is the administration doing to ensure Ladakh's cultural integration and economic development?

Ladakh's exclusive culture has carved out a name for itself among national and international researchers and travellers. The tourism industry contributes about 50 per cent to Ladakh's economy. The eagerness among people to study and appreciate this unique culture and ecosystem has resulted in a major influx of guests in recent years. We have prioritised the preservation of Ladakh's fragile ecosystem and the ancient relics of the monasteries. Last year, the tourism and

culture department successfully organised the first winter conclave to encourage Ladakh's winter tourism capabilities. This year we plan to go even grander, complying with Covid-19 restrictions.

The Changthang plains in eastern Ladakh produce the finest quality of pashmina and we aim to develop a unique identity for it. The GI (geographical indication) tagging process of Ladakh's pashmina is in its final stages. Recently, we sanctioned a ₹3 crore package to the Pashmina Growers Co-operative Marketing Society in Changthang.

How do you propose to make Ladakh self-sufficient?

One of our major plans is to improve the agricultural production of Ladakh. We have launched a ₹500 crore Mission Organic Development Initiative to convert Ladakh into an organic state by 2025.



“
Road connectivity is the base for any development in Ladakh and is being pursued with utmost importance.

“
We have launched a ₹500 crore Mission Organic Development Initiative to convert Ladakh into an organic state by 2025.

“
We are making efforts to promote Ladakh's winter tourism.

This will give a major boost to Ladakh's economy as the market for organic products is vast. Ladakh is home to a wide range of Himalayan medicinal and aromatic plants. A large variety of horticulture products like apricots and apples can be grown here. Developments in this sector will bring major economic benefits to Ladakh. A 5,000MW solar power project has been sanctioned; the tender has already been floated by the Solar Energy Corporation of India.

Can we expect Ladakh to become a popular winter tourist destination like Jammu and Kashmir?

Kashmir and Ladakh are varied in terms of culture as well as natural surroundings and, therefore, have their own USPs. Till recently, Ladakh had a negligible number of tourists in winter. We are making efforts to promote Ladakh's winter tourism as it will ensure a steady contribution to the economy.

How do you balance the development of Leh and Kargil? There is concern that Kargil may get neglected.

The twin districts of Leh and Kargil have different needs in different sectors. They share a common history and culture, including language. The administration is well aware of the needs and is addressing those needs to enable progress and development of each district in its own way. All 12 departments of the Union territory have their offices in both districts. We are working with a holistic approach and our endeavour is to give full administrative attention to both districts. ●

Beating the winter challenge

24x7 power supply

Steady supply of food, water and medicines, especially to tackle Covid-19

Reviving economy

Improved road connectivity

₹500 crore plan to make Ladakh 100% organic by 2025

5,000MW solar power project

Promoting Ladakhi pashmina

Heights of tension

The scramble for tactical advantage and reports of warning shots being fired indicate that the India-China stand-off is entering a more dangerous phase

BY PRADIP R. SAGAR

SIX MONTHS INTO his tenure as the commander of Leh-based Fire and Fury Corps (XIV Corps), Lt General Harinder Singh faced the biggest challenge of his career—the Chinese transgressions at the border. Since May, he has engaged with his Chinese counterpart five times, without much success. But, after the Army's latest offensive action, which gave it control over dominating heights in the region, Singh has more bargaining power in his negotiation with the Chinese. However, the tension on the border is unlikely to be resolved by the end of his tenure; normally, a corps commander's tenure is 12 months. Negotiations hardly yield immediate solutions to military stand-offs. It took nearly six years to resolve the Sumdorong Chu incident (1986), where India and China had come close to war.

Harsh Pant, head of strategic studies at Observer Research Foundation and professor of international relations at King's College London, said: "India has wrested military initiative from the Chinese forces on the ground for the moment, but Chinese forces will be waiting for their turn," he said. "There is going to be lots of turbulence going

forward."

But, after External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar and his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi met on September 10, on the sidelines of a Shanghai Cooperation Organisation meet in Moscow, there is absolute calm on the border. A senior Army officer termed this "unusual", given the experience of the past four months. There is apprehension that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) is desperate not only to dislodge the Indian Army from strategic heights, but also to attempt to gain leverage in talks by taking other areas. As a result, Indian Army formations are on highest alert all along the border.

One major development post Jaishankar and Wang Yi's meeting is that China's statement, quoting Wang Yi's remarks to Jaishankar, does not say "responsibility entirely with India"; earlier, this had been a key part of China's stance. However, the joint statement does not mention "status quo ante", either.

The eight fingers of Pangong Tso, where slopes of barren mountains jut into the lake (tso), has been a bone of contention between India and China since the early 1960s. Traditionally, India claims the territory till the easternmost Finger 8. But, both sides reached an understanding that India



REUTERS

CALL OF DUTY

Indian soldiers disembark from a military transport plane at a forward airbase in Leh

would control Fingers 1-4 and China 5-8. In the last fortnight, the Indian Army took control of dominating heights in the Fingers area, along with at least six other strategic positions; this would enable India to oversee Chinese movement.

An officer said that the action was in response to the PLA taking control over the ridgelines of Finger 4. "Indian Army climbed tough heights at the altitude of 19,000ft," he added. This is nearly the altitude of some of the highest posts on Siachen—the world's highest battlefield.

During talks, Chinese military had agreed to withdraw from Finger 4, but nothing has materialised. In the absence of a major breakthrough in the talks, the Indian military is prepared to face the harsh winter in Ladakh and, indeed, all along the Line of Actual Control. For the Chinese military, it would be the first experience of the difficulties of high-altitude deployment in sub-zero temperatures during winter. There is

a belief that China may turn to cyber operations and a battle of perception in the winter.

Lt Gen (Retd) S.L. Narasimhan, member, National Security Advisory Board, told *The WEEK*: "Disengagement should be the immediate process, followed by de-escalation, which seems to be distant at the moment." He added that it was evident both sides do not want escalation or war. But, he said, the number of troops the Chinese have brought into their depth areas and the Indian Army also mobilising equal numbers is worrisome. "Unless the complete de-escalation takes place in the depth area, one cannot be really sure of the situation," he said.

Pant said that given the trust deficit between the two sides, it will be a long haul both at the border and in the broader normalisation of bilateral relations. "India has stood up to China in ways that Beijing perhaps was not expecting," he said.

"And India is likely to make decisions assuming the worst about China."

Military planners believe that the mutual scramble for high ground and tactical advantage and the reports of warning shots being fired—the first gunshots along the LAC since 1975—indicate that the crisis is entering a more dangerous phase. Frank O'Donnell, non-resident fellow, Stimson Center South Asia Program, said that with firing of guns now becoming normalised, and tensions running high, the potential for an exchange of fire and casualties is increasing. "This in turn raises the risk of larger offensive military actions," he said. He added that Chinese President Xi Jinping had publicised that there is an active military stand-off with India, meaning the political costs to him are high if he cannot hold the ground China has seized in perpetuity or exchange it for political or territorial concessions elsewhere. And India will not accept that, said

O'Donnell. "This means China has very little room to back down from the position it is now in," he said.

Lt Gen (Retd) Anil Ahuja, former deputy chief of integrated defence staff, believes that while Xi can signal intent, military operations of the magnitude that would be required even for a full-scale sectoral offensive require much mobilisation and preparation. "The professional acumen of the Indian military and political leadership lies in being able to realistically evaluate his build-up capability, monitor it and assess what he can do with that," he said. "He is unlikely to be able to take any substantial punitive action against India with any degree of guaranteed success." He added that Xi could assure the plenum (meeting of the Chinese Communist Party's central committee) of holding India on tenterhooks till the next campaigning season and then attempt to "teach India a lesson".

SURVIVAL INSTINCT

A hunter-gatherer tribe in the Eastern Ghats has further isolated itself to survive the pandemic

BY RAHUL DEVULAPALLI

His tribe harvests honey from tree hollows; they find the hive by following bees. Peddalu Mandli, 27, of Petralachenu in Telangana is slowly learning that art from elders. Last week, Mandli and a few others tracked down a hive. “Only our tribe has the expertise to find these beehives and collect honey from it,” he says proudly.

Mandli hails from the Chenchu tribe, one of the oldest aboriginal tribes in India. Hunter-gatherers, the Chenchus live in the thickly forested Nallamala Hills—around 9,000sqkm in the Eastern Ghats, spread across Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. The tribe also has a presence in Karnataka and Odisha.

Unlike most other members of his tribe, Mandli has lived in a city and has a degree—a bachelor’s in education. For some time, he waited tables in Hyderabad. But now, to protect himself and his tribe, he has moved back to the hamlet and its traditional way of life. Wary of Covid-19, Petralachenu residents—around 200 people—have cut ties with the outside world.

As the men are excellent marksmen, hunting expeditions have been stepped up during the lockdown; the bag mostly yields birds and small animals. “I am not that good with the

bow,” says Mandli. “So, I take along my dog, who plays a major role in our hunting trips. We have realised that if we have to survive the pandemic, we have to go back to our traditional lifestyle. In future, I want to cultivate and promote the crops that our elders used to eat; it will keep us healthy and immune.”

The Chenchu hamlets are called pentas. While an exact number of pentas is not available, there are reportedly 48,000 Chenchus on record. Many of the pentas are situated close to Nagarjunasagar-Srisaillam Tiger Reserve, India’s largest tiger reserve. The tiger is the tribe’s totem. They believe that whenever they are on the verge of starvation, a tiger will come to their rescue and leave a dead prey for them to feast on.

Dharmakari Ramkishan, a government doctor and an activist who has studied the Chenchus extensively, says that Covid-19 could wipe out the tribe. “Chenchu are officially categorised under particularly vulnerable tribal groups,” he says. “Since they have lived in deep forests all their lives, they have not been exposed to major infections. Their immunity to Covid-19 will be much lesser than people from other communities.”

Ramkishan, who also runs an NGO called Chenchu Lokam, adds that the tribe’s mortality rate is thrice the



national average. “From an anthropological point of view, they are walking historical treasures,” he says. “Studying them can reveal a wealth of information. The state government should immediately announce a separate Chenchu plan and make sure that their immunity levels are improved.”

As of now, not a single Covid-19 case has been registered in any of the pentas, probably because most hamlets are far off the beaten track. Hamlets in the Appapur Gudem area, for example, are 35km off a motorable road.

“We have warned forest officials

not to enter our region, because we want to rule out every possibility of contracting infection,” says T. Balaguruvaiah, sarpanch of the Appapur cluster. “We told the officials and other outsiders who wanted to provide us with food that we can survive as well as take care of the forest on our own. My priority is to ensure that my tribe does not get wiped out.” The tribal elders have nominated one tribesman to manage the government-run Girijan Cooperative Corporation outlet in the forest from where rice and essentials are procured every month.

Government officials, too, are doing their best to ensure that the tribe has limited contact with outsiders. T. Akhilesh Reddy, project officer of the Telangana government’s integrated tribal development agency, says: “We have completely restricted access to Chenchu habitats. But despite our warning some politicians and NGOs are trying to contact them. From our side, we have supplied them with rations to last a good amount of time and are also ensuring (supply of) essential items and water.”

Meanwhile, the tribe has its own strategy in place, in case anybody

VULNERABLE HUNTERS

(Clockwise from top left) Children of the Chenchu tribe; an elder with bow and arrow—Chenchus are excellent marksmen; the Chenchu way of fishing

tests positive for Covid-19. “We believe that a drink made from a powerful herb called nalenii found only in the forests can be effective against this virus,” says Balaguruvaiah. “Our ancestors used to drink it (to ward off) malaria. Along with this drink, we are also looking at other medicinal herbs to fight this virus. Since good hospitals are far, we have to be prepared.”

Trick or treat

Medical community stands divided over the efficacy of alternative therapies in treating Covid-19

BY POOJA BIRAIJA JAISWAL

ON SEPTEMBER 6, Kerala Health Minister K.K. Shailaja reportedly endorsed a study which said that homoeopathic prophylactics were effective against Covid-19. It said that only a few of those who had taken the prophylactic contracted Covid-19 and they, too, recovered soon. The study was carried out in Covid-hotspot Pathanamthitta district, where Arsenicum Album 30C was distributed among 90 per cent of residents. The study aimed to assess the efficacy of the said homoeopathy medicine as an immunity booster. Shailaja later clarified that she neither said that homoeopathy medicines could be used to treat Covid-19 nor stated that the study had been scientifically proven. But by then, the damage was done—it had created a rift in the state medical community.

While the state unit of the Indian Medical Association (IMA) opposed Shailaja's initial statement, homoeopathy practitioners came out in her support. The row has put the spotlight on the debate over the efficacy of alternative medicine to allopathic medicine in the fight against Covid-19, especially at a time when cases are rising and restrictions are being relaxed to open up the economy.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi had repeatedly asked people to follow advisories issued by the ministry of

AYUSH, which suggested a range of home remedies to boost immunity, including consumption of turmeric, honey, ginger and other concoctions. AYUSH treatments have often been questioned over their safety and efficacy, especially given the lack of robust, empirical studies in their defence.

On August 15, the ministry launched a three-month campaign, aimed at increasing awareness about affordable and easy practices that can be adopted for enhancing immunity and preventing any disease. Yet, more than six months after the first case of Covid-19 hit the country, acceptance for AYUSH practices, at best, remains divided on the ground.

For instance, Dr Amol Rawande, a homoeopath based in Nanded in rural Maharashtra, believes that homoeopathy can help fight Covid-19. He said that he had prescribed homoeopathic medicines to more than 400 Covid-positive patients. "In the case of a mild to moderate symptomatic patient, Ferrum Phos 6X, Bryonia Alba and Veratrum Viride help in preventing the onset of a cytokine storm, a severe immune reaction," he said. "I believe homoeopathy is apt

to fight Covid-19 as it works with the immune system, which is most at risk from the virus."

But back in Mumbai, Dr L.M. Parashar, ENT surgeon at Apollo Spectra Hospital, had a different tale to tell. "Before lockdown, about two to three per cent of OPD patients were suffering from mouth ulcers. Post lockdown, there has been an increase in patients with symptoms such as redness of the mouth, burning sensation and itching," he said. This is because people are constantly drinking homemade concoctions, made without proper ingredients, instead of water, he reasoned. "This has led to the rawness of oral mucosa," he said. "The point is not to completely ignore or reject alternative medicine,



TRIAL AND ERROR
A doctor displays homoeopathy medicine recommended by a group of experts under AYUSH ministry

but to consume it correctly and in conjunction with the correct diet and lifestyle, which people are not doing."

The problem with accepting the efficacy of AYUSH remedies, said paediatrician Dr Amol Annadate, was that none of the claims had been proved. "There are no trials conducted either for ayurvedic *kadhas* or homoeopathic medicines like Arsenicum Album 30C," said Annadate,

who also owns and runs an ayurveda medical college in Aurangabad. "But the role of AYUSH essentially comes into the picture either as pre-Covid [precautions] or at the recovery stage, which can take between two to three months. These are not used as treatments for Covid-19 under any circumstances." He does believe that homoeopathy can help in reducing mortality rate. "But there should still

AYUSH treatments have often been questioned over their safety and efficacy, especially given the lack of robust, empirical studies in their defence.

be trials to prove it," he said. "My ayurvedic consultants are definitely prescribing ayurvedic solutions to patients."

Even as modern medicine continues to be the mainstay of Covid-19 treatment, experts call for an integrated medical approach between the different disciplines so as to better manage the impact of the disease in the long term. Annadate, however, questioned the credibility of the task force set up in May to plan and suggest treatment for asymptomatic and mildly symptomatic patients through the use of ayurveda, unani, homoeopathy and yoga. "They haven't conducted trials that can prove their efficacy. Scientific evidence is the only thing that will shut up the naysayers," he said.

Dr Gaurang Joshi, director of Atharva Multispecialty Ayurveda Hospital in Gujarat's Rajkot, recently tweeted that his hospital has been "successfully running online OPD for Covid-19 patients and providing ayurveda treatment at their home". He added that more than 50 patients had "turned Covid-negative with their pure ayurveda treatment with home quarantine". "I totally stand by my conviction that ayurveda can treat Covid-19," he asserted.

But Dr P. Gopi Kumar, state secretary, IMA Kerala, questioned the scientific validation of the alternative medicines proposed to treat Covid-19 or even serve as immunity boosters. "The ministry gave directions for the use of Arsenicum Album 30C as an immunity booster without citing any evidence whatsoever," he said. "In a pandemic like this when millions are getting infected and undergoing serious complications, no such drug must be used for which one has no idea about its credibility, authenticity and side effects. So, all these immunity-boosting concoctions and drugs cited by the AYUSH ministry and the state health minister are definitely questionable." ●

adviser and senior consultant, neurology,
Apollo Hospitals, Jayanagar, Bengaluru

Nerve centre

Regular check-ups, balanced diet and physical activity will keep neurological diseases at bay

Covid-19 can affect the brain. The potential neurological complications of Covid-19 include stroke, delirium, brain inflammations and peripheral nerve damage. During the pandemic, neurological complications have been a great concern for people with non-Covid health problems as well.

Stroke point

Strokes are preventable to a great extent. Almost 60 per cent of strokes are caused by hypertension, diabetes and high cholesterol. Heart disease, and consumption of tobacco and alcohol can also raise its risk. Once you are over 40, keep track of your blood pressure, sugar and cholesterol levels, and maintain a healthy lifestyle.

Do not miss your health check-ups. Digital devices can be used for monitoring vital signs regularly. One can avail telemedicine consultations, too.

Stroke is acute at the onset. Do not ignore stroke symptoms like facial deviation,

weakness in one of the limbs, alteration in speech, vision problems and imbalance while walking. If the patient is brought to the hospital in the golden hour (within three hours of the onset of stroke), blood supply to the affected region could be restored before cell death occurs. If the stroke is caused by thrombosis, medications can help dissolve the clot.

Managing short circuits

Epilepsy is the commonest neurological disorder after headache. One per cent of the general population will have epilepsy at some point in their lives.

Food contaminated with tapeworm eggs or larvae is a major cause of acquired epilepsy. Do not eat unwashed fruits, vegetables and greens or undercooked pork. Low levels of sodium and calcium can also raise one's risk of epilepsy.

People with uncontrolled or refractory epilepsy require proper neurological evaluation. The rest can be managed



Do not miss your health check-ups. Digital devices can be used for monitoring vital signs regularly.



with telemedicine. Recording the seizure on phone can help the doctor make the right diagnosis. Epilepsy is eminently treatable. Anticonvulsants for epilepsy may have to be continued for at least two to three years.

Forget me not

Dementia is essentially a disease of ageing. Ageing cannot be prevented, but factors that lead to rapid ageing such as diabetes, hypertension and dyslipidemia could be kept in control.

Have a balanced diet. Low intake of calcium and Vitamin D may increase the risk of dementia. Stroke and head injury patients and those with thyroid and endocrinal problems could also develop dementia. Most dementias are treatable. Some are preventable. Be aware of the early signs and do not hesitate to seek help.

Tackling tremors

Slowness in movement and thinking, tremor in hands and poor balance and coordination are some of the common symptoms of Parkinson's Disease.

During the pandemic, people with Parkinson's can opt for virtual consultations. Exercise and physical activity are key to managing the disease.

—As told to Mini P. Thomas

To watch the interview with Dr P. Satish Chandra, scan the QR code



Shooting from the lip

Union Law Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad (*The Indian Express*, September 10) has availed of the death of Kesavananda Bharati, seer of the Edneer Mutt in Kasaragod, to serve up the usual hindutva cocktail of distortions, misreading and blatant lies.

The blameless seer was only challenging the Kerala High Court judgment which threatened to deprive his mutt of several acres of highly remunerative land. But it left the swami, the hero of a landmark 1973 judgment by the Supreme Court, which said that the “basic structure of the Constitution” could not be altered by Parliament.

It is true that prime minister Indira Gandhi had tried to get that doctrine reversed by engineering the appointment of a junior judge as chief justice of India over those who had served longer. That did her no good at all because, as Prasad admits, the ruse was “unsuccessful”, and the doctrine holds as good today as when it was pronounced nearly 50 years ago. This despite the Congress having enjoyed “brute majorities” for 31 of these 47 years.

Why flog this very dead horse when Ravi Shankar and the object of his adoration, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, are misusing their current “brute majority” to undermine—as closely as they dare—the basic structure which enjoins them to uphold secularism and ensure fraternity in a multi-religious India?

Ravi Shankar has a fleet of experts to advise him on matters of jurisprudence. Perhaps he should have consulted them before flying in the face of a 2001 Supreme Court judgment in vilifying Rajiv Gandhi for having the 1985 Y.V. Chandrachud judgment on Shah Bano case “nullified by a questionable law passed by exercising a brute majority, purely for a vote bank”.

That law, which lay people call the Shah Bano

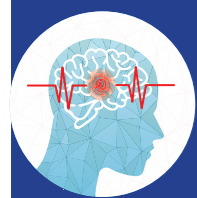
Act, was challenged in the Supreme Court in 1986 by a member of the selfsame “vote bank”, a Muslim, Danial Latifi—a far more distinguished lawyer than Ravi Shankar is or can hope to be. Latifi was one of the most eminent jurists that independent India has seen. His arguments were not the piffle of Ravi Shankar's polemic but the sober and considered thoughts of a well-versed expert in constitutional law. His petition was so compelling and so complex as to require a Constitution bench of the Supreme Court to deliberate on his arguments for a good 15 years.

On September 28, 2001, that is nearly two decades ago, the Supreme Court pronounced its final verdict. It held that far from being a “questionable law”, as

Ravi Shankar labels it, Rajiv's Gandhi's initiative had—I quote from the judgment—“actually, and in reality, codified what was narrated in the Shah Bano case”. The Constitution bench further held that “the provisions of the Act do not offend Articles 14, 15 and 21 of the Constitution.”

The Supreme Court particularly commended section 3 of the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act, 1986. That extremely cleverly-worded section, drafted by Ashoke Kumar Sen, a law minister far more learned than Ravi Shankar, provided for “reasonable and fair” provision to be made and paid within the period of “iddat” (The 90-day period of separation from the husband to ensure that the woman neither has sexual relations with her husband nor is pregnant). This meant the financial provision was not for sustenance during the 90 days of iddat but had to be “reasonable and fair” for all of her life, and payable within that 90-day period.

The law minister hardly needs reminding that this final pronouncement was made during a BJP regime. Is his rant in keeping with his empty boast, “We are proud of the extraordinary legacy of the Supreme Court”?



Almost 60 per cent of strokes are caused by hypertension, diabetes and high cholesterol.

Food contaminated with tapeworm eggs or larvae is a major cause of acquired epilepsy.

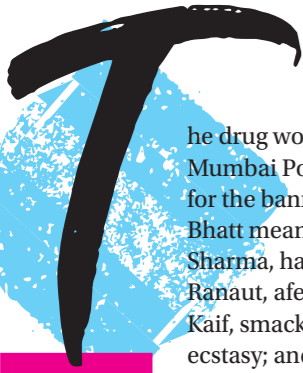
Low intake of calcium and Vitamin D may increase the risk of dementia.

Lost in the Woods

Bolly, Kolly, Tolly, Sandal or Molly, India's film hubs are in the midst of a spreading drug problem

BY PRATHIMA NANDAKUMAR,
LAKSHMI SUBRAMANIAN,
CITHARA PAUL,
POOJA BIRAIA JAISWAL,
RAHUL DEVULAPALLI
AND NACHIKET KELKAR

ILLUSTRATION BHASKARAN



he drug world, according to the Mumbai Police, uses certain codes for the banned substances. Alia Bhatt means cocaine; Anushka Sharma, hashish; Kangana Ranaut, afeem (opium); Katrina Kaif, smack; Nargis Fakhri, ecstasy; and Priyanka Chopra, LSD. “The names of drugs keep changing as it is a strategy to throw the cops off guard,” said Yashpal Purohit, a Bombay High Court lawyer who has handled several drug cases in Mumbai and Pune.

Nomenclature aside, the Narcotics Control Bureau does seem to be hot on the trail of a drug cartel that allegedly has ties with Bollywood. On September 8, the bureau arrested actor Rhea Chakraborty, the former girlfriend of the late actor Sushant Singh Rajput, under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act for procuring and consuming drugs. She is currently in 14-day judicial custody at Mumbai’s Byculla jail.

In its remand application, the NCB said that Rhea was “an active member of a drug syndicate connected with drug supplies”. It said that her WhatsApp messages indicated that she bought the drugs along with Sushant and gave instructions in this regard to his house manager Samuel Miranda, house help Dipesh Sawant and her brother Showik Chakraborty. On September 11, Rhea was denied bail. If found guilty, she could be jailed for up to ten years.

The NCB’s case hinges on 59 grams of curated marijuana found on alleged drug peddlers Abbas Ramzan Ali Lakhani and Karan Arora, who were arrested on August 28, and their alleged links with those close to Sushant. The NCB has arrested Showik, Miranda and Sawant and 15 others in the case. Rhea reportedly revealed the names of several Bollywood celebrities during interrogation, but NCB officials said these cannot be disclosed at the moment. However, an official involved in the probe said that the



SAD END
Actor Sushant Singh Rajput’s death has stirred up a hornet’s nest

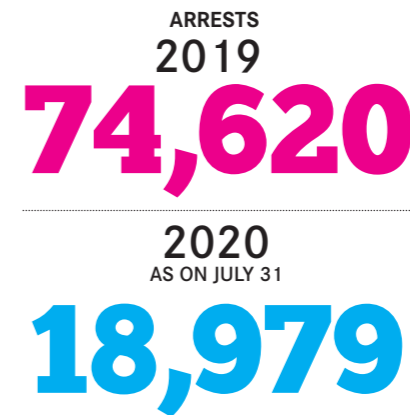


TROUBLE TIME
Rajput’s former girlfriend Rhea Chakraborty is in judicial custody for allegedly procuring and consuming drugs

THE PAST FEW MONTHS HAVE SEEN THE POLICE SWOOPING DOWN ON DEALERS, CONFISCATING HUGE CACHES OF DRUGS AND KNOCKING ON THE DOORS OF THE RICH AND THE FAMOUS.

names would be investigated. Sources said that Rhea also admitted to Sushant smoking weed depending on his mood and the drug’s availability. The payment, allegedly, was made from the cards of either Rhea or Sushant. NCB sources also said that Showik used to provide details of the supplier who was supposed to come outside Sushant’s house and deliver the drugs to Sawant and Miranda. Though Rhea has reportedly admitted to communicating with all the accused to procure drugs for Sushant, her lawyer Satish Maneshinde has dismissed the allegations, saying his client was being harassed for “loving a drug addict”. If Bollywood’s latest potboiler is

playing out in news studios, other hubs of Indian film industry have their own drug-addled sagas to unpack. The past few months have seen the police swooping down on dealers, confiscating huge caches of drugs and knocking on the doors of the rich and the famous. The Sandalwood drug scandal, for instance, jolted Bengaluru out of its pandemic slumber. Earlier this month, the central crime branch of the Bengaluru city police arrested two Kannada actors—Ragini Dwivedi and Sanjjanaa Galrani—as part of its investigation into a major drug racket. In its first information report, the Bengaluru police named Ragini and 11 others, including the son of a former minister, who have been booked under the NDPS Act



and Section 120B of the Indian Penal Code for buying, possessing, distributing and using banned drugs at rave parties, as well as for criminal conspiracy. The crime branch has been adding names to the list by interrogating arrested

drug dealers. The actors’ arrests came after the NCB’s Bengaluru unit arrested three drug dealers—former television actor D. Anikha and her associates Mohammad Anoop and R. Ravindran—on August 21. The officers confiscated a huge cache of MDMA pills and LSD blots from their homes in the city. During interrogation, Anikha allegedly admitted that she had supplied drugs to prominent Sandalwood actors and musicians, television actors, children of VIPs and college students. Bengaluru City Police Commissioner Kamal Pant said the CCB had lately been tailing Ravi Shankar, a senior division assistant at the Regional Transport Office in Jayanagar, following a tip-off that he went to parties with a Kannada actor and supplied drugs there. “We arrested Ravi in a 2018 drug case and got a lot of information from his phone on the people linked to him,” said Pant. “His statement gave us leads for subsequent arrests.” The crime branch learnt that drugs were being sold to the glitterati at rave parties held at resorts in Ramanagara and Bidadi, and farmhouses in Bengaluru and Tumkur. Getting an entry to these parties is quite hard, and invites are sent out at the last minute to dodge the police and the media. The crime branch has also arrested Rahul Shetty, an architect and close friend of Sanjjanaa Galrani; Viren Khanna, a party planner; Loum Pepper Samba, a Senegalese drug peddler; Vaibhav Jain, son of a prominent jeweller in the city; and Prashant Ranka, a local drug dealer. They are looking for Aditya Alva, son of former minister Jeevaraj Alva and brother-in-law of Bollywood actor Vivek Oberoi; and the prime accused Shivaprakash, a Kannada film producer once close to Ragini. Both have absconded. Said Joint Commissioner of

Police (Crime) Sandeep Patil: "There is focused attention to break the drug network. Thousands of kilos of marijuana are being seized every year, and school and college students are turning addicts. At the same time, rave parties attended by celebrities and VIPs are providing a platform to drug peddlers to sell synthetic drugs."

When it comes to rave parties, Goa invariably finds its way into the conversation. On the night of August 15, the Goa Police raided a rave party at a villa in Vagator village and found cocaine and MDMA pills worth ₹9 lakh. The host was Kapil Jhaveri, a small-time Bollywood actor who has been in films such as *Aatma* and *The Love Season*.

"We arrested four people for possession of drugs and 19 others for being in the house where the drugs were being consumed," said Shobhit Saxena, superintendent of police, crime branch, Goa Police. Jhaveri and three female foreigners were arrested. A few days later, the police picked up Shailesh Shetty, co-promoter of dance music festival Sunburn, for organising the rave party, as well as the peddler who allegedly sold the drugs to Jhaveri. Both are out on bail. Incidentally, Jhaveri is on the board of directors of Tirumalla Tirupati Multistate Cooperative Credit Society, which a Goa legislator had recently accused



UNDER INFLUENCE

Actor Sanjjanaa Galrani was detained in connection to a drug case probe by Central Crime Branch of Bengaluru Police

of money laundering.

"There is nothing surprising," said Vivek Agnihotri, director of films such as *Tashkent Files* and *Buddha in a Traffic Jam*. "Cocaine is called the champagne of Bollywood parties and glamour is essential for the syndicate to thrive and survive. Right from identifying newbies or starlets to introducing them to drugs, an entire industry works on how to get newer people hooked. Influential A-listers are roped in to encourage younger talent to take it up and very soon, unknowingly at first, one gets pulled

FOREIGNERS ARRESTED

2019
436

2020
AS ON JULY 31

109

into a syndicate. The network works on commission; the user becomes the dealer or the promoter and pushes others to become members for a cut. The reason some senior people, no matter how talented they are, do not get work in Bollywood is that they refuse to be part of this group."

Rhea had reportedly told the NCB that 80 per cent of Bollywood actors were on drugs. And while most have been silent about their habits, actors like Ranbir Kapoor have admitted to smoking weed in their younger days. Some others, like Fardeen Khan and Vijay Raaz, have had run-ins with the law in drug-related cases.



FALLEN STAR

Kannada actor Ragini Dwivedi is in judicial custody in an alleged drug abuse case in the Kannada film industry

'new gen' movies. In fact, over the years, the raids have caught only second- or third-rung stars, if that. For instance, in May 2018, excise officers in Thiruvananthapuram arrested three Ernakulam natives for possessing hashish oil worth ₹12 crore; it was apparently meant for some A-listers in the film industry. Notably, a certain top actor hooked on hashish is said to have undergone de-addiction therapy during the recent lockdown.

Before the pandemic, a group of senior Malayalam film producers had sought an appointment with a state cabinet minister through his secretary. The secretary, who expected an outpouring of routine complaints regarding production issues or tax exemptions, was stunned to hear the producers talk about the spike in drug use on film sets. They said the behaviour of young actors was delaying schedules and hurting them financially. The producers wanted the government to take up the matter with the all-powerful Association of Malayalam Movie Artists (AMMA), many of whose top office-bearers are close to the ruling CPI(M). They gave the secretary a list of known drug users in the film industry. "The list had the who's who of the industry," he told THE WEEK. "New-gen actors, scriptwriters, directors... I must say I was shocked."

Turns out, the Sandalwood drug bust had a connection with Mollywood. Mohammad Anoop, who was arrested with Anikha in August, is reportedly close to many top stars in Kerala. He used to deliver expensive drugs to night parties in Kochi, said customs officers. Apparently, a few handpicked restaurants, high-end hotels and flats are the centres from where the agents of the patrons collect the "stuff". Gyms and spas are also known to be places of drug exchange.

"The use of drugs like LSD

But perhaps the most open about it has been Sanjay Dutt, who has put forward his lifetime of drugs and alcohol as a cautionary tale.

The Malayalam film industry, which has garnered great applause for its path-breaking cinema, has also dealt with such demons. In fact, Mollywood's tryst with drugs has highlighted a fissure between the "old school" artistes and their "new gen" successors. The most notable case in recent memory was that of actor Shine Tom Chacko, a promising talent, who was arrested in 2015 for allegedly possessing cocaine. There was buzz at the time that the real culprit was a prominent actor who anchors many of the

MOLLYWOOD'S TRYST WITH DRUGS HAS HIGHLIGHTED A FISSURE BETWEEN THE "OLD SCHOOL" ARTISTES AND THEIR "NEW GEN" SUCCESSORS.

EFFECT OF DRUGS

Stimulants: Greater release of excitatory neurotransmitters, resulting in a higher level of wakefulness and more radically altered mood. Examples: Cocaine, amphetamines

Depressants: Work similarly to stimulants on mood and personality, but activate inhibitory chemical messengers. Higher use leads to tolerance, which may be the first step to dependence. Example: Heroin

Hallucinogens: Affect areas of the brain which control sensory perception and thought patterns. Change in mood or personality is more likely to be influenced by setting of drug use. Examples: LSD, some 'magic' mushrooms

Dual Action Drugs: Drugs like "Ecstasy" (MDMA) have stimulant properties like amphetamines, but also have effects in common with LSD. Users have reported feeling happier and an increase in empathy



ROLE OF DARK WEB

Dark web is the part of the World Wide Web that exists only on exclusive encrypted networks. As such, it provides anonymity to its users. Though it has been argued that the dark web promotes civil liberties such as free speech and privacy, it can be used for criminal activities such as drug deals. Payment is done with cryptocurrencies, as they allow users to remain anonymous.

is common among a section of new-generation actors,” said Kerala Film Producers Association president M. Renjith. He had also voiced his concern during the recent friction between the producers’ association and young actor Shane Nigam, whom the association banned for indiscipline stemming from alleged drug use on sets.

In Tollywood, the names of top Telugu actors, directors and producers have been linked to drug networks, and police and excise officers have found their names on peddlers’ phones. In 2017, investigating officers called in a string of film folk, including top director Puri Jagannadh and popular actors Ravi Teja and Charmme Kaur. The police had found a large cache of banned substances at a peddler’s home, and he had apparently revealed the names of his star clients.

Since then, Hyderabad-based activist M. Padmanabha Reddy, who is a former IFS officer, has been filing RTI applications to know the status of the case. “The case was put on the backburner,” he said. “At the time, they had collected the nail and hair

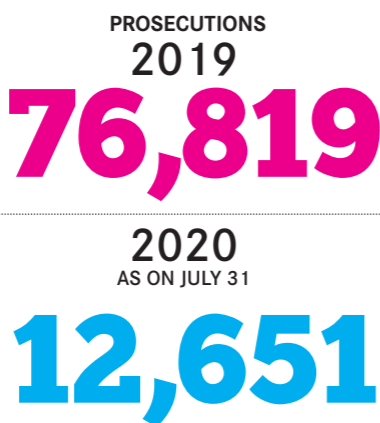
samples of the celebrities to test for banned substances. When we sought to know the results of the analysis, information was denied on the pretext that it was personal information. We got to know that film industry elders had met the chief minister and the case has almost been closed since then.”

In another case, a police officer recalled how a popular young Telugu star, in 2013, was called in and warned; his name had been cropping up whenever a Nigerian peddler was arrested. The police also suspect that some actors who shoot abroad come back with drugs. They say event managers and assistants often act as a link between the peddlers and the artistes.

Said C. Vivekananda Reddy, a retired state excise officer from Hyderabad: “The celebrities have a strange confidence owing to their star status and believe they can get away with anything. But during interrogation, they crack and their confidence dips.”

Political nexus?

Many a time, the names of politicians have surfaced in drug cases. For instance, earlier this month, the NCB summoned Yashas, the son of a Bengaluru councillor S. Keshavamurthy, to Mumbai, in connection with



UNWANTED ATTENTION
Kannada actor couple Diganth Manchale and Aindrita Ray at the Central Crime Branch office in Bengaluru. They were summoned for questioning in connection with a drug case

the Sandalwood drug case. However, rarely has a politician been punished in any such case. In fact, there have for long been whispers about a Congress legislator in Karnataka having links to drug peddlers with international connections, especially in Sri Lanka, where Indian film stars frequent casinos known to be dens of drug activity.

In 2017, police recovered drugs from a luxury car that had had an accident near South End Circle in Bengaluru, but the case did not progress. Reportedly, the car belonged to a former MP’s grandson. Former chief minister H.D. Kumaraswamy has even alleged that the BJP toppled the Janata Dal (Secular)-Congress government in 2019 using drug mafia money. The Congress has attacked the BJP over the arrest of Ragini; the actor had been a star campaigner for the BJP during the 2019 assembly byelections.

In Kerala, the police suspect the involvement of Bineesh Kodiyyeri, son of CPI(M) state secretary Kodiyyeri Balakrishnan, in the Sandalwood drugs case. On September 9, the Enforcement Directorate questioned Bineesh, who has had cameos in a few films, for more than 10 hours. He is reportedly friends with the arrested Anoop. “Bineesh loves the limelight,” said a source. “He demanded roles in movies in return for the ‘services’ he provided.”

Many in the Malayalam industry have also linked the unusually high number of movies being produced to drugs and black money. As many as 167 films were produced in 2019 alone, and the figure has consistently crossed 150 in every year of the past decade. Interestingly, most of the producers were newcomers, and the ED has reportedly sought details of all films produced by the industry in the past two years.

Industry hypocrisy

In September 15, Samajwadi Party MP and actor Jaya Bachchan told Parliament: “Just because of a few people, you cannot tarnish the whole industry.... I was really embarrassed and ashamed that yesterday one of our members in the Lok Sabha, who is from the industry, spoke against the film industry.” She was referring to a statement BJP MP and actor Ravi Kishan had made about the prevalence of drug use in the film world.

The Indian film industry has often been called out for being hypocritical in its response to allegations of drug abuse. The usual reaction has been denial and disbelief in public, and a meek acknowledgement in private conversations.

Kannada film producer and journalist Indrajit Lankesh, however, openly spoke about several actors “consuming drugs” at rave parties.

IN TAMIL NADU, A CLUTCH OF SENIOR KOLLYWOOD STARS, ALONG WITH A YOUNG MUSIC COMPOSER, ARE CALLED THE “POWDER BOYS”.

“(After the NCB made the arrests in late August) I gave the crime branch around 20 names of actors, actresses, sons of film directors and politicians, event managers and coordinators, based on the information I received from my sources in the industry,” he said. “It is now up to the investigating agency to find enough evidence to arrest all the culprits.”

The Karnataka Film Chamber of Commerce had been in denial until the two female actors were arrested. While some have since expressed shock, others argued that Sandalwood was being unfairly “targeted” and that drug abuse was rampant in society. Some also complained of “misogyny” after the police arrested only the female actors.

“Many people are questioning the timing of my statements,” said Lankesh. “It is just the law of incidence. I have seen indiscipline issues among some actors who have turned up on sets in a bad state. Some newbies are treating films as a hobby rather than a profession. It will be hypocritical not to address the issue. A



E.V. SREKUMAR

LOST FACE

The police suspect the involvement of Bineesh Kodiyeri, son of CPI(M) Kerala state secretary Kodiyeri Balakrishnan, in the Sandalwood drugs case

dialogue has to start, to tackle the drug menace. The arrests will act as a major deterrent for students getting lured by ganja and cocaine, as they will realise that consuming drugs is illegal and punishable.”

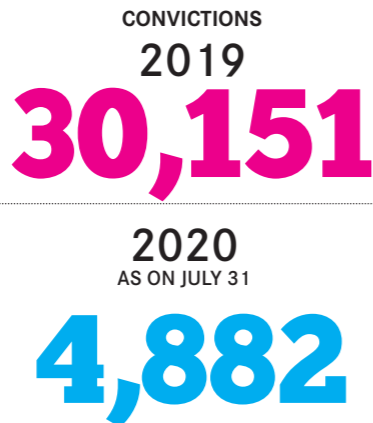
Pointing to the leadership vacuum created by the deaths of veterans such as Rajkumar and Ambareesh, former film chamber president Sa Ra Govindu said: “We want to clean up the industry and we cannot allow a handful of people to ruin the legacy of an industry that was built by stalwarts.”

The older generation in Kerala has bemoaned the “caravan culture” of the past decade. “Earlier, everyone from the hero to the spot boy used to be together on set,” said a senior actor. “But now, most actors have their own caravans and they step into it once their portion is over. Nobody knows what happens inside.”

It seems there is more discipline on the sets when veteran stars such as Mammooty and Mohanlal are part of a production. “They are so different from the current ‘powder generation,” he said. Added a Bollywood

producer: “Most of them (new-gen artistes) are in their early thirties now. Some who cannot handle success or money became addicts.”

The topic of drugs has triggered a war of words between generations. While the old-school artistes call the newer lot the “powder gen,” the youngsters label the veterans as “boozers.” “The old generation had heavy drinkers. They did not take drugs because drugs were not easily available,” said a new-gen scriptwriter. Many actors and scriptwriters THE WEEK spoke to said they were



open to using drugs and even argued for a “liberal approach.” “Many in the Malayalam film industry use drugs,” admitted an actor-director. “But do not make it sound as if it exists only in the film industry. Aren’t there drugs in colleges, offices? It becomes an issue only when it leads to abuse. Unlike MDMA, weed or magic mushrooms have no side effects. Cannabis is legal in many countries. It is time weed is legalised.”

In Tamil Nadu, a clutch of senior Kollywood stars, along with a young music composer, are called the “powder boys”. Police sources said the stars network with the drug cartel, the cinema industry in Chennai and some industrialist families in the state. “They source and supply; hence the nickname,” said a senior officer at the DGP office in Chennai.

A. Bruno, the zonal director of the Narcotics Control Bureau, Chennai, said the rave parties usually had MDMA pills. The late-night parties that once happened in Chennai’s star hotels have moved to the East Coast Road, he added. The parties get their customers through the dark web, client references and video game tournaments, which are also organised by the drug pushers. MDMA, usually in powder form, costs ₹3,000 a gram, and is either sniffed or rubbed on the wrist. Many actors are said to use it as a stimulant to help them perform better. Half a gram of MDMA can keep one awake all night, said Bruno.

The Telugu film industry has not taken too kindly to the bad press it has been receiving. Jeevitha Rajasekhar, general secretary of Telugu Movie Artists Association, said that even though drug consumption was a major problem, only the film industry got the blame. “Drugs are bad and actors are supposed to be role models. I agree with that,” she said. “But why are only film industry members pushed to the forefront? We want the governments to put an end to this menace. At the same time,



IN OLDER MOVIES, DRUG USE WAS PORTRAYED AS A SOCIAL EVIL. NOW THE IMAGE OF A DRUG USER HAS BEEN SOFTENED TO SOME EXTENT.

as an industry, we do not want to be the face of the menace.”

The perception battle

In older movies, drug use was portrayed as a social evil, practised only by the villain and his coterie. Now, though, the image of a drug user has been softened to some extent. A lot of films even show the hero smoking up for pleasure. A case in point is the 2013 Malayalam movie *Kili Poyi*, said to be the industry’s first stoner movie. “This change in the depiction of drugs is reflective of the new ethos of the film industry in particular, and the larger society in general,” said film critic Sajitha O.C.

Kannada actor and social activist Chetan Kumar made a separate point. He tweeted: “While the current focus is on exposing film personnel/actors who use #drugs privately...

Isn’t it hypocritical to not point fingers at film ‘stars’ who, for money, openly advertise alcohol (as soda), gutka/pan masala, gambling (rummy), etc? Aren’t they ‘ambassadors’ of social evils?”

Said Harmanpreet Kaur, assistant professor at Tata Institute of Social Sciences: “Art is inspired by society. It is interesting to note the portrayal of drug use/substance abuse in

Hindi cinema over the decades. *Hare Rama Hare Krishna* (1971) with its hit number ‘Dum Maro Dum’ reflected hippie culture and portrayed drug use as a vice. The hero rescuing his sister from it carried a strong anti-drug message. Many films portrayed cannabis/bhang use in a jovial manner through songs, be it ‘Jai Shiv Shankar’ (*Aap ki Kasam*, 1974) or Holi songs like ‘Rang Barse’ (*Silsila*, 1981).”

Contemporary Hindi films have also shown characters doing drugs, like in *Dev.D* (2009), *Udta Punjab* (2016) and *Raman Raghav 2.0* (2016). *Fashion* (2008) is another example in which Kangana Ranaut starred as a model ruined by drugs. Incidentally, she has now been tweeting against Bollywood’s “drug abuse problem” even as a video of her claiming that she used to be a drug addict herself, has gone viral on Twitter.

Regardless of whether the fresh cases lead to further arrests or bring down cartels, it is clear that the various ‘woods’ of Indian cinema, be it Bolly, Sandal or Molly, have a spreading drug problem. And change, it seems, can only come from within.

To modify the famous lines of Robert Frost: “The woods are ugly, dark and deep, and they have some secrets to keep.”

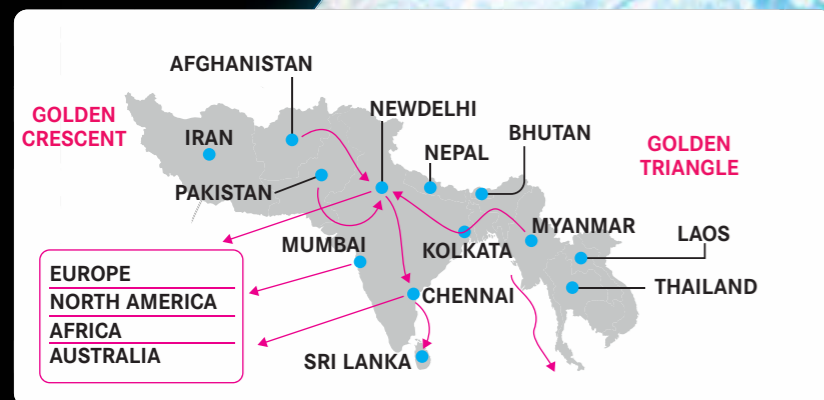
—with Namrata Biji Ahuja

INDIA ON A HIGH

KEY FACTORS RESPONSIBLE

India is close to major opium-producing regions of southwest Asia and southeast Asia, known as the 'Golden Crescent' (Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran) and the 'Golden Triangle' (Myanmar, Laos and Thailand)

Indigenous, illicit cultivation of opium poppy and cannabis, and production of low-quality heroin



MAJOR TRANSIT POINTS

(Opium, heroin, marijuana and hashish)

IMPORT

- Pakistan to Jammu and Kashmir*, Punjab and Rajasthan
- China to Uttar Pradesh and Bihar
- Myanmar to Manipur, Nagaland and Assam
- Nepal to Uttar Pradesh
- Bhutan to Bihar
- Bangladesh to West Bengal

EXPORT

- Delhi to Europe, North America and China, Hong Kong, Israel and Afghanistan
- Maharashtra to Africa, Europe and North America
- Kerala to the Middle East and the Maldives
- Tamil Nadu to Sri Lanka, Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines
- Andhra Pradesh to Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines
- Assam to Bhutan

SEIZURES IN 2020

(TILL JULY 31)



*All references are to the former state of Jammu and Kashmir

MAJOR INTERNAL TRAFFICKING ROUTES

(Opium, heroin, marijuana and hashish)



MAP IS FOR ILLUSTRATIVE PURPOSES ONLY

POPULAR CHOICES

Preferred psychoactive substances, excluding alcohol

CANNABIS

(Bhang, marijuana and hashish)

Users	3.1 crore
Problem users	72 lakh
Dependent users	25 lakh
Leading states (% of population aged 10-75)	
Punjab	12.55
Sikkim	10.94
Delhi	8.12
Arunachal Pradesh	7.36
Uttar Pradesh	7.36

OPIOIDS

(Opium, heroin and pharmaceutical opioids)

Users	2.3 crore
Problem users	77 lakh
Dependent users	28 lakh
Leading states (% of population aged 10-75)	
Mizoram	25.67
Nagaland	25.22
Arunachal Pradesh	22.18
Sikkim	18.74
Manipur	14.22

INHALANTS

Users

Problem users	77 lakh
Dependent users	22 lakh
8.5 lakh	

Leading states (% of population aged 10-75)

Arunachal Pradesh	5.33
Sikkim	4.58
Delhi	4.48
Himachal Pradesh	3.38
Mizoram	2.74



LEGISLATION

- Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, Act, 1985
- Prevention of Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act, 1988
- Related crimes under IPC and CrPC



ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES

- Narcotics Control Bureau
- Directorate of Revenue Intelligence
- Customs and Central Excise
- Central Bureau of Narcotics

Bigger fish to fry

Investigators hope to bust larger drug networks

BY NAMRATA BIJI AHUJA

In April, drug law enforcement agencies made a presentation before Union Home Minister Amit Shah. The picture was worrisome. A minimum of 360 tonnes of retail quality heroin is being consumed in the country every year, the international value of which is about ₹1,44,000 crore. There are an estimated 20 lakh “dependent” users of heroin in the country. The survey conducted by researchers and doctors of National Drug Dependence Treatment Centre at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences in 2019 helped the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) understand the consumption and impact of drugs and psychotropic substances on the Indian population.

The NCB arrested Bollywood actor Rhea Chakraborty on September 8 in a drug-related case and she is said to have mentioned some names. But drug law enforcement officers said the actor or her celeb friends may not reveal much. Those accused might not be aware of the entire drug syndicate. That there could be a bigger syndicate in the state with supply links on foreign land, will be a matter of investigation.

However, the newly begun slew

of investigations gives officials hope to bust larger drug networks in the country. “We have exposed some of the links in Bollywood in the latest case but the drug problem in Mumbai is part of a larger malaise. We are focusing on catching the big players,” said an investigator.

“The names of these celebrities [given by Chakraborty to the NCB] cannot be disclosed at this point during the investigation,” said the official. “However, legal action will be initiated against them soon.” But

EMERGING TRENDS SHOW THAT SEA ROUTES ARE MORE ACTIVE THAN LAND ROUTES. PAKISTAN-BASED DRUG SMUGGLERS ARE PUSHING HEROIN IN INDIA THROUGH THE SEA ROUTE.



BITTER HARVEST

CRPF and Jharkhand Armed Police destroy cultivation of poppy in Jharkhand

the drugs seized so far in this case are only drops in the ocean.

India is sandwiched between the notorious Golden Crescent (Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran) and Golden Triangle (Thailand, Myanmar and adjoining areas)—two principal areas of illicit opium production in the world.

“Last year, we generated a lot of awareness in state agencies and other law enforcement agencies about the drug menace,” Rakesh Asthana, NCB director general, told THE WEEK. “As a result, a lot of seizures have taken place and coordinated efforts are being made to control the problem.”

While India was earlier receiving drugs from international syndicates, today its pharmaceutical and chemical industry—one of the biggest in the world—is also being tapped by

international drug cartels for procurement of “precursor” chemicals and for producing synthetic drugs like methamphetamine, popularly known as Yaba tablets, cocaine and a dozen other curated drugs. “The drug cartels in Maharashtra, Kerala, Karnataka, Delhi and Punjab are actively involved,” said K.P.S. Malhotra, deputy director, NCB.

Cocaine is emerging as the future drug in India. “It is costly but much sought-after because the high it gives is different from other drugs,” said a drug law enforcement official. India does not grow coca plant, so the cocaine comes from Colombia and other South American countries.

Fresh inputs with drug law enforcement agencies, accessed by THE WEEK, revealed that the Colombian drug cartels want to bring the paste from the coca plant to labs set up in

India, where it can be treated with potassium permanganate to make cocaine. India is one of the biggest manufacturers of the chemical compound.

The pharma industry in the country, too, is contributing to the drug menace, where painkillers like Tramadol and Premadol are abused. Moreover, large amounts of plant-based drugs like cannabis are grown in Odisha, Bihar, Jharkhand and northeastern states. “They are mostly grown in areas prone to left-wing extremism, insurgency or terrorism,” said a drug law enforcement officer in Jharkhand.

There are various networks in south India that are very active like the traditionally ganja-producing areas of Kerala which are now being tapped by heroin and cocaine drug cartels. The biggest threat is being

posed by the Kasargod module. “The Qatar authorities are working closely with Indian drug law enforcement agencies to bust this network where the drug trafficking organisations are using human carriers from Indian airports for trafficking of drugs to Doha,” said Malhotra.

A total of 14 cases are being probed by the NCB as part of the Qatar network. The probe revealed that the suppliers were communicating directly with kingpins lodged in Qatar’s central jail. The carriers were usually persons looking for jobs in the Gulf, who were lured by travel agents and sub-agents.

Emerging trends show that sea routes are more active than land routes. Pakistan-based drug smugglers are pushing heroin in India through the sea route. India is also working with the Myanmar police to bust drug syndicates which allegedly have deep links in China. According to latest intelligence reports, Myanmar provinces of Kachin and Shan bordering China have a huge drug industry, indirectly supported by the Chinese.

Another challenge for the drug law enforcement officers is to break the demand and supply chain. “It is easy to probe cases once the traffickers are caught and drugs are recovered. But the real challenge comes when the drugs cannot be located,” said an investigator.

In 2019, about 55kg of cocaine and 200kg of methamphetamine were caught in Australia. The Australian Federal Police revealed that the cocaine had come from India. The Indian agencies found that a group from Delhi, Punjab and Uttarakhand was involved. The NCB registered a case, conducted raids and seized 20kg of cocaine. The investigators found that the 55kg of cocaine was actually part of a consignment of 300kg that had landed in Mumbai by sea in a container. The remaining cocaine is still missing. ●

Joint capital

Hyderabad's industrial cluster has become a transit and manufacturing hub for narcotics and psychotropic substances

BY RAHUL DEVULAPALLI

It was a tip-off that helped the Directorate of Revenue Intelligence (DRI) sniff out Venkat Reddy from a factory he had rented in a pharmaceutical cluster in Hyderabad. Reddy had been arrested twice earlier for illegally manufacturing ephedrine, a compound used to make meth. In August, the DRI raided the factory and caught Reddy 'cooking' mephedrone, a banned synthetic drug that goes by the street name 'meow-meow'. The DRI also raided multiple locations in the industrial hub and seized around 220kg of mephedrone, also known as poor man's coke. Meow-meow has a very small market in Hyderabad; most buyers are reportedly in Mumbai and Delhi. Officials, therefore, believe that the produce was for export. "This is only the tip of the iceberg," said a police official.

If one goes by the past cases probed by the excise department, the DRI and the police, it seems that Hyderabad is a transit point for and manufacturing hub of narcotic and psychotropic drugs. Weed, too, finds its way to Hyderabad through the cannabis corridor of neighbouring Andhra Pradesh's East Godavari

and Visakhapatnam districts.

"There are four regions where cannabis is cultivated on a large scale—the northeast, Kerala, Uttarakhand and Himachal and the Andhra belt. Right now, Andhra tops the list for production," said a top cop from Andhra Pradesh.

According to intelligence officials, modified vehicles are used to ship weed into Hyderabad and its surrounding areas through the cannabis corridor. Modifications range from engineering hacks to secret compartments in the vehicle, the tyres or even the fuel tanks. Currently, the market value of weed grown in this corridor is ₹25,000 per kg. Every year, an estimated 100 tonnes of weed is seized by officials in Telangana.

"We think what we seize is only 3 per cent of the produce," said an official of the police task force in Telangana. Only a fraction of the load that reaches Hyderabad is distributed by local peddlers. The major share is split, bagged and carried to big markets—Mumbai, Pune, Bengaluru, Gujarat—and other states, either by human couriers or heavy vehicles.



Interestingly, Hyderabad's supply of psychotropic substances and synthetic drugs like LSD, MDMA or ecstasy, crystal meth and cocaine come from Mumbai, Goa or from abroad. In the last few years, these substances made up for majority of drugs seized from users and peddlers, some of them Africans.

"An engineering student from a small town in Telangana ordered MDMA on the dark web," said an officer. "He got the drugs concealed in a book from the US. We were sur-



CAUGHT IN ACTION

Peddlers who were arrested for transporting banned psychotropic substances and cannabis in Hyderabad



prised to know that the culture has penetrated deep into the interiors, too."

But there is a bigger problem brewing in the backyard for enforcement agencies. Hyderabad is home to a large number of pharmaceutical factories that specialise in bulk manufacturing. In the last few years, the Narcotics Control Bureau, DRI and the police have rounded up and seized units that were manufacturing precursor chemicals for narcotic substances as well as new-age drugs. Mephedrone is only one such example.

Ephedrine is a compound used in prescription drugs to treat breathing issues and blood pressure. It is also procured as a raw material by various pharma companies to manufacture large-scale drugs. Ephedrine can also be used to manufacture methamphetamine, which is then sold as crystal meth or speed, a synthetic drug. In the last few years, hundreds of kilos of ephedrine have been seized from various factories that were trying to use it illegally.

"Out of the total quantity of ephedrine they buy for manufacturing legal medicines, a greedy manufacturer may mark five per cent as spoilt," said a government official. "This will either be used to manufacture drugs or be exported as it is. Ephedrine is in high demand in Indonesia, where it is banned. We found that it is being exported to Indonesia from India in cooking utensils. We suspect that it is being sent out to western countries in different ways."

Ketamine, used as tranquillisers or pain killers, is also known as a 'date rape drug'. Though its domestic use is limited, it is in high demand overseas where it is used in combination with other semi-synthetic drugs. Even Ketamine was found in recent seizures in Hyderabad.

The officials suspect that these drugs are concealed in artefacts, books and utensils and couriered to the US, the UK, a few Asian and African countries. Reportedly, one popular destination is Democratic Republic of the Congo. It is also believed that they are being smuggled out of the country in cargo ships.

Officials seem to be worried that some unethical pharma unit managers and brilliant chemists who have gone rogue might be cooking up substances under the radar in Hyderabad. Intelligence officials dealing with narcotics said that there might be five to six such operators in the city specialising in manufacturing drugs and procuring precursor chemicals.

"We are closely monitoring closed pharma units," said Cyberabad Police Commissioner V.C. Sajjannar. "We are taking swift action whenever we notice any suspicious activity. We have task force teams and special operating teams continuously looking for (weed) and other banned substances. Our force is also on alert on highways and bypass roads so as to seize vehicles transporting narcotic drugs." ●

OFFICIALS SEEM TO BE WORRIED THAT SOME UNETHICAL PHARMA UNIT MANAGERS AND BRILLIANT CHEMISTS WHO HAVE GONE ROGUE MIGHT BE COOKING UP SUBSTANCES UNDER THE RADAR.



Reaping the trade wind

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has a singular fondness for oneness. Saying “one nation, one flag”, he got Jammu and Kashmir’s special status scrapped. Introducing the digital health mission, he prescribed, “one nation, one health card”. To streamline power distribution, he said, “one nation, one grid”. To sell the idea of GST, he quoted “one nation, one tax”. So far so good.

Problems will arise if the zealots among his partymen go further and seek one language in one nation, or one faith in one nation. Such ideas may undo the oneness that we have achieved since Sardar Patel knitted India together under Pandit Nehru’s benign slogan “unity in diversity”.

Modi, too, is on a knitting mission these days. Chanting “one nation, one market”, he is seeking to integrate India’s myriad mandis into one. “We are self-reliant in agriculture, and we export commodities.... [So now,] we are bringing laws to free the farm sector,” he said in his

Independence Day address. The reference was to the three farm ordinances which had been issued during the Covid-19 lockdown, and are becoming acts of Parliament during this lotion-washed monsoon session.

India has been food-short for centuries, and India’s rulers have been following the ant-and-the-grasshopper moral ever since Allauddin Khilji built granaries for storing harvests to feed the people during famines. Faced with food shortage and hoarding by greedy merchants, our rulers banned private hoarding, put curbs on prices, rationed the essentials, subsidised farm costs, levied harvests, built warehouses, and offered assured prices to farmers.

All these were needed when we did not grow enough grain, and when farmers were cheated by moneylenders and middlemen. But the times have

changed, and harvests have boomed. Now we need laws that free the farmer to reap what he sows, and to sell what he reaps to anyone, anywhere, any time.

Modi thinks his three laws can do the trick: one, dilute the Essential Commodities Act; two, introduce a law for free trade in farm produce; three, bring another law to let farmers sell at the prices they can command.

Thus he is removing cereals, pulses, oil seeds, cooking oils, onion and potato from the list of essentials that cannot be hoarded. Once stocking is allowed, exports and food processing businesses will boom. Not that it is going to be a free run for hoarders. The

state will reserve its right to put curbs in case of wars, famines, calamities and runaway rise in prices.

The free trade law will end the first-buyer claim that agricultural produce market committees (APMCs) had over farm produce. Though set up to ensure that farmers are not cheated, the APMC mandis have become playgrounds of agent cartels.

The old law had also prevented exporters, processors and retail chain operators from buying directly from farmers. Now on, the farmer will be free to sell to anyone he likes and anywhere. A Nagpur orange grower may sell his harvest directly to a jam-maker in Ongole or Oklahoma. Farmers may open trading channels with companies, partnership firms, or registered societies, the norms of whose conduct may be notified by the Centre.

The third law will allow contract farming by which firms may get the farmer to sow and reap what they want at prices they can negotiate. Such deals may be monitored and insured, but firms would not be allowed to acquire ownership of the farm.

So, is it all a win-win situation? By no means. Critics say, it will be a free run across the farms for millers, picklers, chips-makers and jam-makers. Two, who will pay the states which were getting crores from the APMC mandis?



Kane Williamson
Captain, New Zealand
cricket team

I do not encourage Mankading

BY NEERU BHATIA

Kane Williamson is the antithesis of everything the Indian Premier League and Twenty20 cricket are about. Understated both in persona and with the bat, as opposed to the IPL’s glitz, glamour and loudness, Williamson is a quiet and cool leader in the most demanding T20 league. He brings an old-world charm to the neo-richness of the game. You will not get towering sixes but his class speaks for itself, as was evident in the 2018 season, when he captained the SunRisers Hyderabad to the playoffs, scoring a whopping 735 runs in the process. Above all, Williamson brings to the IPL his growing stature as one of the finest ambassadors of the game.

SRH has consistently made it to the playoffs of the IPL in recent years; they won the title in 2016. The captaincy mantle has been returned to David Warner. But Williamson, Warner and Jonny Bairstow will be expected to shoulder most of the run-scoring responsibilities this year

in the UAE. With the change in the SRH coaching staff, it remains to be seen how World Cup-winning coach Trevor Bayliss will use the Kiwi for maximum impact.

In an exclusive interview with THE WEEK, Williamson opens up about being in the bio-bubble, his thoughts on SRH’s preparations and also the ill-fated 2019 ICC World Cup final. Lastly, the statesman in him makes it clear that he, for one, is not a supporter of ‘Mankading’. Excerpts:

Q/ How is the experience of being in the IPL bio-bubble, cut off from the outside world?

A/ It is pretty unusual for all cricketers and [it is my] first experience of the bio-bubble. Sports around the world are doing something similar. It is also great that the tournament can go ahead. It is definitely nice to get out after six days of quarantine to catch up with the team and have some social interaction.

Q/ A lot of players have not played

competitive cricket since March. How do you prepare for a high-intensity competition like the IPL after a long break?

A/ Yeah, it is a challenge as all the players have been in different situations in terms of their preparations. But I guess having such a long period away from the game and coming to the IPL a few weeks early, getting used to the conditions and the demands of the league has been something quite nice as well. There is no doubt as [the tournament] progresses that match fitness will improve. There is a lot of excitement to get back to cricket after such a long time.

Q/ How do you feel about your game mentally and physically going into the IPL?

A/ When Covid-19 struck NZ, we were towards the end of our season. We saw the lockdown as a break from cricket, with the schedule being so intense. Having said that, it allowed for a pre-season mentality which

we had not had. We had a couple of camps to try and get the fitness levels up to where we would like them to be. But you also want to manage your preparation well so that when the time comes to play again, you are fresh and you have not overdone it. The training volume here (Dubai) is high. We have tried to strike that balance.

Q/ You scored over 700 runs in 17 matches in the 2018 season. What would you try to replicate to get those kinds of scores again?

A/ There have obviously been a number of changes here at SRH. The first thing is to get some clarity about my role. I am not captaining this year and the team has new players as well, so the balance always changes. I have to be clear about my role and make a big contribution. Rather than replicate things, it is about trying to prepare as well as I can and offer the team as much as I can with the bat. As well as support Davey (Warner) and the others in the team.

Q/ Glenn Turner mentioned in his book that coaches have taken a back seat, with the emergence of strong captains. Your thoughts?

A/ I think it is a really important relationship and without a doubt, there is a very important role for both captain and coach. The coach and captain drive the team and give it direction. It is important to have clarity and direction in the team, (and about) the style (in which) you want the team to play.

“ IT IS IMPORTANT FOR PLAYERS TO GET OUT OF THEIR ROOMS AND SOCIALISE. IN INDIA, THERE ARE WHOLE TRAVELLING DAYS. HERE, IT IS ABOUT ONE-AND-A-HALF HOURS BY ROAD. ”



IN GOOD COMPANY
Kane Williamson with SRH mentor V.V.S. Laxman at ICC Academy ground in Dubai

COURTESY: SRH

Q/ SRH has consistently made the playoffs. What does the team have to do to come up with similar results this time?

A/ The key over the last few years has been the ability to play as a team, having a number of contributions throughout the season and adapting to changing conditions, which will

be important here again. The team was picked based on the tournament that was to be played in India. The conditions and environment here are different. We talk of our squad having changed, but that is also the case for the oppositions. To make adjustments quickly will be important.

Q/ How much of a challenge will it be for players to remain in the bio-bubble and do things as they would do on a normal tour?

A/ It will be a challenge. It is important for players to get out of their rooms and socialise. In India, there are whole travelling days. Here, it is about one-and-a-half hours by road. It will be important to come up with activities and options for players to

get enjoyment on off days and to keep them fresh. It is a long time to be isolated. We are very fortunate that the hotels are brilliant. Franchises look after support staff and players very well. But the bio-bubble is unique. There will be something to address certainly when we see these [issues] surfacing further down the tournament.

Q/ Did the Covid-19 enforced break help purge memories of last year's World Cup final?

A/ It was probably the first time since starting my international career that (I have had) a gap of four months. It was quite nice, getting into a new routine and not thinking a lot about cricket for four months. At home,

spending a lot of time with family and friends and doing a few chores was really enjoyable. It was refreshing.

Q/ Do you still get stopped and asked about the World Cup?

A/ Sometimes. I suppose from the point of view of a viewer, it was one of the most amazing games to watch. They will probably make a movie out of it someday. But with the schedule that we have in cricket, the focus has to change quickly to what is next. And that has been a really good part of moving on from something like the World Cup [loss]. You cannot live in the past. You have got things right in front of you that you have to address and that is why we are here in Dubai and then there will

be a summer of cricket in NZ and the T20 World Cups later. A lot of people watched the World Cup and felt strong emotions of how things unfolded. The special thing about sport is it does affect people and it is amazing that you get to be involved.

Q/ People credit you with making the NZ team and cricket a lot humbler, happier and kind. Do you like that description?

A/ People always have different opinions on what you do and how it should be done. As a team, the most important thing is to have an identity that is suited to the people involved in it. That is what we try and do, and we know if we are doing that day in and day out, then we can be proud of our efforts and know it was channelled in the right direction, rather than being somebody we have not been, which is a lot harder.

We work hard at what we do and the behaviour we try and uphold. We want to always improve on those as well, remind ourselves of what is important and ensure we do not stray too far from it. It is an ever-evolving thing. Every time the team changes or support staff changes, there are always certain elements that change with it and you have to just keep moving with the times.

Q/ Your thoughts on 'Mankading'? R. Ashwin is a strong advocate but Ricky Ponting is not too comfortable with it.

A/ No, I certainly do not encourage it. That is not something that we look to do at all as a team. As I said, we have behaviours that are important to us as a group, and something like that does not fit with us, so that is my stance. However, if someone is looking to cheat, I think it would be worth having a quiet word with him and make sure the rules and spirit of the game are upheld. As ambassadors of the game, I think it is really important to stay within those lines. ●

Gold rush

How Vidit Gujrathi captained India to victory in the first-ever online chess Olympiad

BY NEERU BHATIA

THE WIDE GRIN on his face said it all. It had been several days since Vidit Gujrathi, grandmaster and Indian team captain, and his team of 12 were declared joint winners by the International Chess Federation (FIDE) in the first-ever online chess Olympiad. The victory was yet to sink in fully. “Right now, I am just waiting for the gold medal to arrive,” said Gujrathi, who turns 26 in October.

India’s number three chess player, Gujrathi had aimed to break in to the world top ten this year, before the pandemic struck. He has a popular YouTube chess channel, is a strong advocate of meditation and loves basketball.

On August 30, the Indian team made history when it was awarded the chess Olympiad gold jointly with Russia, overturning the original decision in Russia’s favour. Two junior players, Nihal Sarin and Divya Deshmukh, lost their internet connections during the last match and forfeited on time, prompting Gujrathi to file an appeal immediately. FIDE ruled in India’s favour despite protests from Russia.

The victory was every bit hard-earned and fair. It tops the Indian team’s previous best performances—in 2014, when it won the bronze in the open section, and the women’s team’s best performance of a fourth-place finish in the 2012 edition.

India was seeded seventh with an average rating of 2419 at the recent Olympiad, which had 163 nations participating, and was placed in Pool

A alongside formidable teams like China and Georgia. Each team had to include one male and one female player aged 20 years or less. The top three teams from the three pools advanced to the knockouts.

Nashik-born Gujrathi is currently ranked 24 in the FIDE world rankings; the only Indians above him are Viswanathan Anand (15) and Pentala Harikrishna (20). He was a part of the Indian team in 2016 and 2018 as well. The ongoing infighting in the All India Chess Federation (AICF) led to him being made captain after R.B. Ramesh, who served as India’s non-playing captain for a decade, stepped down. “Both Hari and Vidit have the capability to carry the team along,” said Ramesh, who is a member of the selection committee. “They do not inflict any punishment on players who lose a match. Hari, however, was playing in a tournament, so we asked Vidit to lead the team, and he agreed.” Srinath Narayanan, 26, was made vice-captain, as he has worked with the juniors in the Indian team.

“India was seeded seventh with an average rating of 2419 at the Olympiad, which had 163 nations participating.”

The victory is sweeter given that the credit goes solely to the players amid the turmoil in the national chess body. “Our problems were not chess-related but off-the-board problems,” said Gujrathi. “We had three-four days to install extra internet and power backup when we reached the knockouts. When the tournament started, I had one bad internet [connection]. Now I have three stable connections!”

The captain and his deputy approached power secretaries and other top officials of state electricity boards to prevent load shedding during matches of all players. As a result, Koneru Humpy had an engineer and linesman stationed outside her house during matches and Anand’s neighbourhood had no power cuts for a change. The team did not even have a dedicated server due to the lack of federation support, but as they progressed, the duo arranged for one with the help of some Indian fans.

“When R.B. Ramesh asked me to be the captain, I asked him what the job would entail,” said Gujrathi. “He said team selection and strategising, and that sealed the deal for me. I like to strategise. In certain team events, if one player lost, they immediately



RIGHT MOVES
Vidit Gujrathi, grandmaster and Indian team captain

replaced him. His confidence would be shattered. That is one thing I was very mindful of. I was very clear we would select a team that was good for India, even if it meant dropping myself. As soon as I became captain, I realised I had to be ready to take responsibility for whatever happens. I had to be the problem solver.”

After much bickering between the two AICF factions, the team was carefully selected. “There has been no precedence to this event as we never had this format at the Olympiad before,” said Ramesh. “It was the first time there was a mix of seniors and juniors.... Online, there is likely to be less pressure than while playing over the board. It would have been

easy for juniors to get overwhelmed, but all of them came through with flying colours.”

In normal circumstances, the AICF would organise preparatory camps before the Olympiad, but not this time. Giving an insight into the backroom work that had to be done before the tournament, Gujrathi said, “The first thing I had to do was take care of a lot of administrative work, correspond with FIDE and understand the rules. Srinath and I share a good rapport. We made a database about where every member stood. We planned an internal competition and the juniors agreed. This made us understand everybody’s style, strengths and weaknesses. It helped

later on in the tournament to take a decision on who was better against China.”

Gujrathi and Narayanan drew the best out of the teenagers. Deshmukh, 14, played a stellar role in the tournament, as did R. Praggnanandhaa, 15, as they starred in crucial wins against a strong China in Pool A. But a loss in an earlier round put Deshmukh under pressure. Gujrathi reassured her. “She lost on time in one of the games,” he said. “It was not her fault but she was very upset. I told her that in the next few games, if she lost it would be my responsibility, and if she won, the credit would go to her. After that she won all the games.” Other senior members like



Anand and Humpy, too, had called Deshmukh and encouraged her.

It was not easy leading the team, considering Gujrathi had to prepare for his own matches too. “It used to be crazy,” he said. “Matches would happen between 1:30pm and 4:30pm. As soon as these finished, I would get on call with the team or Srinath to figure out who would play the next matches. The entire night used to be spent over the selection of juniors, and then I prepared for my matches in the mornings. During my games, Srinath took over completely.”

Gujrathi had a fantastic 2019-20 season, hitting a high of 2736 in ELO ratings and even becoming the second-highest ranked Indian for a while. “Before the pandemic, I felt I was at my peak,” he said. “I had a very good tournament in Prague. The pandemic came at the wrong time, in that sense. Game-wise, I am [up] there, but I will use this year for preparation, so that when I am able to travel, I will go all out. I aim to be in the top five.”

With no competitions happening in India right now, Gujrathi spends

“Nashik-born Gujrathi is currently ranked 24 in the FIDE world rankings; the only Indians above him are Viswanathan Anand (15) and P. Harikrishna (20).”

time growing his streaming channel. He likes to multitask. “I have a lot of ambitious plans,” he said. “One of the things different in this Olympiad was the huge following. Even when I stream every day, I see a lot of people following. I plan to make it bigger and better from my end, maybe with some interesting collaborations.”

Early in his career, Gujrathi was known to be a very emotional player. He has mentally trained himself to be calmer, more focussed. To take his game to the next level, he should have ideally been in Europe now,

but due to visa and travel restrictions, he is training remotely with his coaches—grandmasters Vladimir Chuchelov and Alon Greenfeld. His stint with Anish Giri led to a marked improvement in his game, which also reflected in the results last year. “To be the best you have to train like the world’s best,” said Gujrathi. “You need a professional outlook and environment. I feel in India there is a lack of professionalism in sports. When I trained with Anish in the Netherlands, we had complete Olympic-level training—diet, fitness and the best trainers.”

Amid the high of winning the Olympiad and gaining an online following in chess, Ramesh has some cautious words of praise for the Indian captain. “It is heartening to see how he has evolved over the years,” said Ramesh. “He is already working with strong players like Giri, who has been a good influence on him. He is more active on YouTube these days, and it could work both ways for him. I hope he can handle all these things maturely as his chess preparations should not suffer.”

IVORY TOWER

SANJAYA BARU



China wants more than mountains

While the entire attention of the country may be on the border between China and India, the attention of China’s strategists would be more on the Indian economy. One should not interpret the old Chinese saying—One mountain cannot contain two tigers—too literally. The mountain that the Chinese strategists have in mind is not the Himalayas but Asia and its economy.

The Chinese army’s repeated incursions along the Line of Actual Control (LAC)—Depsang (2013), Doklam (2017) and Galwan (2020)—should not be viewed purely as attempts at land grab aimed at securing advantageous positions in the event of a war. Many in India have become students of Himalayan geography, but the real game in Asia is for economic dominance. Of course, it is the duty of military brass to defend the border and retain control over territory. But, China’s strategy towards India has to be viewed from a wider lens, and not a purely military one.



What does China want? From the plains of Central Asia to the islands of the Pacific, from North-east Asia to Southern Africa, Xi Jinping’s China wishes to establish that there is only one Asian superpower. Sure, at the global level China still acknowledges that there is another superpower, the United States. But, Xi would want the world to acknowledge what it did at the end of World War II, that there are only two superpowers and everyone else is a secondary or tertiary player.

Indeed, most Asian nations, including Japan, have come to implicitly accept this. India, too, has stopped calling itself a ‘leading power’ and now refers to itself, along with Russia, Japan, France and so on, as a Middle Power. But Xi would want India to say that a bit more loudly.

Till around 2012, China may well have gone

along with the global consensus that India too was rising rapidly and would catch up with China. After all, none other than Singapore’s Lee Kuan Yew, a friend of China, had said in 2007 that China and India were the two engines of the Asian aircraft, and for Asia to take off smoothly both engines must fire in tandem.

India’s economic growth experience, between 1991 and 2012, may have made China believe that India was capable of catching up. Till 1980 the two economies stood more or less on par, even if China had by then built a stronger base for future growth. It was assumed India was capable of again catching up.

The travails of the United Progressive Alliance II government may have made China re-examine these assumptions. The Indian economy seemed to be faltering and its political leadership seemed no longer capable of ensuring that India remained on the growth trajectory of the first decade of the 21st Century. It appears that the Chinese assessment

of the six years of the Narendra Modi government is that despite its political strength it has not been able to restore momentum to the economy.

It would be wrong to assume that China only aims to bolster its tactical, or even strategic, positions along the border. In appearing to do so, and repeatedly provoking India, China seeks to keep India both politically and economically off-balance. Which means no five-point joint statement is likely to end the impasse in the relationship. The challenge before India is to regain economic momentum and bolster its economic capabilities. That alone will ensure an Asian balance of power conducive to regional peace and global security. An Asia dominated by an authoritarian and hegemonic China will never be peaceful, secure or stable.

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

ILLUSTRATION BHASKARAN

SYSTEMIC STAINS

The dhobis of Kolkata's historic South Dhobikhana say that the city corporation is doing nothing to improve their lot

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS
BY SALIL BERA

A washerman
working at South
Dhobikhana,
Kolkata



opposite Maddox Square in Kolkata, occupying the large expanse of 62 Ritchie Road, lies the historic South

Dhobikhana. Started by the British on August 15, 1902, it is the second oldest open-air wash house in the country; Mumbai's famous Mahalaxmi Dhobi Ghat opened in 1890.

An old wooden signboard at the entrance to the wash house says "South Dhobikhana". The sprawling 22 *bighas* (one *bigha* equals 0.33 acre) house as many as 180 wash pens.

The construction of South Dhobikhana was proposed in 1880 on the lines of the Mahalaxmi Dhobi Ghat. In 1890, the fund for its construction was sanctioned from the Municipal Corporation's loan fund. By 1913-1914, around 180 concrete wash pens became operative.

Most of these wash pens are still functional even though the washing style has changed over the years. Dhobis start working at around 4am and continue until evening. A total of 245 licensed dhobis—many of them second or third generation washermen—are associated with the South Dhobikhana. In addition, there are another

450 or more people assisting them. Panchu Lal Das, 74, who has been working in the Dhobikhana for the last 50 years, says that the working conditions in the wash house are extreme—in summer they have to work in the scorching heat, and in winter, in freezing cold. The Dhobikhana is lacking official support, the washermen say. Most of its infrastructure is in a dilapidated state now. Santu Choudhuri, secretary of the union, South Dhobikhana Rajak Sangh, says that they used to get water supply four times a day earlier. But now, water is available only twice a day—around 10,000 litres in two instalments from 7am to 9am and from 4pm to 6pm from the Tallah tank. The dhobis say that the electric supply is plagued by voltage fluctuation, and this affects the functioning of electric drying machines—used particularly during the monsoon.

During the British period, the South Dhobikhana was listed under emergency services. The dhobis who have been in this profession for generations are in a sad state today because of the apathy of the corporation. They are uncertain how long this traditional job will continue, given that it is not lucrative enough to attract the younger generation.



Ram Chaudhuri, 81, is one of the oldest dhobis working at South Dhobikhana



A dhobi washes around 200 pieces a day, and earns about ₹25,000 a month

The collected clothes are bleached, washed with clean water and rinsed in steel drums using a hand-operated rotation system called 'hydro', dried in sunlight, and, finally, ironed before they are returned to the customers



Working conditions in the wash house are extreme—in summer the dhobis have to work in the scorching heat, and in winter, in freezing cold

A total of 245 licensed dhobis are associated with South Dhobikhana



Because of their constant exposure to detergents and other cleaning products, the dhobis are prone to skin diseases



Most of the dhobis are originally from Bihar, but they live in tenements in the Bhawanipore, Mudiali and Hazra areas of Kolkata

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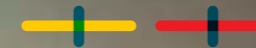
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GETAWAY FIX

Why drive-in theatres, in vogue now, will always be fleetingly cool

BY SNEHA BHURA



CAR CHAIRS
Sunset drive-in theatre in Ahmedabad



Dr Prasanth from Chennai once used to be a regular at Prarthana Beach Drive-in Theatre on East Coast Road. On a Sunday evening, as he takes a breather before his Covid-19 shift begins the next morning at 5:30am, he is trying to remember the last film he saw at Prarthana, the city's oldest drive-in which started in 1991. It was *Vasool Raja MBBS*. "To tell you the truth, apart from the movie, I can remember everything there," says Prasanth.

The doctor recalls heading out of the city on Saturday evenings with friends in a car to the breezy Prarthana. Prasanth and his friends would spread out bedsheets on the floor outside their car and order hot dosas and fried rice from a canteen nearby. "We would hug the [loudspeaker]

post sometimes to get the best quality sound. Most people did not stay in their cars," says Prasanth. "If the movie was bad or boring, you could just stare at the stars. You could also use the speed-bumps as pillows. Nobody goes to drive-in cinemas expecting IMAX clarity. It is all about hanging out with friends, family bonding, making fun of the movie or just dozing off."

Richard Hollingshead of Camden, New Jersey, is credited with starting the first drive-in theatre in 1933, because his large mother could not comfortably seat herself in movie theatres. By the 1950s, there were more than 4,000 drive-in cinemas all over the US, exemplifying its car culture and individualism. The first drive-ins arrived in India in the 1970s. Some say Sunset, in Ahmedabad, is the oldest one in Asia. It can still accommodate over 600 cars. Yet, drive-in as a concept never really took off outside popular American culture.

During the pandemic, there has

been a renewed buzz around the good old drive-in as being most amenable to socially distanced, big-screen entertainment. While confined to your own car, you can take off your mask and eat your own food. Bluetooth technology and wireless headphones will ensure you do not have to crowd around loudspeakers outside the car. Event companies running open-air screenings before Covid-19 sensed an opportunity and briskly moved in to cater movies to cinephiles this year.

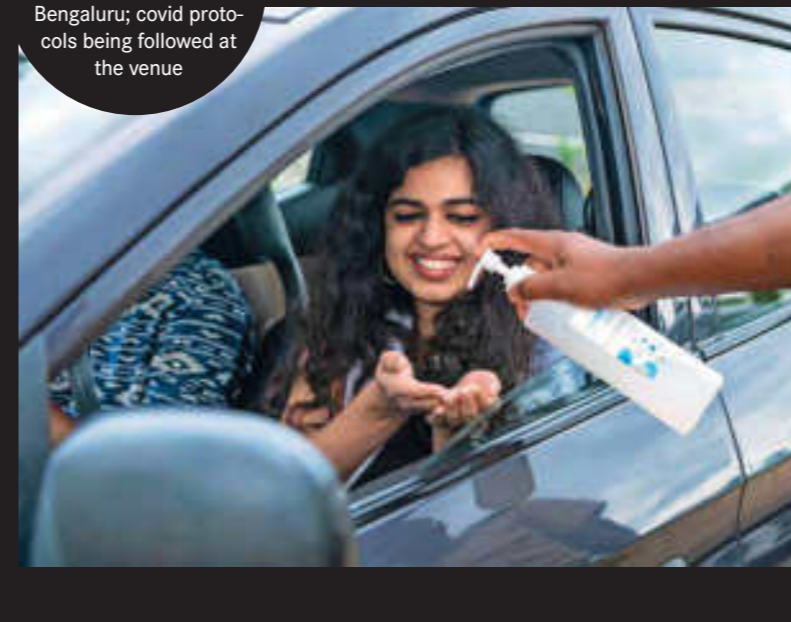
With Unlock 4.0, the Centre allowed open-air theatres to operate with 100 people from September 21. Multiplex chain PVR will launch its first drive-in theatre at Bandra Kurla Complex in Mumbai in October. In Bengaluru, SteppinOut, a new company, has held seven drive-in screenings for 18 cars at a facility near the airport in the past two months with movies like *Grease* and *English Vinglish*. "Our venue is constantly sanitised and our customers stay inside their cars all the time. Ordering

SAFETY IS THE ONLY REASON DRIVE-IN IS SEEING A HUGE SURGE NOW. IT GIVES PEOPLE THE EXCITEMENT OF LEAVING THEIR HOMES AFTER BEING STUCK THERE FOR MONTHS.

—Sushen Kakkar, project lead, SteppinOut



OPEN ENTERTAINMENT
(Clockwise from left)
Drive-in screening venue of SteppinOut in Bengaluru; covid protocols being followed at the venue



and payment is contactless, through a QR code," says Sushen Kakkar, project lead of SteppinOut, which will operate in 15 cities in India from September 21.

When asked about the specific screen and projector technology he imports from the US, Sanchit Gupta, cofounder of Gurgaon-based Sunset Cinema Club, remains tight-lipped. "These are things very specific to the drive-in business," he says. "Previously, no one was concerned about drive-ins, now suddenly everyone wants to jump in. I have to protect the knowhow."

Gupta's company has been holding a drive-in screening every weekend since 2019 in a 30,000sqft space for 60-70 cars in Gurgaon. He will now open drive-ins in Delhi, Mumbai and Bengaluru. "This business is not easy to crack. You need to know the content to be played, there should be a brand presence and studio collaboration is essential," says Gupta, whose company has collaborated with Warner Bros, Viacom and Disney to show their movies.

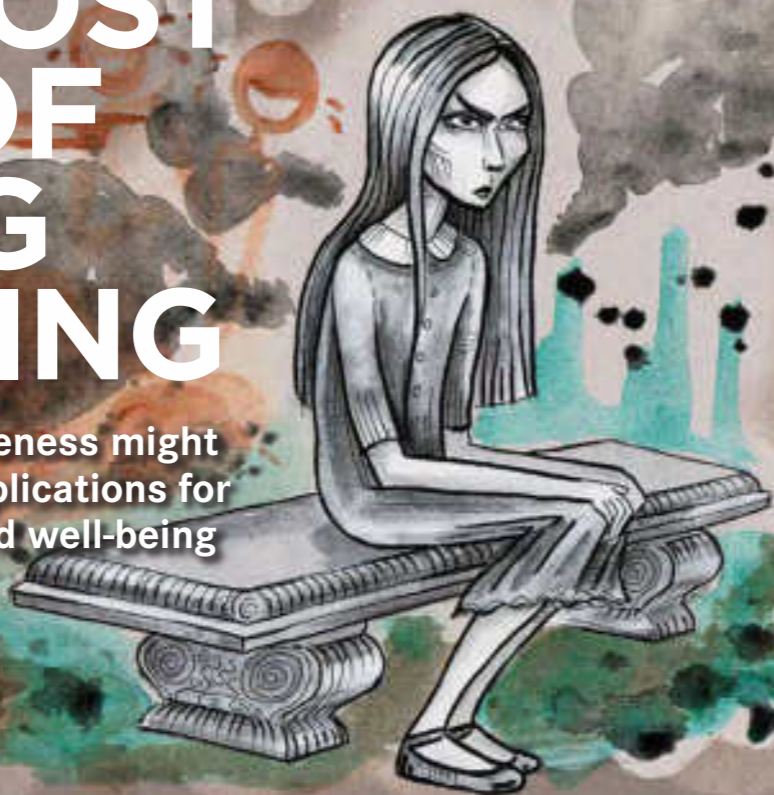
But most new entrepreneurs are certain that drive-ins will not survive the test of time. "Safety is the only reason drive-in is seeing a huge surge now," says Kakkar. "It gives people the excitement of leaving their homes after being stuck there for months. It is a very cool concept, but post-Covid, theatres will start screening new movies which a drive-in can never do."

The cool drive-ins will be remembered in delightful fragments by friends and family. Just like for 62-year-old M.K Ganeshram, who remembers a *Jurassic Park* screening in the 1990s when his kids sank in the backseat in mortal fear of the giant reptiles. "In the car, we are alone with our friends and family. In a theatre, somebody might ogle my wife and daughter. Drive-ins are safe, you know," says Ganeshram, in all sincerity. 🍿

THE LOST ART OF DOING NOTHING

An experiment on idleness might have far-reaching implications for our mental health and well-being

BY ANJULY MATHAI



In 1982, after just a week aboard the space station Salyut 7, Russian cosmonaut Valentin Lebedev was going out of his mind with boredom. “The drab routine has begun,” he wrote in his diary. Cut to 2012. The zero-gravity video of Canadian cosmonaut Chris Hadfield singing David Bowie’s Space Oddity on the International Space Station was viewed more than 200 million times. From tweeting pictures of an African salt water marsh from outer Space to carrying on a conversation with *Star Trek* star William Shatner from his Soyuz Capsule, there was never a dull moment in Hadfield’s space odyssey. “Only boring people feel bored,” he said famously.

So why were two people experiencing the same thing reacting to it in radically different ways? Why can

some people enjoy their own company for hours while others become restless within minutes? It is perhaps to find an answer to such questions that researchers at the University of Fine Arts in Hamburg, Germany, are conducting a rather ingenious experiment: They are offering three applicants grants of €1,600 each to do as little as humanly possible. Anyone in Germany can apply before September 15 by detailing their plan for “active inactivity”.

Professor Friedrich von Borries, who designed the project, thinks laziness might have a role to play in “eco-social transformation.” “It is about exiting the constant success spiral, getting off life’s hamster wheel,” he said. “If we want to live in a society that consumes less energy and wastes fewer resources, this

is not the right system of values. Wouldn’t it be nicer to gain social prestige by saying, ‘I have time to dream... meet friends, put up my feet—I have time to do nothing?’”

But what exactly does ‘doing nothing’ mean? Because you are always doing something even when you are doing nothing. Doreen Dodgen-Magee, who wrote a book on boredom called *Devised! Balancing Life and Technology in a Digital World*, defines doing nothing as “a car whose engine is running but isn’t going anywhere.” It could be anything from day-dreaming, just hanging out, lying awake in bed, taking long walks, gazing out the window or whistling to yourself—activities typically associated with laziness and boredom.

Dr Varghese Punnoose, a psychiatrist from Kerala, cites relatively

new research that explains the effect of idleness on the brain. When the electroencephalogram (EEG) was discovered in the 1920s, a German psychiatrist called Hans Berger noticed a particular type of brain wave called alpha rhythm in the occipital part of the brain when you allowed your mind to wander. Not much significance was attached to it then.

Later, when researchers at Washington University conducted an experiment using fMRI to understand which part of the brain was stimulated when you were paying attention, they, quite accidentally, discovered that the brain was surprisingly busy when it was in the resting state, or what is known as the Default Mode Network (DMN). In fact, it was more metabolically active then. Three-fourth of the total energy it utilised was when it was apparently idle or in DMN.

This discovery has enormous significance, according to Punnoose. “To encode, consolidate and process information, the brain is desperately in need of unstimulated idle time,” he says. According to him, idle time helps you clear your thoughts, sharpen your perceptions and calm your emotions. It also produces “random episodic thoughts” that are highly creative.

Creative people in India agree that they have gotten some of their best ideas when they were not particularly working or actively looking for inspiration. “It might have happened when I was taking a walk in the park or watching a movie,” says best-selling author Ravinder Singh. “Some character in the film, in my head, might have reacted in a different way than portrayed and that will set me thinking. What if the politician had instead been a Bollywood star?”

Artist Riyas Komu feels that the experiment by the German researchers “carries the right spirit of human behaviour and freedom.” “I think it is remarkable that finally, the time has come when people have understood

WE INDIANS ARE CLASSICALLY CONDITIONED TO DO NOTHING.

—Cyrus Broacha, TV personality



I THINK IT IS REMARKABLE THAT FINALLY, THE TIME HAS COME WHEN PEOPLE HAVE UNDERSTOOD THE MIND OF HUMANS.

—Riyas Komu, artist

the human mind,” he says. He feels rigid routines and a restrictive structure of power hinder the freedom to create in a person, which is an intuitive process.

The German experiment comes in the wake of the country testing the benefits of a Universal Basic Income (UBI) by giving 120 people €1,400 a month for three years “to monitor how it changes their work patterns and leisure time”. Several countries are tinkering with the concept of UBI to help people tide over the economic crisis triggered by the pandemic. The question is, if your financial problems are taken care of and you have more leisure time to do what you want, what will you do? Today, however, the opposite of idleness—excessive busyness—has become a status symbol, according to researchers at Columbia and Harvard Universities. “We think that the shift from leisure-as-status to busyness-as-status may be linked to the development of knowledge-intensive economies,” wrote the researchers in the *Harvard Business Review*. So

people who possess “human capital characteristics” like competence and ambition are perceived to be more in demand. Thus, if you tell others that you are busy and working all the time, you might be considered to be more sought after.

There are some, however, who feel that the German experiment will not work in India. “It might benefit Germans because everything there—work and pleasure—is streamlined,” says TV personality Cyrus Broacha. “They are not used to sitting around and meditating without doing anything. They don’t have the idle gene. We Indians, however, are classically conditioned to do nothing. As a former VJ, with no deadlines or targets, I have been practising idleness for years now.” The lockdown, he jokes, has let him up his game. “Now my bathroom is my office. I have so much time to groom myself and focus on health and beauty.”



A call to arms

BY ANJULY MATHAI

Everybody knows that social media can manipulate data and use it to control us. But how many of us know about Snapchat dysmorphia – or young girls using filters to look good on Snapchat and then going for plastic surgery to fit that image? How many of us see social media as a “marketplace that trades exclusively on human futures”? Or think about the trillions of dollars that have made internet companies the richest in the history of the world.

And what is the product they are selling? Us. Or, to be more specific, “it is the gradual, slight, imperceptible change in our behaviours and perceptions,” according to Jaron Lanier, the author of *Ten Arguments for Deleting your Social Media Accounts Now*. *The Social Dilemma* is a documentary by Jeff Orlowski that tells, through the perspective of a few former executives at Facebook, Twitter, Google and other tech companies, about the catastrophic destruction that these platforms are wreaking on our lives.

There is the rampant fear that artificial intelligence is going to take over our lives and hijack our jobs. But AI is already doing that in a deeper way today. We are living in a reality in which it has overpowered our human nature. According to the film, there are massive rooms at Google, both underground and underwater, where hundreds of computers, deeply inter-connected, are running

FAKE NEWS ON TWITTER SPREADS SIX TIMES FASTER THAN REAL NEWS.

—Tristan Harris, former design ethicist at Google

Rating ★★★★★



several programmes simultaneously.

Lanier asks us to imagine what if Wikipedia customised its data to each individual user. And that is exactly what Google is doing. If you type in climate change, for example, your search might tell you that it is a big hoax. Or you might find that it is the greatest threat to humanity. It all depends on where you are living and what your interests are. It is like we are living “in 2.7 billion Truman Shows, each person with their own reality and their own facts”.

According to Tristan Harris, former design ethicist at Google, fake news on Twitter spreads six times faster than real news. We have created a system, it says in the film, which is biased towards false information because truth is boring. False information makes more money for internet companies. An example cited is of #Pizzagate. The rumour spread on social media that ordering a pizza meant ordering a trafficked person. It ended when an armed man stormed a pizza shop to liberate imaginary children from its imaginary basement.

Although the documentary was enlightening, I did wonder whether the makers were exaggerating the truth. In other words, were they propagandising the propaganda? After watching the film, you tend to see conspiracy theories everywhere. The fictional segment of a family whose son is being controlled by social media, being fed just the right information to keep him engaged, was suspicious. But if it is really happening, it is time we woke up to the fact. As Harris said, how do you come out of the Matrix if you don’t know you are in the Matrix? And how many of us are going into this with our eyes open? Somewhere mid-way through the film, my phone beeped with a new notification. I thought twice before checking it. And then I did it anyway.👁

BITTER CHOCOLATE

SWARA BHASKER



Gram and the generation gone by

Social media has become the single-most defining development of the last decade, one that has not just influenced but changed human interaction, behaviour patterns and social relationships in fundamental ways. It has filled our lives in ways we could never have imagined a decade ago—our lives are not just shared, they are displayed and consumed. We click photos of the meal we order and hashtag it #FoodPorn before taking a bite. We pose for selfies as if we are automatons. And no moment seems lived unless it hasn’t been captured and posted on Instagram. In some ways, we are constantly performing the act of living our daily lives. Unwittingly, we are living two lives—one, the boring day-to-day life that we breathe and trudge along in; the other, a curated, saturated, IG-filtered life on display.

The younger generation has taken to it with aplomb and are its primary drivers/consumers. But the older generation, too, has interesting responses to it, as I discovered in the case of my father.

A retired Indian Navy officer in his late sixties, Dad discovered Instagram a few months ago when I opened an account for him. Initially he fumbled with the ‘like’ and ‘comment’ buttons, but soon learnt how to ‘follow’ people, to view stories and put up his own stories and posts. His favourite part though was writing captions—always wry, quirky and finding something profound in the mundane. I think he would first think of the caption and then capture the video/picture. Soon his pages were flooded with scenes from our garden, and after I arrived from Mumbai with my pets, of dog, cats and the sensitive canine-feline politics of the house.

Much to my amusement and occasional embarrassment, Dad decided to become the chronicler of the ordinary and celebrate ‘regular’ people and their lives—from the local barber, the vegetable vendor lady and the gardener to unsuspecting delivery boys and security guards of our colony. My friends started following Dad’s handle and soon he was having independent conversations with them in the comments section. Many of them would message me separately and tell me how oddly comforting his wry observations were—a reminder of the decent,

non-abrasive humour and wisdom of a time gone by. Occasionally, he would direct the gentle sarcasm my way, prompting gleeful comments from our mutual followers—“*Beti ser toh baap sawa ser* (The father is even ahead of the daughter)”; “The real star in the family!” It seemed my dad and his Instagram handle were in a honeymoon phase.

Then one day he came up to me a tad disturbed. “Swara, these videos of scantily dressed women dancing keep showing up on my feed.”

I looked. “Dad, someone you follow may have posted them.”

“I don’t want to see this.”

“Unfollow them.”

I did it for him. A few hours later, he came back. “Some gentleman has sent me a message.”

It was the person he had unfollowed—“Why u unfollow me sirrrrrr?” followed by sad smileys.

“Ignore him, Dad.” My dad complied, but looked hassled.

Over the next few days, my dad struggled with targeted content and ads and the tasteless humour that Instagram’s algorithm threw his way. His constant question was, “How do I unsee this?” A metaphoric question for our time.

The final straw in my father’s deteriorating relationship with Instagram came the day a relative posted a (very flattering, actually) sun-kissed picture of herself on a beach in a two-piece swimsuit. My father, embarrassed and uncomfortable but also not wanting to show it, took a decision. He came to me one morning and announced, “I have deleted Instagram.”

“Why Dad?”

“I think it’s not appropriate for my age group. I think it’s a platform for young people. It’s better the young see what the young post.”

“But what about your followers, Dad? They look forward to your posts.”

My dad returned to his study, contemplative, and then came back with a fresh cat video. “Why don’t you post this from your handle with this caption?”

Clearly the persuasive charm of social media continues, even for a decent, reticent, gentlemanly military man of a generation gone by.

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



Repeat performance

Six years after his debut feature, *Court*, was adjudged the Best Film (Horizons) at the Venice Film Festival, **Chaitanya**

Tamhane has again created a buzz at the 77th edition of the festival. On September 12, he won two awards—the International Critics' Prize and Best Screen-play—for his Marathi film, *The Discipline*, which is about an Indian classical musician's efforts to achieve perfection. *The Discipline* is the second Indian film to compete at the festival; the first was *Monsoon Wedding* (2001).

Vote of confidence

At a time when Bollywood is plagued by accusations of nepotism and drug use, **Aditi Rao Hydari** has come out in support of it. "No industry is devoid of flaws," she said. "We are also human beings, we make mistakes, we have our flaws... but there is a beautiful side to our industry, too." She said that even though she is considered an "outsider", there are people in the industry who will be there for her in times of trouble. Nice to hear something positive in these difficult times!



CONTRIBUTOR/SNEHA BHURA
COMPILED BY ANJULY MATHAI



RITVIZ
singer-producer

A viral story

Singer-producer Ritviz recently launched a three-part miniseries called *Cabin Fever* on his YouTube channel. Done in collaboration with Jugaad Motion Pictures, which has directed music videos like Prateek Kuhad's 'cold/mess', it captures the turmoil and restlessness of a pandemic-afflicted world through the lives of two young people. Ritviz talks to THE WEEK about his latest project.

Q How have you been keeping yourself busy through the lockdown?

Have you been working on new songs or music videos?

A [I have been] keeping things simple. I am used to travelling for shows every weekend, so it has honestly been a blessing in disguise because now I get more time to spend at home, work on music and hang out with my folks. I am always working on new music. There is no set formula, I just pick up and work on what inspires me at that moment.

Q What was the idea behind *Cabin Fever*? Could you relate to either of the characters or what they were going through?



A We were about to cross a million subscribers on YouTube when Jugaad Motion Pictures approached us with the idea for *Cabin Fever*. It was right at the start of the lockdown and they had already finished shooting the first episode. When I watched it, I instantly fell in love with the story, the characters and its overall presentation. Coping with this lockdown has been extremely hard for everyone, I am sure, just like the characters in the series, but watching it gives me hope that there is something good waiting for us at the end. We just need to stick together and be there for each other.

Q How did you go about designing the soundscape of the show? What made you select the songs you ended up using on *Cabin Fever*?

A All creative credits for this show go to Pranav (Bhasin, Jugaad's frequent collaborator) and the team at Jugaad Motion Pictures. They have built this show the way they like it, and that is what I love about it. They put their heart and soul into what they do, and it is visible. I am merely a passenger in this epic journey.

Q How has the pandemic helped you evolve as a musician?

A I have always believed in evolving constantly. This pandemic in particular has made me realise that social media is not everything, and how important human connections are.

—Sneha Bhura

Rise and shine



Devendra V. Darda, managing director of Lokmat Media Group, was elected chairman of the Audit Bureau of Circulations (ABC) for 2020-2021.

Darda has served on several media industry bodies like INS and INFRA. He also presides over many educational institutions in Yavatmal, Maharashtra, and is on the managing committee of the Western India Football Association.

A new nightingale

South Indian actor **Nithya Menen** is the latest to join the brigade of actors who have turned singers during the pandemic. She has collaborated with UK-based sarod player, Soumik Datta, to come out with a single. "The song is about something relevant and I can't wait for people to hear it," she said. Although it is in English, it will have elements of classical Indian music. It is set to release either by the year-end or early 2021.





Don't bury the dead

Migrant workers, forgotten during the lockdown, appear to be forgotten even in the unlocking of India.

The Union government has informed Parliament that no data is available on how many workers may have died in the last few months of the pandemic, during the biggest exodus of Indians since the country's partition.

It is distressing that no such compilation has been made using a combination of state agencies and media reports.

As someone who spent close to four months tracking the journey of migrant workers, walking with them as they traversed hundreds of kilometres back to their village, I, for one, would be happy to share all my data.

I could introduce the labour ministry to Mukesh Mandal's family that lives just on the outskirts of Delhi, in an urban village in Haryana. Mandal, a small-time house painter, had lost all his avenues of income when the country closed down. His wife Poonam, held up his passport size photo for me to see, a vacant look on her quietly stoic face. A day earlier, Mandal had sold his mobile phone for ₹2,500. He bought a table fan—it was hot in the crowded tenement where his family lived—and a few kilos of ration. Then he tied a cloth to a bamboo pole outside his hut and hanged himself.

Or, I could draw the attention of officials to the family of Ranveer Singh, who died from a heart attack near Agra, as he at-

tempted to walk the nearly 300km distance. I went to meet his family in Morena. His sister Pinky said her brother had to work in the city so that he could send money home; one of his dreams was that Pinky could start her own school. His last call home was to the family from Agra. "Come and get me please," he implored. But by the time the family was able to get a curfew pass he was already dead.

Then there is the Gond Adivasi village of Antoli. It is so remote that even when we reached its outskirts after driving for more than a day, we had to walk several kilo-

metres inside, through mud and fields, before we could meet its residents. We all saw the macabre headline of the 16 workers who were run over as they slept on railway tracks in Aurangabad. They thought that no trains were running and that it was a safe space for them to hide from the police. This was their village.

Or, we could remind the governments about the accident that took place in Auraiya, when 24 migrant workers were killed in a road accident. Their injury was compounded with insult when survivors were made to travel in the same trucks which were carrying the dead, the body bags resting on open slabs of melting ice. They were moved into an ambulance only after a massive uproar.

To not tabulate the data of those who died is to render them invisible.

We keep saying that each life lost is more than a statistic.

But it appears that we are not even ready to acknowledge them as statistics.



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