

CHINESE DOUBLE VISION • AAP AND DELHI RIOTS  
CHALLENGES OF RECOVERY • ANIMALS IN ISOLATION • THE CANCEL CULT

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# OPEN



22 JUNE 2020 / ₹50

## T H E

Delhi's Covid-19 crisis gets worse even as the city reopens

## C A P I T A L

## C A S E



A suspected Covid-19 patient in an ambulance awaits admission outside a New Delhi hospital, June 9

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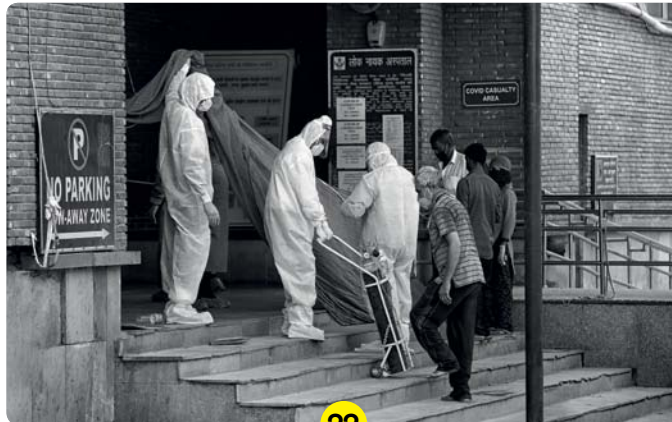
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Cover Photograph by T Narayan

# OPEN MAIL

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## LETTER OF THE WEEK

White America was already complaining it was feeling stifled under the coronavirus lockdown when a white police officer choked to death a 46-year-old black man just because he had the power—implicit official and explicit cultural—to do so ('The United Rage of America' by James Astill, June 15th, 2020). The outrage against police brutality and racial inequality since George Floyd's murder has not been limited to blacks only. White as well as other ethnicities in the US and the world over who have experienced similar treatment in their own countries have protested. Floyd's "I can't breathe" is the real political complaint of Americans—of all hues, not the ideologically motivated 'I can't move' of the anti-lockdown protestors. The 'land of the free' is no stranger to race riots, but the reaction to Floyd had been building for some time now with similar murders being reported but ignored by the Trump administration. It's already too late for the preacher and protector of human rights around the world, but especially in the Third World, to revisit its self-image and ask a simple question: 'Why is it always George the black, never George the white?' Till it can find an answer and a solution to that, the US should get off its high horse. Democracy, before anything else, begins at home. Mend before you recommend.

Ashok Goswami

## ANIMALS ON A PAR

The death of a pregnant elephant in Kerala has triggered nationwide outrage ('Chronicle of a Death Not Foretold', June 15th, 2020). Several celebrities have demanded action against this instance of cruelty against animals. It is sad that this happened in a so-called highly literate state where this beautiful creature is worshipped and adorned at every occasion. We hope that this movement will go beyond social media activism and lead to stricter legislation against such treatment of animals. Perhaps a more important question to ask is why we hear so much about deaths of the voiceless but never

enough about prosecutions of the perpetrators of those murders. The law in India does not give long prison sentences for wildlife crime. And until India's wildlife laws were updated recently, penalties for animal murders were simply fines that were disproportionate. Even where tough laws do exist, for a criminal case, it can be difficult to prove beyond reasonable doubt that a killer is guilty. Too often, the expertise or evidence is not available for a sophisticated analysis. Death penalty might not be the best solution for all crimes but it certainly makes sense for killers of innocent animals; definitely in this rare case of the murder of a mother and



her unborn child. It is up to us to lend voice to the voiceless.

CK Subramaniam

## SHOOJIT'S SCOPE

Shoojit Sircar's films are truly about putting the real life on the reel without embellishments ('I Don't Have to Worry about That One Friday' by Divya Unny, June 15th, 2020). However, the same cannot be said about all the projects he backs. *Pink* might have had a stellar cast, but it reeked of middle-class moralising. The court scenes were contrived and Amitabh Bachchan's dialogues were just the neighbourhood uncle's screed. The soundtrack of *Gulabo Sitabo* is fun and I'm eagerly waiting to watch it first day, first show, so to speak. The screen size doesn't really matter.

Anand Lal

## END TIMES

Whiff of a world war, trade wars, protests, riots, pandemic, race riots and now locusts—isn't this the stuff religious prophecies of end times are made of? ('The Year of the Locust', June 15th, 2020).

Just Anuja

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By S PRASANARAJAN

## YOU HAVE BEEN CANCELLED. PERIOD.

**T**HIS IS A cathartic moment in the legends of resistance: Protesters across the world kneeling in memory of George Floyd, the black man who died in police custody; and an entire nation, shamed by its original sin of existence, crying out for justice in retrospect. Racial lines won't be blurred by tears or teargas; they will only get starker as a moral system built on the Dehumanised Other sweeps across America.

To lay the old demons to rest, you need to kill a few new ones. So it seems as ideological righteousness claims monopoly over grief and anger, as the new order of justice demands consensus over broken conscience. We are One. Or you're *Not*. No matter your revulsion, your anger, at the savagery that triggered the moral eruption, is no lesser. Morality of the street is a sacred screech, canonised by liberal piety. To deviate, to stir in disagreement, is to blaspheme, to be subjected to what the novelist Milan Kundera calls "auto-culpabilisation," a vintage totalitarian method in which punishment is in search of a crime. Liberals are on a punishing spree.

Take these:

As America burned, the *New York Times* carried an op-ed by Republican Senator Tom Cotton, titled 'Send In the Troops'. Supporting President Donald Trump, he wrote: "One thing above all else will restore order to our streets: an overwhelming show of force to disperse, detain and ultimately deter lawbreakers." The liberal newsroom rebelled. The editorial page editor, James Bennet, a liberal himself, defended his decision to publish the piece, which, his colleagues tweeted, "puts all black people in danger, including @nytimes staff members." Bennet wrote: "It would undermine the integrity and independence of the *New York Times* if we only published views that editors like me agreed with, and it would betray what I think of our fundamental purpose—not to tell you what to think, but to help you think for yourself." He had to go.

Amidst the protest, as rioters went berserk, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* carried a piece by its architecture correspondent with the heading: "Buildings Matter, Too." That "hurt" Black Lives. The editor, Stan Wischnowski, had to go.

Adam Rapoport, the editor of *Bon Appétit*, had to go as an old Instagram photo in which he fancy-dressed himself as a Puerto Rican resurfaced on social media. That "hurt."

Not long ago, there was the case of Ian Buruma, who was then the editor of the *New York Review of Books*. He had to go because he published an essay by Jian Ghomeshi, a tainted Canadian broadcaster amidst the #MeToo storm in a special issue on "The Fall of Men." It did not matter that the contributor had already been acquitted by a court. Buruma, a fine essayist and author, and certainly not a right-wing misogynist, refused to recant, and even dared to speak the unspeakable in an interview: "I am not a judge of exactly what he did."

I don't intend to go on naming the shamed in the American media. But a unipolar world of ideas the liberals intend to build is not different from, in its fundamentals, the one built by the Soviet Union. Yesterday, the #MeToo movement, born out of the collective rage against sexual cruelties inflicted by men in power, was diminished by the casualness with which some accusations were played out on social media. Today, America's anger, cutting across class and colour, against the racial behaviour of power is a tipping point in the moral evolution of a country most closely associated with the idea of freedom. Is it being diminished by the liberal cancel cult?

The cancel cult is a perfect case of the ideal of liberalism, whose time has not passed, undone by the intolerance of liberals. Any intellectual position that abhors a questioning mind is pretence, a falsity. It is a wall built by moral cowardice to protect the illusion of consensus. As liberals become proof-readers of arguments in media and academia, every word, written or uttered, has to pass the righteousness test. The failed ones are buried alive, and they are seldom mourned. The silence of the tribe is frightening.

The liberal project in monochromatic arguments gives them a false sense of empowerment at a time when liberalism, in America and elsewhere in the West, has abdicated the struggle for political power. As the American writer Mark Lilla has written, liberalism has become an "evangelical" enterprise. But evangelism, in his memorable aphorism, "is about speaking truth to power. Politics is about seizing power to defend the truth." Inside the cancel cult, truth is faith enforced by the usual evangelists.

Having said that, I'm just grateful that, in these times of trial by liberal fire, somewhere on my bookshelf, Genet is still there, Nabokov is still there. And I was not planning to watch again *Gone with the Wind* anyway. ■

SAURABH SINGH



# INDRAPRASTHA

*Virendra Kapoor*

**I**T IS CRUEL, downright cruel. How much more suffering, how much more pain will we have to bear before our collective nightmare is finally over? Nobody seems to know for sure. Meanwhile, we must continue to suffer in silence. Don't have an option. The other day, a very close friend succumbed to multiple ailments complicated further by the coronavirus. It was a personal loss. But was I allowed to attend the funeral? Of course, not. They had set a limit on the number of mourners who could be present at the cremation ground. The fewer, the better. But in any case, no more than 20. They even insisted on the body being taken straight from the hospital to the notified crematorium. This was extraordinary, to say the least. But there was more. No, it was not alright that you should visit the widow to condole the death. In fact, she needed to be in self-quarantine—for her own sake and for the sake of her family.

Never before had I heard of such a calamitous situation that you were barred from offering condolences in person to the widow of a close friend. The corona edict was that you offer condolences long-distance, while remaining in self-isolation. Of course, WhatsApp cannot be a substitute for actual physical presence. Sitting down with the bereaved widow and the children, sharing old memories, recalling good times and bad and generally being a comforting presence at a tragic moment, was strongly discouraged in the corona times. The tiny entity had acquired such a powerful status, evoking universal panic, that it had bent to



its as yet unfathomable will the entire humankind.

**I**N TIMES OF a universal health crisis when everyone lives in the fear of the unknown, you would think we will be god-fearing, abandoning greed, dishonesty, fraud, etcetera. On the contrary, by all accounts, the medical community seems to have decided to rake it in big, exploiting the ignorance and fear of the virus which was inflicting untold misery all around. A friend experienced this a few days ago. Intermittent mild fever for a few days led him to a doctor. No, it was certainly not corona. Relieved, the doc nonetheless wanted him to get a few tests done. Which he dutifully agreed to. Three tests later, he was asked to do a couple of more in order for him to be able to completely rule out anything serious, just in case. Sceptical about the ways of the private medical practitioners, my friend demurred. But the wife insisted that what the doctor said was best for him.

In the meantime, a five-day course of antibiotics would take care of the tiny infection in his lungs, the doctor volunteered helpfully. Two days later, when all the test reports were in, he was told to feel

relaxed, now that there was nothing wrong with him barring that tiny lung infection which had been taken care of by the antibiotics. The entire rigmarole of CT scans, blood, sputum tests, etcetera, set my friend back by a neat Rs 40,000. Meanwhile, one could ask for an institutionalised random medical audit to deal with the growing malaise of wholly unnecessary tests but given how iconic auditors have behaved in recent times, we have to lump it. Medical tests are increasingly about deceitfully enriching doctors, not restoring to good health the suffering humanity.

**W**HILE STILL ON coronavirus, an acquaintance felt he had contracted the virus. Testing was thought absolutely necessary. But can you imagine in the capital city of India, there was no lab ready to test. In a city notorious for its culture of connections, he reckoned he had the best. But nothing worked. Pleading long waiting lists, all labs declined. After working the phone lines for two days, finally a lab obliged. But they wouldn't send someone to take the tongue swab, he would have to visit personally. Which meant risking exposure to likely corona-infected patients. Anyway, he did his test, it was positive. But after a fortnight of home quarantine, he was regaining his health and, vitally, self-confidence.

**I**N THE AGE of WhatsApp, this one makes some sense: 2020 is the year of the rat. We are all in hiding; we only go out to get food; we store food; when people come close, we run away. Amen. ■



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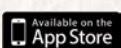
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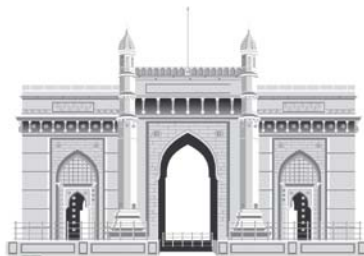
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# MUMBAI NOTEBOOK

Anil Dharker



**T**HE LOCKDOWN WAS relaxed (not lifted) in Maharashtra on Monday, June 8th. The Government announced that offices would open with one-third of staff strength, yet reports say most offices were empty. It's easy to see why. How do employees who don't have cars or two-wheelers come to work when the suburban rail service is shut? As it is, even companies with a majority of professionals in their ranks are wondering if they should open up or continue to work from home. After all, even a single Covid-19-positive case in their midst will mean they have to shut down the office and everyone will have to self-quarantine.

In the meantime, the city's municipal corporation sent a notice to its employees to show up or face the sack. Apparently, more than half of Class 3 and 4 employees were not turning up for work. How could they without public transport? You can't possibly walk from Mulund to CST, and who in the city has bicycles? It's possible other companies took a leaf out of BMC's very public announcement and issued similar ultimatums, because on Monday morning when buses started plying, queues at distant suburbs like Virar and Andheri were miles long. I have never been able to estimate numbers, but without doubt, there were many hundreds in each queue. If at all anyone got anywhere, it would have taken hours. I learnt from friends in essential manufacturing units like pharmaceuticals, that they arranged private transport to bring their employees in, then made local arrangements for accommodation. Would that have been possible for

offices like BMC with massive staff members? I have no clue.

We are still in early June and the lockdown is in force till month's end. But people are obviously chafing at being confined indoors. The moment it was announced that people could go outdoors for fresh air and exercise between five and seven in the evening, the floodgates opened and Marine Drive promenade, Juhu Beach and other public places were engulfed by people. Social distancing was impossible and not everyone wore masks.

Before you say that's India for you, take a look at what's happening all over the world with the anti-racism protest. The US has gone completely crazy, but even in Britain, crowds of young people thronged the streets in close solidarity with American protestors. 'Close' is the operative word here: people were virtually jostling each other as if demonstrating for a good cause could make even the threat of the coronavirus disappear.

**E**ARLIER PANDEMICS LIKE the bubonic plague and Spanish Flu killed millions all over the world. A few of those who escaped used their quarantine period productively and produced incredible work. In 1606, Shakespeare for example, used his year plus a bit in self-isolation to write *King Lear*, *Macbeth* and *Antony & Cleopatra*. Three great plays, and you will note, all tragedies. After all, the plague during which people were

falling off like flies, was no time for levity.

Fifty years later, the plague again devastated England. Campuses shut down, so Isaac Newton, then a 24-year-old student at Cambridge University went off to his village family home. There, while he sat on the lawn on a warm summer's day, an apple fell on his head, and you know the rest. He also used the time to develop calculus, formulated centuries earlier by ancient mathematicians, and made it the sophisticated tool it became. As for the Spanish Flu, it produced great art, but what could painters use as their subject if they were confined to their rooms? Look into the mirror and produce self-portrait after self-portrait!

What will the universal lockdown of the coronavirus produce? Given our times, you would expect dystopian art and literature and music. The problem is that all of these are already dystopian! Listen to contemporary Western music: ever since dissonance became an integral part of it, a majority of music lovers at best tolerate it in short snatches. Most people dismiss it as 'this modern music', although it is now a hundred years old. If you see Contemporary Western Dance, its foundation on lurching, convulsive movements and ominous background music always suggest alienation and a less than harmonious world. Even modern-day Kathak, although often brilliantly choreographed, follows the same pattern.

So will today's creative artists take us even deeper into the dark abyss, or will they do the opposite and depict a hoped-for brighter and more cheerful world? I doubt it. If they did, no one would take them seriously. ■





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# OPENINGS

NOTEBOOK

## Cricket Cautiously Takes Guard

**S**PORT AT THE professional level is spectacle. A player spends a lifetime of empty stands at the school, district and even state circuits, until, having finally made it at the national level, he is able to participate in an ancient ritual, performing before enormous cheering or booing crowds, drawing energy and impetus from them; looking up to the skies after making a century or waving his bat derisively at an audience in another country that had mocked him. And then comes a pandemic and severs the relationship overnight. The player is again thrown back to his beginnings, when all that exists are two teams slugging it out in isolation. It is a reality about to confront cricket and what it does to performance is right now the least of anyone's concerns. Because the first order of the day is to at least begin playing again.

Cricket is now taking its first faltering steps to get back to life from the lockdown. A number of separate happenings came simultaneously to announce this. There was primarily the news that early July would finally see an international cricketing event: a Test series between West Indies and England. Earlier slated for June, it was postponed by a month, which seems not so bad when there was a question mark over whether it would happen at all. On June 9th, almost a month before the first Test slated for July 8th, the West Indies team arrived in England. They will train for three weeks by themselves while also fulfilling the quarantining obligations. It hadn't been without some niggles. Three West Indian players decided that they didn't want to take the risk of travel and refused to go. Whereas such a spurning would have invited punitive actions in ordinary times, they were immediately told there would be no consequences. A

statement by Cricket West Indies (CWI) said: 'Darren Bravo, Shimron Hetmyer and Keemo Paul all declined the invitation to travel to England for the tour and CWI fully respects their decision to choose to do so. As previously stated, CWI will not hold this decision against these players when considering future selection.' The release also gave some indication of how the lockdown would impact the tour. It said: 'The West Indies squad will live, train and play in a "bio-secure" environment during the seven weeks of the tour, as part of the comprehensive medical and operations plans to ensure player and staff safety. The bio-secure protocols will restrict movement in and out of the venues, so the selection panel has also named a list of reserve players who will travel to train and help prepare the Test squad and ensure replacements are available in case of any injury.' The key thing about the series is that it will be played in stadiums where the stands will be devoid of any audience. That would be the new normal for the foreseeable future.

On Tuesday this week, the International Cricket

Council also came out with a set of regulations for the resumption of cricket. This was as per the recommendations of a committee headed by Anil Kumble and had these points:

- There could be Covid substitutions. If a player showed symptoms of the disease, he could be pulled out and another player from the team play in his stead.
- Saliva could not be used to shine the ball, an already enforced ban which was ratified. It is not going to make fast bowlers happy. They will be one more arsenal short in a game that is increasingly skewed towards batsmen.
- On the other hand, it allowed for sweat to be applied to balls because the virus (hopefully) only inhabits saliva

**Cricket is now taking its first faltering steps to get back to life from the lockdown.**

**A number of separate happenings came simultaneously to announce this. There was primarily the news that early July would finally see an international cricketing event: a Test series between West Indies and England**

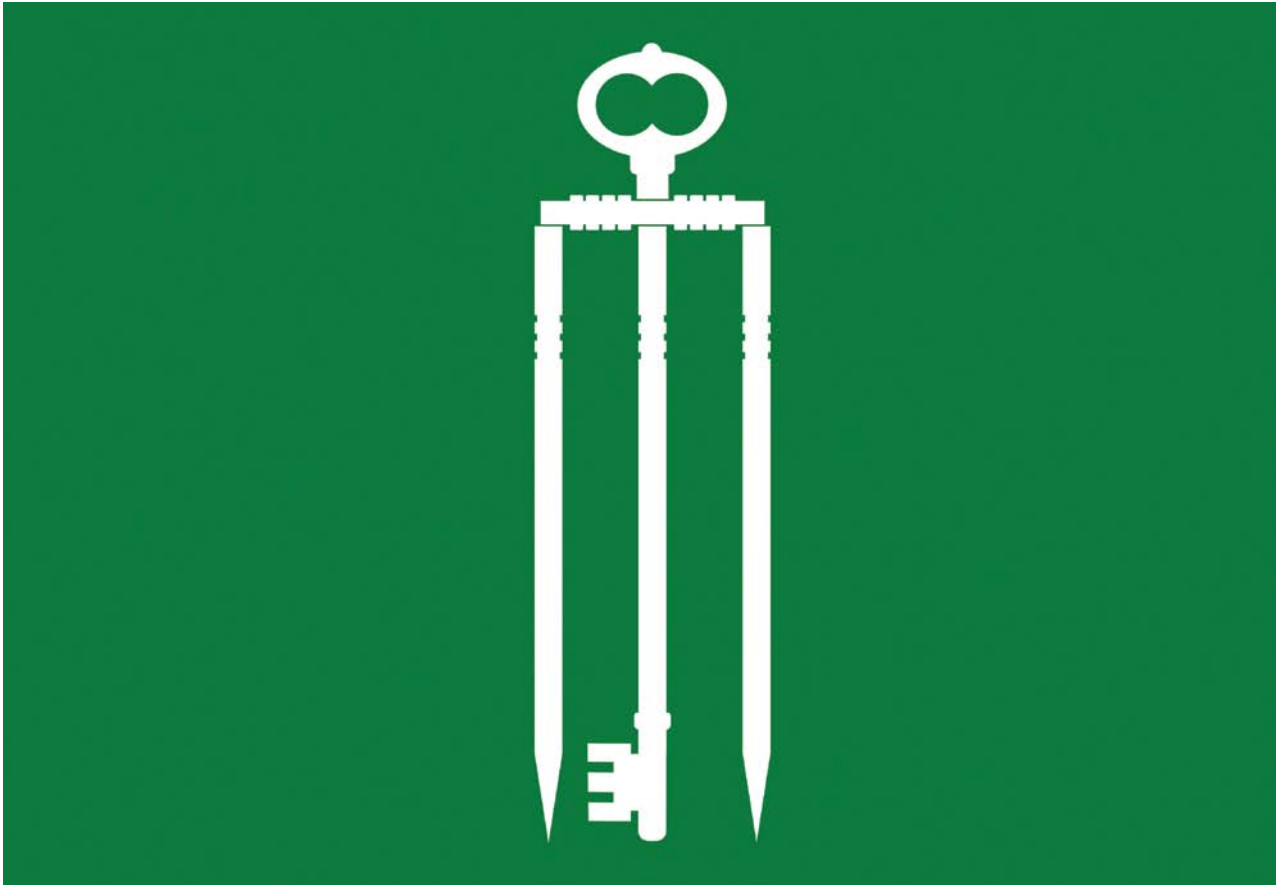


Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

- Non-neutral umpires, as in those belonging to the same country as the home teams, will be there. As a result of that, teams would be given an extra DRS review to appeal against decisions.
- More space would be given on the jerseys of players for advertisements. This was so that revenue-hit boards could earn more money.

The third news on the cricketing front was Sourav Ganguly, President of the Board of Control for Cricket in India, indicating that the Indian Players League (IPL) would be held. One of the major revenue earners in Indian cricket, the domestic T20 league was slated to be held in end of March, precisely the time when the lockdown began. After some other provisional dates being toyed with, it had been thought that the year might just have to be written off. On June 10th, Ganguly wrote to BCCI's affiliates that the tournament had not been shelved for the year. A *PTI* report on his letter said: "The BCCI is working on all possible options to ensure that we are able to stage IPL this year, even if it means playing the tournament in empty stadiums," Ganguly wrote. The fans, franchises, players, broadcasters, sponsors and all other stakeholders are keenly looking forward to the possibility of IPL being hosted this year. Recently, a lot of players both from India and other countries, participating in the IPL, have shown keenness on being part of this year's IPL. We are optimistic and the BCCI will shortly decide on the future course of action on this.' In the same letter, he also spoke of the domestic leagues being restarted and that they could get

innovative with the formats to make it more feasible.

The IPL's eventual fate will also be tied to the T20 world championship in Australia, which was to be held in October as per the pre-pandemic schedule. As of now, the ICC hasn't decided what it will do about it. Should it be cancelled, then it gives a window for the IPL to be held. And then there is the next Indian cricket team's tour to Australia. After some indecision, it was recently scheduled for October by Cricket Australia, just before the T20 World Cup. There might not be any health reasons that puts the tour in jeopardy but if the T20 World Cup is cancelled, then the IPL will be held around the same time and then there will be permutations and combinations required to please everyone.

In any case, all these matches will be to empty stadiums and the entire cricketing ecosystem will need to adapt to the changes. Former Indian cricketer Rahul Dravid shared his thoughts on the future in an interview to *Sony Ten Pit Stop* this week. Players, he thought, would definitely miss the connection with the crowd and the energy it brings. On being asked whether cricket, 'as we know it' will change, he said it will be different until a vaccine is found and added, "Life is going to be different and cricket is a reflection of life in a lot of ways... It is going to be different whether it is the way we play the game, how we interact with teammates, dressing room etiquette, viewership—getting used to playing with less people watching you. We will have to adjust our expectations." ■

By MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI

PORTRAIT • JK ROWLING

# WOKE TARGET

The Harry Potter author is being accused of transphobia for not being sufficiently gender neutral

**A**LITTLE OVER A month ago, JK Rowling announced a new children's book. A fairy tale book, *The Ickabog*, it was going to be released online in a serialised format, finally coming together as a book in November. Ten years ago, this news would have set the world on fire. The return of Rowling to the children's book genre, her first ever since the *Harry Potter* series, should have made the book instantly the most awaited cultural product of the year, maybe, even the decade. But this hasn't happened.

And you can tell why this is. The internet does not find her woke enough.

For the last couple of years, many individuals who would have grown up reading the Harry Potter books have been turning against her. Her public support last year for a woman who lost her job at a think tank because she made some comments that were construed by some as being transphobic, her following of certain Twitter accounts who again are called transphobic, and even before all that, her decision to support the casting of Johnny Depp in the second movie *Fantastic Beasts* has made her something of a controversial figure. To be fair, Depp has always denied allegations of physically assaulting his now ex-wife Amber Heard, and had by then reached a settlement and divorced her; although there is another ongoing court case now where he claims she used to assault him.

In the growing estrangement between her once fans and her, people have reread the Harry Potter books to find it has a diversity issue. Some have found the Chinese character in the Potter books, Cho Chang, too close to an ethnic

slur. Some have even wondered aloud if the goblins in the Potter universe's Gringotts Wizarding Bank with their hooked noses do not prove that Rowling is anti-Semitic. The latest storm occurred a few days ago when she shared an article titled 'Creating a more equal post-COVID-19 world for people who menstruate' on Twitter. 'People who menstruate,' she tweeted along with it. 'I'm sure there used to be a word for those people. Someone help me out. Wumben? Wimpund? Woomud?'

There were abuses and denouements. She was called a TERF (Trans-exclusionary radical feminist, an acronym coined by trans activists); one person, she says, even called her Voldemort. Warner Bros issued a statement; celebrities piled on, including several members of the Harry Potter film cast. Daniel Radcliffe, who as a child played the boy wonder, said, "To all the people who now feel that their experience of the books has been tarnished or diminished, I am deeply sorry for the pain these comments have caused you."

At the heart of this debate Rowling is embroiled in is whether the sex one is born with should have any relevance. Many of the activists who criticise Rowling want gender identity (or what a person feels their gender is) to override sex as a legal and practical category. This means, for instance, a person with a male body can become a woman by simply identifying as one. This is a far more complex subject with far-reaching consequences than those who have criticised Rowling will admit. What Rowling and Maya Forstater, the woman who she defended last year, try to point out is that increasingly they find no clear space for discussion on this subject. Ideology, they point out, has invaded civil society, media, law and even science. Increasingly, governments are being pushed to allow people to change their legal sex at will, and to access single sex spaces of the opposite sex, even when there's been hardly any debate on how this would impact women. Rowling isn't a transphobe. She does not deny the violence and abuse many transsexuals face. But she worries that defining womanhood as a feeling rather than a biological fact has implications for the protection of women's rights. She has defended her ground. Some days later, she wrote a lengthy and personal article detailing her interest in the subject and reasons out her opinions.

Whatever you think of Rowling's views, you have to acknowledge that she has arrived there after thought and care. And it is hard to say the same about the online mob baying for her blood. ■

By LHENDUP G BHUTIA

Illustrations by SAURABH SINGH



**ANGLE****A FAMILIAR TASTE****On the enduring appeal of Parle-G biscuits which registered record sales during the lockdown****By MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI**

**T**HE COCA-COLA stock is one of the prized possessions of Warren Buffet, one of the greatest investor the world has ever seen. He bought a little under \$2 billion of it in the late '80s and then saw it go up by 20 times. Plus only in the dividends that he got from the company, Buffet has made multiple times what he put in. It is among the stocks he says he will never sell. What makes Coca-Cola so compelling? For one, Coca-Cola will never go out of fashion. In Buffet's words, it is a brand so entrenched in the minds of consumers that it is impossible to replace it, no matter how much a competitor puts in to create another cola. If you want an Indian parallel to such a hold that a product has on the consumer, you saw evidence of it in the sales of Parle-G that was made public this week. In a time when the world is in lockdown and recession, the biscuit sold more than any other time in its recent memory.

You could think that is but natural given that people would eat more biscuits when cooped up inside but that is only half the story. There are a number of biscuit brands in this country owned by huge FMCG behemoths with deep pockets. But Parle, riding on the popularity of its biscuit, increased its market share by close to 5 per cent. A *PTI* report said: 'The company has gained a market share of around 5 per cent in the highly competitive biscuit segment, helped by Parle-G biscuits, which was proffered by the

people while stocking pantry during the pandemic. Parle-G biscuits also gained traction as it was preferred by government agencies and NGOs working to distribute food relief packages to the people during the pandemic due to its economic proposition with value package of Rs 2 besides being considered as a good source of glucose, Parle Products Senior Category Head Mayank Shah told *PTI*.'

The same psychology that Buffet explains about Coca-Cola applies—some products build extraordinary loyalty because of the large amount of time they have been used. They are trusted. This is especially true of what consumers put into their bodies. The biscuit was first made in 1938 and, except for the size of the packets, its form and taste has remained almost unchanged. It is associated with childhood for almost every Indian and what can be safer than what children have eaten. Why would parents not pass it on to their offsprings? During times of a pandemic, safety becomes a paramount concern. It is also very cheap as the smallest packet costs just a couple of rupees. Which is why rural consumers primarily drive its sales.

But its resonance with the literate yuppie classes was also evident when Twitter began to trend this week with fond reminiscences of the biscuit by people. Like Bollywood actor Randeep Hooda who tweeted: 'My whole career is fueled by chai and Parle-G since theater days...' ■

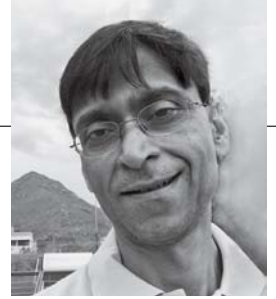
**IDEAS****DENIAL**

Even though the revelation that the West Indian cricketer Darren Sammy was subjected to a racist slur by his teammates during his IPL stint created a furore, the BCCI has remained tightlipped on the subject. According to some reports, the board said it had received no complaints on the issue when it happened. If we were to believe that the players were unaware of the racial tones the word carries, what does that say about the BCCI? What is shocking about the incident is not that Sammy didn't know the meaning of the word. It is that his teammates didn't know. An Instagram post of a senior Indian international cricketer with Sammy who uses the word in a caption has now been discovered. How does an international cricketer be ignorant of these issues? Why has the most-efficiently run cricket administration which has a league that attracts international sportsmen and which otherwise runs programmes on doping and anti-corruption, hasn't yet seen it fit to educate its players on this matter? ■

**WORD'S WORTH**

**'Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced'**

**JAMES BALDWIN** WRITER



By Makarand R Paranjape

# Monumental Translations

Bibek Debroy has made a piece of our cultural heritage accessible

**O**NE OF THE surpassing wonders of ancient Hindus is that they built astonishing monuments in verse.

Attributed to Krishna Dvaipayana, more commonly known as Veda Vyasa, the *Mahabharata* constitutes one such verse monument. The Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute's Critical Edition, completed after the death of its legendary general editor Vishnu Sitaram Sukthankar (1887-1943), having pruned what were considered repetitions and extrapolations, is still about 150,000 lines or 75,000 *slokas* long. Fuller versions extend to 100,000 *slokas* or 200,000 lines. Add the 18 *Mahapuranas*, also credited to Krishna Dvaipayana, which make up another 800,000 lines, besides other texts, and we have a staggering volume of verse ascribed to one human being.

Even if Vyasa is not a historical person or the single author of so many texts, exceptionally gifted and prolific individuals in our own times have actually produced astounding volumes of work by virtue of sheer genius and hard work.

The translation of the *Mahabharata* alone would account for 2.25 million words or 6,000 pages. Add the Valmiki *Ramayana*, *Harivamsha*, *Bhagwat Purana*, *Markandeya Purana*, *Bhagavad Gita* and selections from the Vedas and Upanisads totalling another 5,000 pages.

Now bring in dozens of more books in economics, polity, Indology, plus other than translations from Sanskrit. Not to forget the thousands of newspaper columns and daily limericks sustained over a number of years. The total might be in excess of 6 million words or 20,000 pages!

How can it be humanly possible to be so productive, that too with a full time job of national importance such as the Chairman of the Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister? I think I've given away the answer. Only a prodigy and phenomenon named Bibek Debroy can accomplish so much.

I could, of course, go on and on. But my subject is another, somewhat lesser known and therefore more enigmatic, man called Manmatha Nath Dutt.

Who?

This is precisely the question Debroy takes it upon himself to tease out in his new book just published by Rupa. The subtitle, *Translator Extraordinaire*, provides us a clue. For, if there is

anyone who has an even more impressive record of translating from Sanskrit into English than Debroy, it is probably Dutt.

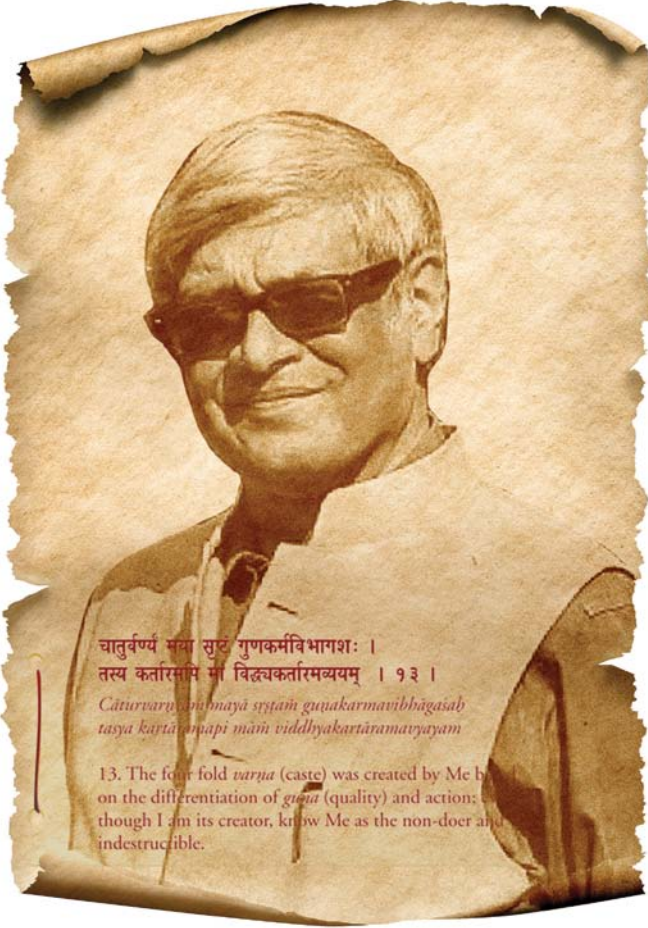
Dutt's long list of translations includes all the above listed texts translated by Debroy. Plus the *Agni Purana*, *Vishnu Purana*, *Garuda Purana*, *Mahanirvana Tantra*, *Manu Samhita*, *Parashara Samhita*, *Gautama Samhita*, *Kamandakiya Nitisara*. Add several other authored and edited volumes on Hindu metaphysics, Ayurveda, the Buddha and so on. All this in less than 21 years, from 1891 to 1912.

Dutt also edited a journal called *Wealth of India*, ran a printing and publishing house, called Deva, then Elysium, Press, from 65/2 Beadon Street, Calcutta, and was founder of the Society for the Resuscitation of Indian Literature. In addition, he was the Rector of a school called the Keshub Academy and member of the Royal Asiatic Society.

So why do we know so little about Dutt? Why has posterity passed him by in so cavalier and careless a fashion? Debroy resorts to fascinating forensics to tell us. Which is why, at times, this biography reads like a detective story.

We don't even know for sure when Dutt was born or when he died. Debroy says that the likely dates are 1862 and 1912, respectively. That means he lived for just 50 years. About his ancestry and progeny, we know a little more, although questions about the former remain. But Debroy establishes that Sucheta Kripalani, India's first female Chief Minister (of Uttar Pradesh) and Acharya JB Kripalani's wife, was his granddaughter. Dutt was also related to Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose from the latter's mother's side.

But why and how did Dutt translate so much? According to Debroy, it was not only to earn a living, but also to acquaint the world with the authentic accounts of Hindu religious and philosophical texts. In his 'Introduction' to *Gleanings* (1893), Dutt's explains his purpose: 'The Hindus and their Religion are the most misunderstood thing in the modern world. The civilized people of the Western World labour under the notion that the Hindus are a people a little better than the aborigines of Africa and their Religion is not better than the grossest form of idolatry... This is an attempt to popularize the Hindu Literature, Philosophy and religion among the Western nations' (Debroy, p 30).



## IF THERE IS ANYONE WHO HAS AN EVEN MORE IMPRESSIVE RECORD OF TRANSLATING FROM SANSKRIT INTO ENGLISH THAN **BIBEK DEBROY**, IT IS PROBABLY MANMATHA NATH DUTT

Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, writing under the pseudonym 'Ramachandra', said in his rebuttal of William Hastie's diatribe against Hindu idolatry, that it is better to go back to original Sanskrit sources to understand Hinduism: 'Let Mr. Hastie take my advice, and obtain some knowledge of Sanskrit scriptures in the ORIGINAL. Let him study then critically all the systems of Hindoo philosophy... Let him not study them under European Scholars, for they cannot teach what they cannot understand; the blind cannot lead the blind' (Debroy, p 29).

But Dutt realised that that was not possible for many. There was no escape from English translations. Debroy, in his 'Introduction' to his monumental 10-volume translation of the

*Mahabharata* into English, agrees: 'Familiarity with Sanskrit is dying out. The first decades of the 21st century are quite unlike the first decades of the twentieth. Lamentation over what is inevitable serves no purpose. English is increasingly becoming the global language, courtesy colonies...rather than the former colonizer. If familiarity with the corpus is not to die out, it needs to be accessible in English.'

What does this dependence on English make us? A translated nation?

Even if we don't like the sound of it, our very survival as a civilisation depends not only on originals, but also on translations. For many, it is through translations that we can reconnect with originals. Translation, thus, becomes a means of reviving our self-understanding. Unlike in Dutt's times, today we translate as much for ourselves, for fellow Indians, as for the rest of the world.

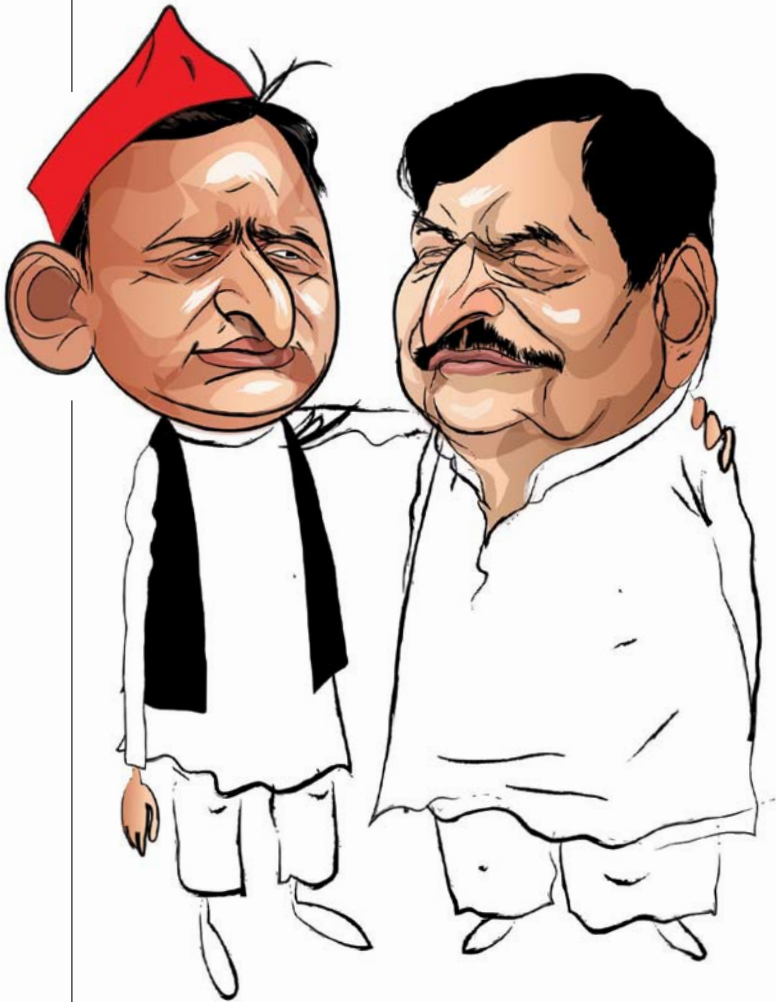
Why is it important for Indians to translate our own ancient texts rather than outsourcing the job to foreigners? Because our own translations are less alienating and more culturally contiguous than those of non-Indians, no matter how accurate or linguistically up-to-date the latter might be. The *svrajist* position vis-à-vis translation is to develop a new universalism that is the flowering of the national impulse, not the flight from it into dislocated cosmopolitanism.

A good deal of the *vivaad* on *anuvaad*, therefore, remains vapid and unproductive. In the Indian polyphony, a multiplicity of originals and translations jostle for interpretive and critical attention. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her 'Translator's Preface' to *Of Grammatology*, puts it: 'Derrida's theory... would likewise admit—as it denies—translation, by questioning the absolute privilege of the original... Any act of reading is besieged and delivered by the precariousness of intertextuality. And translation is, after all, one version of intertextuality... If the proper name or sovereign status of the author is as much a barrier as a right of way, why should the translator's position be secondary?' (p lxxxvi).

This scenario prevails especially when the original is lost or irretrievable, as in hundreds of texts available only in translations. The example of Gunadhya's *Brihatkatha* readily comes to mind. Reputed to have been written in Paishachi or Bhutabhasha, the original has been lost forever. Only its Sanskrit adaptations remain. This also applies to texts that shift shape across cultures. The originals are forgotten or left behind. Only translations persist, which in turn assume the status of original texts.

That is why India's multilingual literary map is made up as much of translated as original monuments in words. It is this bountiful and bewildering richness that shapes the Bharatiya Kavyapurusha, or to change the metaphor, the Kavyaprakriti of Bhavani Bharati.

We are eternally beholden to great scholar-translator-savants such as Dutt and Debroy for facilitating this recollecting of our dismembered linguistic, literal, cultural and civilisational pasts. ■



## Family Drama

In politics, friendships and enmities are temporary, especially between family members. As the Assembly election of Uttar Pradesh looms nearer, the battle between Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav and estranged uncle Shivpal Singh Yadav is diffusing.

In the last election, Shivpal broke off and floated a new party. Akhilesh asked the Assembly Speaker to disqualify him since he was a Samajwadi member. The Speaker didn't take a decision and now Akhilesh has done a volte-face by sending a letter that he was withdrawing his complaint and that Shivpal must not be disqualified. There was reportedly a secret meeting between the two to sort issues out. Also,

Mulayam Singh Yadav, the party patriarch, told his son and brother to be united if they wanted to win the next election.

## MARGIN CALL

When the Rajya Sabha elections take place, Jyotiraditya Scindia is expected to sail through comfortably with BJP MLAs voting for him. But a number of senior BJP MLAs are reportedly not happy with Scindia's entry. Some may even be planning not to vote for him. It may not deny him a victory but the margin could be smaller. The BJP central leadership is trying to prevent this and has state office bearers looking into the issue.

## Back in Action

In the 15 months that he was Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister, Kamal Nath, the 72-year-old Congress leader, built a reputation for being casual. It was said that he used to spend a lot of time in Delhi while his senior party colleague Digvijaya Singh travelled in the state's districts on his behalf. It reminded people of the late ND Tiwari when he was Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh and people used to call him 'New Delhi Tiwari' for a similar reason. After losing power, Kamal Nath went to Shimla to take a break. He then planned to be active again as opposition leader. He started district tours but then the lockdown started. Now he is active again through video conferences with party workers daily in Madhya Pradesh.





## Berth Pangs

**M**adhya Pradesh Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan has a different set of troubles. When the Kamal Nath government fell, 22 Congress MLAs led by Jyotiraditya Scindia came to the BJP. But till now, only three of them have got berths in the state cabinet. The BJP's own leaders are also keen to get ministries. State leader Narottam Mishra, who finalised the deal with the breakaway unit, has now been made home and health minister. The former Congressmen are now pressuring him to get them ministries. That has led to tensions between Chouhan and Mishra, who himself had been a chief ministerial aspirant at one point. Recently, both had breakfast together at Mishra's home and there is speculation about a cabinet expansion soon after the Rajya Sabha elections next week.

## Campaign Overhaul

**A**mit Shah tested the political waters of the country by holding three virtual public rallies for Bihar, West Bengal and Odisha. The BJP's election activities have started through this mechanism. The party claims Shah connected with hundreds of thousands of people through live television and mobile phones. Covid-19 will change election campaigns and the BJP knows that it cannot rely on the old style to get votes.

## An Unsettled Position

**C**an West Bengal leader Mukul Roy, who jumped over to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) from the Trinamool Congress, get entry into the Modi Cabinet before Assembly elections in the state? No one is sure. Some say he is not even a Parliament member at present. Roy is said to be frustrated in the BJP because its state president Dilip Ghosh, an old RSS and party hand, does not like him. Ghosh thinks Roy's image is not clean, given his alleged involvement in the chit fund case being investigated by the CBI. On the other hand, Roy is close to Kailash Vijayvargiya, the BJP's central observer for Bengal. Vijayvargiya had thought that Roy could break Trinamool but that didn't happen. There are also rumours of a rapprochement between Trinamool chief Mamata Banerjee and Roy. Both sides deny it. And Banerjee's nephew Abhishek Banerjee, who is virtually number two in the party, does not like the idea of Roy's return.

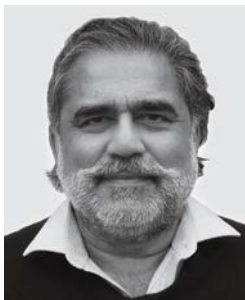
## Digital Diplomacy



**T**he Prime Minister has become very enthusiastic about digital diplomacy. A virtual summit with the Australian Prime Minister that he had pushed for went very well. Recently, Denmark's Prime Minister also called him and discussed a proposed green pact. Before this, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar had held video conferences with the ambassadors of Nordic nations.

## NOT OUR PROBLEM

**E**kta Kapoor is in a fix after one of her serials allegedly showed the army in a negative light and they made complaints to the President and defence minister. The news leaked on social media and Kapoor said she was willing to apologise. Interestingly, she is supposed to be close to the BJP and even got a Padma award from the regime. But the Government and party are unwilling to take part in this controversy.



By IQBAL CHAND MALHOTRA

# CHINA'S DOUBLE VISION

*Beijing's perceptions on the Line of Actual Control are shaped by delusions entrenched since the 1950s*

**F**OR A DEVOTEE of Lord Shiva like me, *bhaang* or *Cannabis indica* is a great facilitator of expanding consciousness and insight. However, for members of the Communist Party of China (CPC), opium has traditionally been the facilitator of insight. From the middle of the 19th century to the middle of the 20th century, China was hot on Indian opium from Bengal and Malwa. The problem arose when Chairman Mao stopped opium imports and China became *self-reliant* in it during the 1950s. That was when the paradigm of double vision took shape in the perceptions of the CPC about the Sino-Indian border. There was a problem with China's homegrown opium as it was deluding its users of their reality. They insisted that not one but two separate and distinct lines defined the ground position between the two armies of India and China.

After using Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev's support in launching his 1962 invasion of India, Chairman Mao became quite cocky. Although he backed Pakistan President Ayub Khan's attack on India in August 1965, he wanted more. The bully in Mao issued India with an 'ultimatum' on September 16th, 1965 to vacate the Nathu La Pass in Sikkim. However, the General Officer Commanding (GOC) of 17 Mountain Division, Major General (later, Lt General) Sagat Singh refused to do so and stood his ground. Consequently, Mao shifted his focus to People's Liberation Army (PLA) forces on the Sino-Indian border in Ladakh. On September 19th, 1965, the PLA crossed the then unformulated Line of Actual Control (LAC) into Ladakh and kidnapped and killed three Indian armed personnel in the vicinity of Tasaskur. The People's Republic of China (PRC) issued another 'ultimatum' demanding that India dismantle two outposts on some territory claimed by Beijing within three days, by September 22nd, 1965. However, to Mao's chagrin, Pakistan capitulated and accepted a UN call for ceasefire before China's ultimatum had expired.

Mao had not forgotten this humiliation in September 1965. By August and September 1967, there were a lot of PLA encroachments at Nathu La, but Major General Sagat Singh refused to be browbeaten into making a withdrawal. Singh had decided to demarcate the LAC, albeit without a change of its status, since the Chinese had already carried out an intrusion and constructed a structure at the North Shoulder (north of Nathu La), on August 17th, 1967. It was becoming clear that further escalation may occur and thus, notwithstanding Delhi's tepid responses, Singh had briefed his superior commanders, the Corps Commander, Lt



Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

**THE LATEST CRISIS IN PANGONG TSO AND THE GALWAN VALLEY IN LADAKH AND AT NAKA LA IN SIKKIM IS UNIQUE BECAUSE OF THE GEOGRAPHICAL SPREAD. THE CHINESE WERE CLEARLY SENDING A MESSAGE. DESPITE MODI AND XI'S POST-DOKLAM SUMMIT MEETINGS IN WUHAN IN 2018 AND MAMALLAPURAM IN 2019, IT APPEARS THAT CHINA NOT ONLY WISHES INDIA TO ACQUIESCE IN VACATING MORE TERRITORY IN LADAKH BUT IT ALSO WANTS INDIA TO SIT DOWN WITH BOTH CHINA AND PAKISTAN IN A TRILATERAL SETTING AND RESOLVE THE ISSUE OF JAMMU AND KASHMIR TO THEIR ADVANTAGE AND SATISFACTION**

General Jagjit Singh Aurora, and the eastern army commander, Lt General Sam Manekshaw, about his plans.

On September 10th, 1967, Sagat Singh briefed Lt Colonel Rai Singh and ordered him to construct the military (Cat Wire) fence. On September 11th, in the early morning, the PLA political commissar at the Chinese post at Nathu La led a section of his infantry down to prevent Indian troops from starting work on their fence. An argument started which soon built into a scuffle. Just minutes after the commissar disengaged himself from the scuffle and led his troops back to their bunker, the Chinese posts opened coordinated machine gun fire on the Indian troops. In this standoff, there were nearly 200 Indian

casualties. The Indians retaliated, attacking Chinese positions and there were twice the number of Chinese casualties as well. Sagat Singh took the initiative and ordered artillery fire directly into the Chumbi Valley and the road axis. The artillery and medium-to-small arms duel continued for five days, after which the Nathu La fight effectively came to an end.

Sumdorong Chu is a rivulet flowing north-south in the Thag La triangle, bounded by Bhutan in the east and the famous Thag La ridge of the 1962 war, to the north. On June 26th, 1986, New Delhi lodged a formal protest with Beijing against intrusions in this region by Chinese troops that had occurred starting from June 16th, 1986. Beijing, of course, denied any such intrusions.

The then Army Chief, General Krishnaswamy Sundarji took a leaf out of Lt General Sagat Singh's playbook. Between the days of October 18th to 20th, an entire Indian Army brigade of the 5th Mountain Division was airlifted in new heavy-lift MI-12 helicopters to Zemithang, a helipad very close to the Sumdorong Chu valley. Referred to as Operation Falcon, this involved the occupation of ridges overlooking the Sumdorong Chu valley, including Langrola and the Hathung La ridge across the Namka Chu rivulet, but south of Thag La.

Then Chinese supremo Deng Xiaoping issued New Delhi with a warning. This threat was communicated by the US Defense Secretary during a stopover in Delhi from Beijing. The rise in tensions was aggravated; Arunachal Pradesh was made a full state of the Indian Union in December 1986. Rajiv Gandhi replied with a resounding slap on Deng's face. There was a chorus of protests from the PRC and the Indian Government's reaction was that any change in Arunachal Pradesh's administrative status was an internal matter. Troop reinforcements on the Indian side, which had begun with Operation Falcon in late-1986, continued through early 1987 under a massive air-land exercise called Chequerboard. Strangely, Naga rebels supported by Beijing suddenly stepped up the heat and staged three ambushes killing 11 Army soldiers at the same time when Sumdorong Chu was making the headlines.

The spring and summer of 1987 saw media reports of heavy troop movements on both sides of the Sino-Indian border. A peeved Deng, clearly rattled about being ignored, sent another ultimatum in March 1987 via the US Secretary of State. By that time, Indian and Chinese troops were placed eyeball to eyeball in the Sumdorong Chu valley. By early April, China had no choice but to move eight PLA divisions to eastern Tibet as a prelude to possible belligerent action. Rising tensions were lowered after a visit to China by then Indian External Affairs Minister ND Tiwari, on his way back home from Pyongyang in May 1987, where both sides reaffirmed their desire to continue talks on the

border issue and to cool things down on the border. In August 1987, Indian and Chinese troops moved their respective posts slightly apart in the Sumdorong Chu valley, after a meeting of the field commanders.

In 1988, when Rajiv Gandhi visited China, Deng Xiaoping wanted to retain the initiative at the border and a Joint Working Group was formed. This led to the formalisation of the concept of the LAC in Ladakh, which came into being in September 1993 when PV Narasimha Rao and Li Peng signed the Border Peace and Tranquillity Agreement (BPTA). Thereafter, this folly of 1993 was successively repeated and a continuous stream of deeply flawed agreements was signed in November 1996, April 2005 and October 2013. All of these agreements

were a strategic illusion. This should have become abundantly clear when in 2003 the then Indian Foreign Secretary, Kanwal Sibal, and Wang Yi, the head of the Chinese delegation, met in New Delhi to exchange maps. The story goes that Wang opened the Indian map, took a long and detailed look at it, folded it and returned it to Sibal. That was it and the meeting ended there and then. By ignoring and belittling the Indian map, Wang freed China from being bound to it and, by extension, also freed China from India's perception of the LAC. The PLA does not need to limit or temper its freedom of military action in Ladakh.

Even then, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee never got the message when he signed a deal with China in 2003 recognising China's sovereignty over Tibet. Nor did his successor Manmohan Singh articulate his reservations when he signed yet another flawed deal with Beijing in 2013. Narendra Modi, who succeeded Manmohan Singh, first got a taste of the Chinese medicine when in September 2014 he was perched on a swing with Xi Jinping on the banks of the Sabarmati river. News came in that substantial numbers of PLA troops had intruded into the Chumar area in Ladakh. This was perhaps the lowest form of crude disrespect that Xi could hand Modi at the start of their relationship. Hard bargaining resulted in the PLA withdrawing

**MAO HAD NOT FORGOTTEN THE HUMILIATION IN SEPTEMBER 1965. BY AUGUST AND SEPTEMBER 1967, THERE WERE A LOT OF PLA ENCROACHMENTS AT NATHU LA BUT MAJOR GENERAL SAGAT SINGH REFUSED TO BE BROWBEATEN IN MAKING A WITHDRAWAL. SINGH HAD DECIDED TO DEMARCATHE THE LAC, ALBEIT WITHOUT A CHANGE OF ITS STATUS, SINCE THE CHINESE HAD ALREADY CARRIED OUT AN INTRUSION**





**MODI FIRST GOT A TASTE OF THE CHINESE MEDICINE WHEN IN SEPTEMBER 2014 NEWS CAME IN THAT PLA TROOPS HAD INTRUDED INTO THE CHUMAR AREA IN LADAKH. THIS WAS PERHAPS THE LOWEST FORM OF CRUDE DISRESPECT THAT XI COULD HAND MODI AT THE START OF THEIR RELATIONSHIP**

from their intrusions a few days later. To his credit, Modi paid a return visit to China in 2015 and floated a proposal to clarify the LAC. This was, however, rejected by the Chinese.

And then came about the 70-day Doklam crisis in 2017, when the Indian and Chinese armies faced-off in Bhutan. China may have backed down, because local PLA units were caught off-guard by India's rapid response ordered by the then Indian Army Chief, General Bipin Rawat, who religiously upheld the traditions left by Lt General Sagat Singh in 1965 and 1967 and by General Sundarji in 1987.

The latest crisis in Pangong Tso and the Galwan Valley in Ladakh and at Naka La in Sikkim is unique because of the geographical spread. The Chinese are clearly sending a message. Despite Modi and Xi's post-Doklam summit meetings in Wuhan in 2018 and Mamallapuram in 2019, it appears that China not only wishes India to acquiesce in vacating more territory in Ladakh but it also wants India to sit down with both China and

Pakistan in a trilateral setting and resolve the issue of Jammu and Kashmir to their advantage and satisfaction. Modi's riposte to this Sino-Indian face-off of the summer of 2020 was to sign a landmark defence deal with Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison on June 4th, 2020, just two days before Sino-Indian border talks were to take place on June 6th, 2020 at the level of lieutenant generals. The talks were inconclusive.

Perhaps China's homegrown opium is the reason for this sustained duality of their perceptions? It is time for the Indian Government to go back to its historical records and precedents and consider permitting the cultivation and export of Indian opium to China. Boris Johnson would make a good landing agent for such Indian cargos in Hong Kong! ■

*Iqbal Chand Malhotra is an author and award-winning TV producer. His new book, Red Fear: The China Threat, will be released in September 2020*

COVER STORY

# THE CAP I

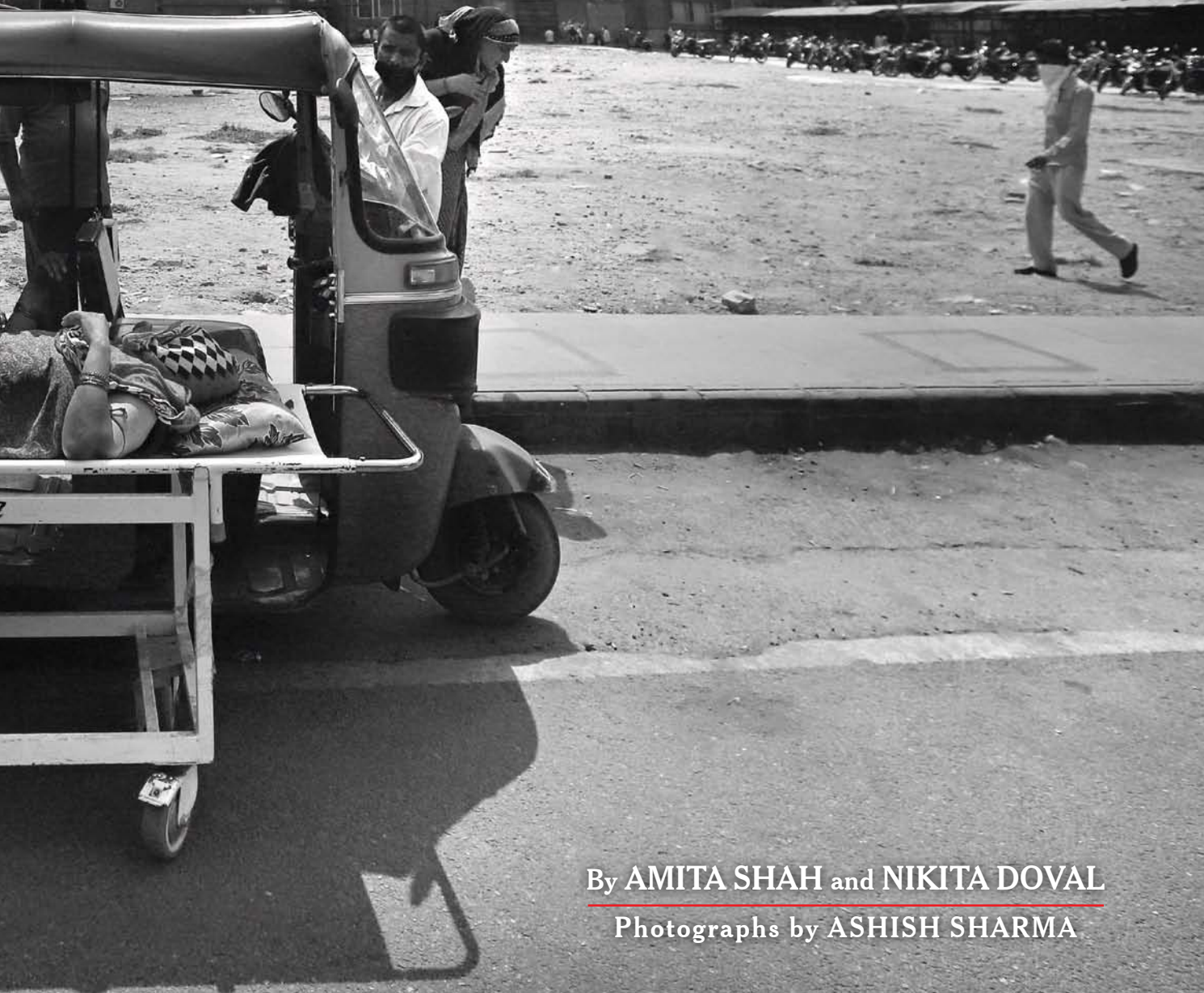
DELHI'S COVID-19 CRISIS GETS



A PATIENT WHO DID NOT GET A BED LIES OUTSIDE GB PANT HOSPITAL, JUNE 10

# TALCASE

WORSE EVEN AS THE CITY REOPENS



By **AMITA SHAH** and **NIKITA DOVAL**

Photographs by **ASHISH SHARMA**

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**r Minakshi Bharadwaj, the first woman** medical superintendent of Delhi's 88-year-old Ram Manohar Lohia Hospital (RML), is piqued by allegations, mostly politically motivated, that the iconic hospital is delaying test results of Covid-19 suspects. Following such charges by the Arvind Kejriwal-led

Delhi government, RML decided that its screening centre, which had been open 24 hours since February 1st when the hospital was initially declared as the nodal centre for the treatment of Covid-19 cases, would be operational only for eight hours, with test results being given out within 48 hours. A Central Government-run hospital, RML, according to officials there, is certainly a target of "dirty politics" and a "blame game" being played out in the national capital, where panic has gripped people who are anxious that there are hardly any vacant beds to treat new Covid-19 patients amid projections that infections will peak only by July-end and that the cases in the world's second-most populous metropolis will touch 5.5 lakh.

Bharadwaj confirms the worst fears of the residents of Delhi, which has a population of close to 2 crore. "Since early May, on many occasions, there has been no vacancy in our hospital. Beds are filled up within minutes and we have to tell people to go to LNJP or Safdarjung Hospital or others," she says, emphasising that "we have been gradually adding up beds. We can add some 20 or 30 beds. That is about it." The pathologist adds that RML doesn't have standalone buildings to create separate Covid-19 centres. As of now, RML has 194 Covid isolation beds, 14 ICU beds, each attached with ventilators for Covid-positive patients and Covid-19 suspects, besides 72 normal beds for Covid suspects.





In the face of a political slugfest to apportion blame for Delhi's healthcare situation, Bharadwaj's worries have already come true. Patients and their wards are forced to run from hospital to hospital before seeking refuge elsewhere for want of state-to-state collaboration in fighting the pandemic. While the lockdown was not well-utilised to build capacities anticipating the trajectory of growth in Covid-19 infections elsewhere, there seems to be a lack of leadership in Delhi to help its residents avail of Covid facilities in nearby states. This is a model perfected in Germany by letting in Covid-19 patients from France. Even in India, many states are doing it within and without. "Inside Uttar Pradesh, since Lucknow has fewer infections than other districts, many patients from other areas are treated in Lucknow to share the burden of regions that are home to large numbers of infections," says Dr Able Lawrence, professor of clinical immunology and rheumatology at Lucknow's Sanjay Gandhi Postgraduate Institute of Medical Sciences.

Rashid Salmani's son is perhaps the victim of such neglect and poor governance. He is mourning the death of his 26-year-old son Salman. On May 30th, when the young man started running a fever and having breathing problems, Salmani took his son to a government hospital in a South Delhi locality, where he runs a beauty parlour. Since it did not have ventilators, he was referred to a Central Government-run hospital, where a chest X-Ray was done. Salman was diagnosed with chest infection. No Covid-19 test was conducted. He was then asked to go to Safdarjung Hospital or the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS). Salmani took him to several hospitals in the capital—government and private—but Salman could not get a bed. Tired of making rounds of hospitals and trying helpline numbers, Salmani called up a relative and took his son to a hospital in Dehradun by ambulance. Salman required a ventilator, which the Dehradun hospital did not have. He was finally admitted to AIIMS, Rishikesh, 240 km from the capital, on June 1st. Salman's 22-year-old brother Arbaaz waited outside the hospital. On June 4th, Salmani got a call informing his son had passed away. The body was handed over to the family to perform the last rites in Dehradun. "I have lived in Delhi for 27 years, but when I needed help to save my son, I got none. The Chief Minister says there are enough beds available. But where were they when my son needed one?" he asks, inconsolably.

Many epidemiologists that *Open* spoke to point out that the lack of what they describe as "granularity" in the planning of the lockdown is beginning to have adverse effects. "The shutdown should have been extremely stringent in areas with more cases



**“Delhi must interact with other states and transfer patients to reduce its Covid-19 burden. This model was highly successful in Europe. It is working in UP as well”**

#### **Dr Able Lawrence**

professor of clinical immunology & rheumatology, Sanjay Gandhi Postgraduate Institute of Medical Sciences, Lucknow

and less stringent in places with almost no cases. Instead, we adopted moderate measures across the country. Which is why we failed in minimising infections and maximising economic activity at the national level," says one.

The situation in Delhi is certainly exacerbated by virtue of its being a nerve centre of activities wherein social contact is higher than in most other parts of India. But there are other reasons too, including the failure of administrations to anticipate the grave danger and to think out of the box. Harjit Singh Bhatti, former president of the Resident Doctors Association at AIIMS, New Delhi, says the current predicament in Delhi is due to the "utter failure of our health system to do primary prevention, which is to test and isolate people." He adds: "We are used to treating people when they are sick. We should have displayed some leadership when faced with a pandemic. ICMR mislead policymakers by suggesting that the virus had become less virulent, further adding to our woes." Bhatti says in some Delhi hospitals, frontline health workers, including doctors, are not paid their

salaries for several months now, indicating that a strike may be on the cards. ICMR (Indian Council of Medical Research) did not respond to allegations that it had downplayed the extent of danger.

The tales of hardship of Delhiites do confirm an acute absence of preparedness.

**W**hen Delhi's first Covid-19 patient, Rohit Datta, recovered and was discharged from the government-run Safdarjung Hospital in mid-March, he had told *Open* that his hospital room was a "well-lit, clean, one-bedroom suite." But with the virus raging and numbers requiring hospitalisation spiralling, fears of shortage of hospitals beds, health workers, ventilators and other facilities have gripped the city, exposing its faultlines. Helpless relatives of patients who could not find beds in hospitals have used social-media platforms to reach out to authorities. Among them was a poignant message by Amarpreet, who tweeted, 'My dad is having fever. We need to shift him to hospital. I am standing outside LNJP Delhi and they are not taking him in. He is having corona, high fever and breathing problem. He won't survive without help. Pls help,' tagging Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal, Health Minister Satyendra Jain and Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) spokesperson Raghav Chadha. An hour later, she tweeted, 'He is no more. The government failed us.' The tweet thread went viral.

A day later, Kejriwal denied there was a shortage of beds and is-



## DELHI IN CRISIS

**Total Cases  
Over 32,000**

**Total Deaths  
Nearing 1,000**

**Positivity Rate  
12 per cent**  
(National Average:  
7 per cent)

**Doubling Rate  
14.17 days**  
(National Average:  
17.21 days)

**Recovery Rate  
38.77 per cent**  
(National Average:  
49 per cent)

**Fatality Rate  
52.59 per million**  
(National average:  
5.91 per million)

(All data as of June 10-11)

GETTY IMAGES

sued directives to city hospitals against turning down anyone with moderate or severe Covid-19 symptoms, with or without a report. This, he said, was non-negotiable, even as he alleged that some private hospitals were “black marketeering” beds and exploiting their links with political parties. On June 6th, he tweeted: ‘As of today, no dearth of beds. Against 8645 total available beds, 4038 occupied n 4607 vacant. These are real beds, not mere figures. As of today, sufficient beds available. But some of them refuse admission. We won’t permit their mischief. Give us a few days. We r at it [sic].’

But Delhi, with the third highest number of cases in the country after Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu, is perhaps yet to see the worst. A five-member committee set up by the Kejriwal government has projected at least 1 lakh cases by the end of June in the city, which, as per Census 2011, has a population of 16.8 million. The panel has asked the government to arrange an additional 15,000 beds. The projection was based on calculations that Delhi’s doubling rate for the infected is 15 days. The committee, chaired by Mahesh Verma, also said around 25 per cent of patients will require hospitalisation.

Everyone is uncertain how long it will take for the city to return to normalcy. From the first Covid-19 case detected in Delhi on March 1st, with a travel history from Italy, to the numbers rising

by more than 1,000 each day now, taking the total to over 32,000 (as of June 11) and with deaths nearing 1,000, Delhi is fighting an unfamiliar war. The statistics are disturbing. The positivity rate is above 12 per cent, higher than the national average of around 7 per cent; the doubling rate over 7-day growth is 14.17 days as against a national average of 17.21 days; the fatality rate is 52.59 deaths per million people as against a national average of 5.91 per million. The recovery rate is 38.77 per cent as against a national average of 49 per cent. No longer can every case be traced to its origin. Almost every Delhiite knows someone infected—a friend, a neighbour, a colleague, a relative.

Delhi’s civic body, the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) released figures on June 11th showing 2,098 Covid-19 deaths, over double the Delhi government’s tally. “From March till June 10th, including all the three MCDs of Delhi, there have been 2,098 cremations of Covid-19 patients,” Jai Prakash, Chairperson of the Standing Committee of the North Delhi Municipal Corporation said. However, the state government said the death audit committee, of senior doctors, constituted by it was assessing the deaths and doing an impartial job.

Delhi’s rising death rate among Covid-19 cases amplifies the crisis, made gloomier by the ordeals of patients, Covid or

BURIAL OF A  
COVID-19 VICTIM AT  
A CITY CEMETERY,  
JUNE 10



non-Covid, being denied beds. Delhi and its health infrastructure seem to be on the verge of collapse as horror stories emerge of families running about for admissions and of the government restricting testing. Testimonials are being shared of families losing members in quick succession, ambulances refusing to come up to take the deceased even as families struggle with the disease. A South Delhi homemaker reported that her father, a 72-year-old businessman who had a heart attack two weeks earlier and was struggling with breathing, had lain unattended in a “super specialty” hospital’s cardiac care unit for four days while awaiting his Covid test result, and had slipped into depression. “Because of the fear of corona, attendants did not come near him,” she says. Even after testing negative and a week after returning home, he is struggling with hopelessness and trauma.

“Don’t be mistaken. Delhi has funds and it has the infrastructure. This is the national capital of the country, if we won’t have the capacity, who will? What is happening right now, therefore, is an absolute failure of planning and coordination. The lockdown was meant to buy us time to scale up our infrastructure and also perform stringent contact tracing and tests in huge numbers. But testing numbers remain abysmally low,” says a doctor with a government hospital in the city who wishes to remain anonymous. Earlier this week, Delhi had conducted just 3,700 tests on a day, the lowest in the last three weeks, even as the AAP government stopped private laboratories from conducting tests.

“It is not enough to simply test though we did not even do enough of that. Contact tracing had to be the key in controlling, which Kerala did so well and to a certain extent Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, even Odisha. Countries like Vietnam did contact tracing till the 4th degree,” says Dr K Srinath Reddy, president of the Public Health Foundation of India (PHFI) and former head of cardiology at AIIMS. While vertical contact tracing looks at identifying persons the infected person met, horizontal tracing seeks the source of infection. Reddy says if there was even a system of community health volunteers in place where volunteers were assigned 50 or so homes, and they tracked the health of everyone there, it would have worked.

“There was such stigma around the disease and fear among people that they would be taken against their will to some facility that it led to reluctance in reporting. Communities should have been reassured. Right now, we need to have an estimate of how many beds will be needed. Previously, anyone who was diagnosed positive wanted to get admitted but now we know that most cases

are mild and people recover at home. We have also been talking about ventilators and they too have been required in a few cases so, maybe, we need to look at setting up temporary low intensity hospitals. It is best if they have running oxygen supply otherwise cylinders can be arranged. These are the kind of basic things that we need to do right now in order to meet the requirements of the situation we are in,” says Reddy.

**A**s the toll rises in the city, **Mohammad Shamim**, supervisor at the ITO cemetery, is having a hard time trying to ensure physical distancing among relatives of Covid-19 victims. He says the number of bodies coming for burial have increased over the last 10 days from six or seven to 13-14 a day. The last rites are done a day after a body is booked. Shamim, 38, who works from 6AM to 9PM, has kept away from his three teenage daughters for over two months, quarantining himself when he gets home. “There are guidelines that only 10 people should attend a funeral but there are 50 at times and if we stop them they misbehave with us. We need police protection,” he says.

The last time the city dealt with an epidemic on this scale was during the Spanish Flu of 1918, when it travelled to India via the ocean. Describing the situation in India, John M Barry wrote in *The Great Influenza: The Story of the Deadliest Pandemic in History* that trains left one station with the living and arrived with the dead and dying. ‘One hospital in Delhi treated 13,190 influenza patients, 7044 of those patients died,’ he wrote.

For Kejriwal, this is the moment of truth. As the numbers of positive cases rose, threatening to multiply, the Delhi government made a tactical shift, sparking off a row. The state government’s recent decisions met with resistance from several quarters and led to a face-off with Delhi’s Lieutenant Governor Anil Baijal, who is chairman of the Delhi Disaster Management Authority (DDMA). Baijal stepped in to overrule the order to limit beds in Delhi’s government and private hospitals to the city’s residents. He also expanded the scope of testing, reversing another order of the Delhi government, to enable contact tracing to contain the spread of the virus and cautioned against tweaking of guidelines set by ICMR.

At a time when Delhi’s positivity rate was high, a sign that the city needed to expand testing, the AAP government altered the new Covid-19 testing guidelines under which only symptomatic contacts of Covid-19 patients would be tested. Union Health Minister Harsh Vardhan, a Delhi MP from Chandni Chowk, had asked the state government to ramp up



**“Since early May, on most occasions, there has been no vacancy in our hospital. Beds are filled up within minutes and we had to tell people to go to LNJP or Safdarjung Hospital or others”**

**Dr Minakshi Bharadwaj**  
medical superintendent,  
Ram Manohar Lohia Hospital

testing, contact tracing and containment measures, implying it was not doing enough. Kejriwal, who himself had to undergo Covid-19 testing after a fever and sore throat, which turned out negative, has argued that if the asymptomatic start going to labs for testing, the system will collapse, at the expense of serious patients. But the new testing guidelines deepened apprehensions, as asymptomatic people who had been in contact with Covid-19 cases waited in fear because they could not get tested.

At a DDMA meeting chaired by Bajjal on June 9th, officials from the Centre said there is no community spread, technically the third stage of transmission, of the coronavirus in the city. Delhi Health Minister Satyendra Jain, however, said the source of infection is “not known” in nearly half the fresh cases reported. After the meeting, underscoring the grim picture, Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia said Delhi may have 5.5 lakh positive cases by July-end, prompting a demand for 80,000 beds by then. Bajjal, however, refused to reconsider his decision to overrule the Delhi government’s order reserving state-run and private hospitals for Delhiites.

Accusing the Kejriwal government of mismanaging the coronavirus crisis, the BJP’s New Delhi MP Meenakshi Lekhi says it had failed to put in place the required arrangements during the lockdown to meet the needs of multiplying Covid-19 cases. “The testing has been curtailed so the numbers are not showing. Every home has been converted into a clinic because there are not enough places to quarantine people. Why couldn’t the *mohalla* clinics be used for testing and quarantine? The infrastructure is crumbling,” she says.

The Congress, too, joined the chorus in castigating the city’s health system. Party leader Manish Tewari tweeted: ‘My wife on written advise[sic] of her doctors was asked to test for COVID-19. Fortunately, she tested negative. Despite growing up on a hospital Campus and knowing every Medical Professional of consequence I had to move heaven & earth just to get her tested. Delhi’s health systems are broken.’

“The Covid-19 outbreak has been among the largest such pandemics in human history, so naturally the limits of all healthcare systems are being tested. Delhi and Mumbai particularly have had to bear the maximum brunt, since majority of international flights in February and March landed here, despite our warning to the Centre to stop flights,” AAP’s Jasmine Shah, vice chairman of the Delhi Dialogue Commission, tells *Open*.

He denies there is a shortage of beds, saying that with 9,200 beds and 4,800 patients, around 50 per cent are vacant. According to him, the problem people are facing is difficulty in finding beds in private hospitals, not in Delhi government hospitals. “Despite

giving adequate time to private hospitals to ramp up their facilities, they have been slow to respond. We are working with them to ensure this issue too gets resolved. They have assured that 2,500 additional beds will be added in the next couple of days. Meanwhile, we have 3,000 vacant Covid beds in Delhi government hospitals, so there is no need for people to panic. High-quality food and care is being provided in our government hospitals, and a dedicated team is monitoring each admitted patient 24x7 and reporting it to the Chief Minister’s office.”

Shah says states like Maharashtra and Gujarat are testing three to four times less than Delhi—around 4,700 and 3,700 tests per million respectively—while Delhi has been testing at the rate of 13,500 per million. On the number of tests decreasing over the last

few days, he says the government had acted against some labs that were not following testing protocols. They were taking four, five or even seven days to give test results, though according to rules test reports have to be given within 24 hours. “If a patient is serious and needs to be admitted in a hospital, it would become difficult for him or her to do so without the test report. It is the government’s duty to ensure that labs follow certain protocols. Now, when these labs are complying with the norms, they are again functioning.”

For Kejriwal, the biggest test will be to ensure there are enough beds for patients, the sick get treatment on time and the death rate slows. And all of this, while the city reopens, struggling to revive the economy. He has before him an intricate task of balancing the two, mitigating the trail of disaster that the virus leaves behind. After his two-day isolation when he was unwell, Kejriwal, in a digital briefing, adopted a non-confrontational tone saying the coronavirus had to be fought unitedly, devoid of politics.

While restaurants and malls have opened in the city, hotels and banquet halls have remained shut as part of an exigency plan to convert them into hospitals if needed.

Currently, Delhi has 20,000 beds (combining private and government hospitals), but by the government’s own projections, the city will need 80,000 beds by end-July. The government has already asked five big hotels to be converted into temporary hospitals. These include the ITC’s Hotel Sheraton in Saket, Crown Plaza at Okhla, Hotel Surya at New Friends Colony, Hotel Siddharth at Rajendra Place and Hotel Jivitesh on Pusa Road. Each hotel in turn is attached to a nearby private hospital. These include names like Max Smart Super Speciality, Batra Hospital and Indraprastha Apollo. A Delhi government panel has suggested venues or stadia such as Pragati Maidan, the Thyagaraj indoor stadium, the Jawaharlal Nehru stadium, Talkatora Indoor Stadium, Indira Gandhi



**“Contact tracing had to be the key in controlling, which Kerala did so well and to a certain extent Karnataka, Andhra, even Odisha”**

**Dr K Srinath Reddy**  
president, Public Health Foundation  
of India, and former head of  
cardiology at AIIMS

Indoor Stadium and the Dhyan Chand National Stadium be used as makeshift hospitals.

According to Anas Abdul Wajid, senior director, sales and marketing, Max Healthcare, which has been handling Covid-19 patients for over two months now, hospitals in Delhi are much better prepared to handle the crisis. “The systems and processes, the personal safety gear and the healthcare workers are available and are well trained to handle the patient load. The government of Delhi has also raised capacity by increasing the dedicated Covid facilities in public hospitals managed by them as well as by requisitioning more private hospitals to serve as Covid hospitals.”

Max Hospitals will run these extended hospitals at the Sheraton in Saket and at The Jaypee Siddharth at Rajendra Place. Patients with minor symptoms will be managed in these hotels by the medical teams from Max. According to a Max Healthcare official, the hospital team has held talks with the Sheraton team on exploring the possibility of converting the facility into a temporary extended Covid hospital. The facility was evaluated from the perspective of creating isolation zones for Covid-19 patients. Besides, over the last few weeks, Max Hospitals have deployed 458 Covid beds across its network in the city. While at Saket’s Max Smart Hospital, a dedicated Covid-19 facility, beds have been ramped up from 100 to 200, in its other hospitals at Patparganj, Shalimar Bagh, Rajendra Place (BLK Hospital) in Delhi, 20 per cent of the beds has been earmarked for Covid-19 patients, as per the directions of the

Delhi government. The official, however, admits that looking at the global scale of the epidemic, it is difficult to say what is enough.

The biggest challenge in cities like Delhi will be to manage the crowds. “De-congesting will be a challenge, but countries have done it. Strict usage of masks, not opening up of religious places, increasing the frequency of public transport so that restrictions on numbers can be maintained, are just some of the things that we need to start doing,” says Bangalore-based epidemiologist Giridhar Babu. Increased testing is a point even he stresses, saying it is key to controlling the spread of infection. Even as hospitals, both private and government, struggle with the caseload, there is increasing worry about non-Covid patients being left out of the loop. Doctors with private hospitals admit their institutions are struggling to accommodate patients on chemotherapy and dialysis, many of whom—like a 75-year-old community activist who contracted Covid-19 along with his wife while visiting the hospital for his long-term kidney treatment—end up with further problems. In many instances, hospitals identified as Covid treatment hospitals are refusing treatment of non-Covid patients.

India is now among the top four countries with the highest number of infections. According to Babu, the spike was bound to happen. “A lockdown is not a magic pill that can make the virus go away. From an epidemiology point of view it is needed to reduce the speed of transmission. With the lockdown being eased and partial travel restored, this was going to happen. The lockdown

THE WALDIA  
FAMILY WORKS  
OUT AT LODHI  
GARDENS, JUNE 8





A MAN SANITISES HIMSELF AT SELECT CITY WALK MALL, JUNE 8

was meant to buy us time to scale up our abilities and states like Karnataka have done it. There are problems with individual states, which have more to do with how the administration there has reacted.” He feels comparing India’s case load with countries like Spain is comparing apples to oranges, as in other countries lockdowns were imposed after people had died.

The only silver lining continues to be the country’s low fatality rate. India’s numbers in the worldwide tally don’t really matter much because of this, according to Dr Suranjit Chatterjee, Senior Consultant, Internal medicine, Apollo Hospitals. With more and more healthcare professionals also falling sick, Chatterjee admits to being worried about his nurses, junior doctors and housekeeping staff: “Currently, the staff are on a six-hour shift, they can’t stay longer than that otherwise they run the risk of falling sick. In the PPE [Personal Protection Equipment] suit they can neither eat nor drink and we can’t afford to put any pressure on our healthcare workers right now.” Maharashtra, for instance, has already sought specialist doctors and nurses from Kerala as its numbers increase and its healthcare system is stretched to its maximum capacity.

At AIIMS, a nine-day protest by nurses attending Covid-19 patients demanding that hours of work be cut from six to four, was called off after an assurance by the administration. Around 500 nurses attend to Covid-19 patients at AIIMS. “Wearing the PPE causes dehydration. Coronavirus will continue for some time. We have to take care of our health workers,” says Harish Kajla, president of the AIIMS nurses’ union.

**F**rom the spacious corridors of power in Lutyens’ Delhi to the congested bylanes in the walled city, the coronavirus has indiscriminately invaded the national capital. Yet, Delhi is opening up, freeing city dwellers from their confines at home to relive a semblance of normalcy. With masks, sanitisers and fears, some Delhiites are daring to step out, most treading cautiously. But the numbers are few.

Nearly three centuries after it is believed to have been built, the bells in Delhi’s famous Hanuman Temple have fallen silent—as telling a testimony to the havoc Covid-19 has wrecked on everyday life as any. Tied up in neat bundles, the bells which are traditionally rung by worshippers while entering or leaving the temple will stay that way for the foreseeable future even as Delhi opens up. “This is going to be a no-contact temple for the time being,” says Pankaj Sharma, one of the priests at the temple as he points out the sanitiser dispensers placed all over the main hall. Circles have been drawn on the floor to ensure people stand six feet apart and no offerings are to be accepted from devotees. To enter the temple, one has to pass through a sanitising booth with nozzles that squirt a solution. There are more temple personnel than devotees on the morning of June 8th, when religious places first started opening up, but Sharma is worried about the crowds that descend on the temple on Tuesdays. “Pre-Covid-19, we had a footfall of 50,000-70,000 on Tuesdays. I don’t expect it to reach those numbers any time soon but there will still be a rush. We will have to see how we ensure adequate social distancing.”



Delhi's chilling figures are bound to shake even the strong-hearted and Delhiites today are a worried lot. But they also feel the need to get on with their lives. For the Waldia family, it means picking up the threads of their workout routine, not just as a lifestyle choice but also because their older daughter Ishani is an under-15 national badminton player. The family has started visiting Lodhi Gardens every morning for their daily run and stretching sessions as Nehru stadium, their usual haunt, is yet to open. "At least in parks it is easy to maintain distance. Opening these up was a good decision because it is very difficult to stay cooped up inside apartments day after day," says Ravinder Singh Waldia, an Income Tax officer.

His words find an echo in the views of Ratish Nanda, CEO, Aga Khan Trust for Culture, which handles Sunder Nursery, a 16th-century heritage park in the city. "Open spaces, especially parks, are very good for both your physical and mental well-being, especially in times like this. World over, the outdoors are considered safer with regards to the spread of the infection; parks are actually healing spaces," he says. Both Lodhi Gardens and Sunder Nursery are dotted with signs to wear masks at all times; in Lodhi Gardens, significantly more crowded, the orders are followed more in spirit than action. Most faces were partially covered with quite a few even opting to simply rest the masks on their chins.

Restaurants also threw open their shutters on June 8th, although footfalls will continue to be a source of worry. In a bakery at Khan Market, an employee takes the temperature and contact details of every person entering. "Before we reopened we deep cleaned and sanitised every nook and corner of the outlet. Tables have been placed six feet apart and guests are allowed only after their temperature is taken and their hands sanitised," says Nitin Warikoo, head of the Cha Bar, the coffee shop at Oxford Book Store. On the first day, they saw some customers walking in but Warikoo is confident the pace will increase, saying people want to start picking up the threads of their stalled lives, albeit with precautions in place.

At Khan Market, the popular Full Circle bookshop and Café Turtle downed shutters as the owners could no longer afford the rent and decided to move to another market. Shadat, an employee at the parking lot, says there was a dip in the number of customers after five officials tested positive at the Enforcement Directorate headquarters right behind the market.

Surinder Sabharwal has been going twice a week, and that too for two or three hours, to his family-owned shop at Chawri Bazaar, Old Delhi. Even though the lockdown has been eased, he has been asked to stay away as locals fear the disease is widely

spreading in the cramped bylanes. "Even if I were to open my shop every day, what purpose would it serve? Business has come to a standstill, there is no labour and every day a new market is shut down because of increasing cases." Sabharwal is referring to the scares at Gadodia Market, the wholesale spice market, and Bhagirath Palace, where traders tested positive.

At Bengali Market in the heart of the capital, boxes of Alphonso mangoes are piled up. They cost Rs 1,000 each, containing a dozen, says Sonu. A customer argues that it was just Rs 650-800 last year. The salesman insists it is Rs 1,000 now. "This year, we are selling just 100-200 boxes a day. Last year, we sold 500-1000."

Across the road, at the 60-year-old Bengali Sweet House, kulfi, a popular summer dessert, is no longer on the menu. "The man

who made kulfi has returned to his village in Bihar. I don't want to ask anyone else to make it," says Lakshya Aggarwal, whose grandfather had started the shop, now divided into two parts. Limited items are displayed on the shelves. The footfall has reduced to 10-15 per cent.

Nearby Connaught Place stands testimony to the city's despair, dilemma and fears. Standing in a queue, maintaining physical distancing, outside Wenger's, the capital's oldest bakery opened in 1926, Mandi, a Delhiite in her 20s, says she has never seen "CP" so desolate. "It's always been so full of people and energy." The footfall has reduced by 50 per cent, says Aman Tandon, whose great-great-grandfather BM Tandon had bought the bakery in 1945 from a Swiss couple named Wenger. Other shops have also opened at Connaught Place, but there are hardly any customers. "Over 90 per cent of the vehicles you see parked here belong to shop-owners," says parking employee Rahul Kumar, a migrant from Darbhanga in Bihar. He decided to stay back in the city, which has witnessed an exodus of around 3 lakh migrants.

June in Delhi has rarely begun with temperatures below 40-degree Celsius. It's the time when several Delhiites pack their bags and leave for the hills. The hill states of Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand are yet to reopen their hotels to tourists from cities with high loads of Covid-19 cases. But then, this summer, nothing about Delhi is the way it was. There is enough space to park your car, there is less traffic on the roads, the shops are not crowded with customers, the air is not as polluted and the Yamuna looks cleaner. Yet, Delhi is gasping for breath to survive the soaring Covid-19 count and return to what it was.

Many factors are to blame for this turmoil and the list includes mismanagement, possibly lame projections and a scramble among leaders to make political capital out of a tragedy. ■



**“The Covid-19 outbreak has been among the largest such pandemics in human history, so naturally the limits of all healthcare systems are being tested”**

**Jasmine Shah**

vice chairman, Delhi Dialogue Commission

# THE EVIDENCE OF CONSPIRACY

## The Delhi Police implicate AAP councillor Tahir Hussain in the Delhi riots of February

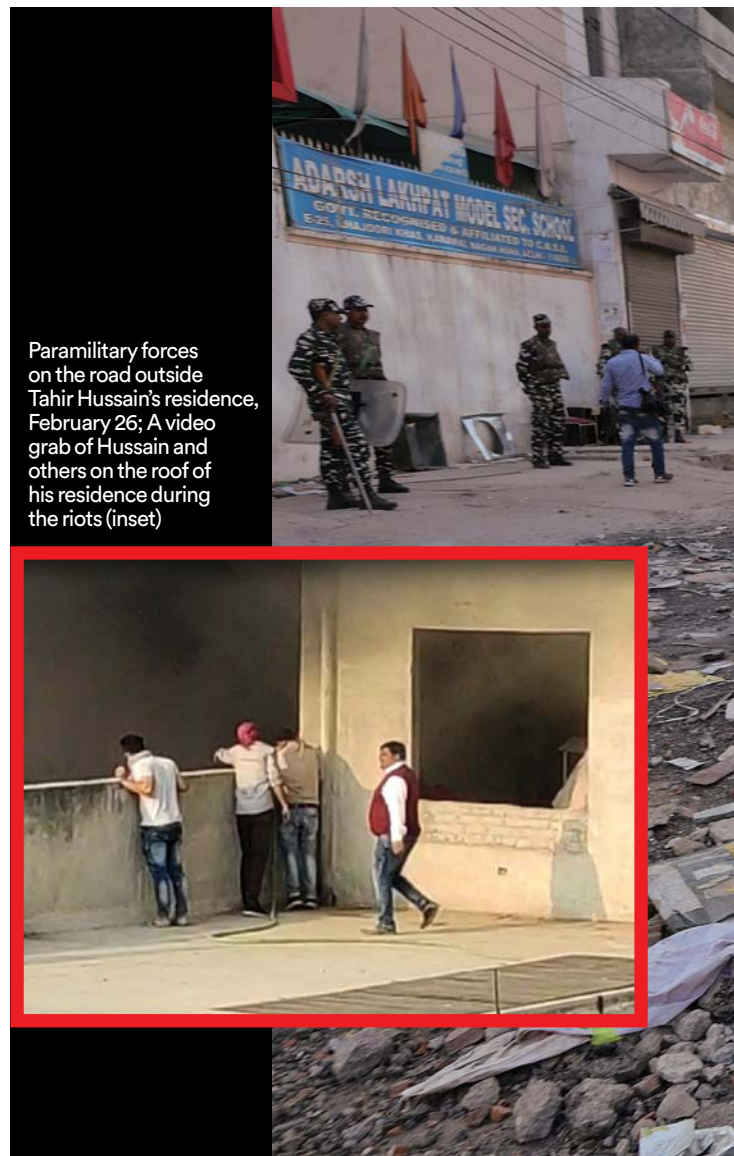
By RAHUL PANDITA

**T**HE DELHI POLICE have filed several chargesheets in connection with the Delhi riots in which at least 53 people lost their lives earlier this year. In its final report submitted to the court, the Delhi Police's Crime Branch has accused Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) Councillor Tahir Hussain of planning the riots and being responsible for violence that occurred around his office-cum-residence in northeast Delhi on February 24th and 25th. In the violence on February 24th, a head constable lost his life while a deputy commissioner was seriously injured.

Video footage shot by people around Hussain's property that surfaced around the riots showed a large number of people on his terrace pelting stones and petrol bombs all around. Afterwards, a large quantity of stones, bricks and petrol bombs, and catapults to hurl these, were recovered from Hussain's premises. As part of its investigation, the police took into possession four plastic crates containing glass bottles (filled with inflammable material), 13 empty plastic crates used for holding glass bottles, three handheld catapults and one big plastic bottle containing some liquid from Hussain's house, while 12 glass bottles, three empty cartridges, and bricks and stones were taken from the road outside.

In its chargesheet now, the Crime Branch has claimed that Hussain got an amount of Rs 1.1 crore transferred to fake companies and then got it back in cash. Bank details, say the police, have revealed that Hussain transferred this amount from his two companies, Show Effect Advertising and Essence Cellcom. Six transactions were made from Essence Cellcom, totalling Rs 92 lakh, to Meenu Fabrications and SP Financial Services. From the account of Show Effect Advertising, a transfer of Rs 20 lakh on January 8th is reflected towards a company called Yudhvee Impex. The police have asked for more time to establish the chain of these transactions, but have claimed that it was used in the preparation of the riots.

In its investigation, the police also found that Hussain had got his pistol released from the neighbourhood police station



Paramilitary forces on the road outside Tahir Hussain's residence, February 26; A video grab of Hussain and others on the roof of his residence during the riots (inset)

on February 22nd, just before the riots—he had deposited it there earlier in January. Out of 100 cartridges that he bought on his licence, the police have been able to recover only 64, along with 22 empty cartridges. According to police sources, Hussain has so far not given any explanation of how these 22 cartridges were used, apart from the 14 missing cartridges.

In his defence, Hussain had earlier claimed that he had shifted along with his family from this property on February 24th after he had called the police. The police have made two of Hussain's employees witnesses. They have revealed that, on February 24th, Hussain was present in his office along with five co-accused in the riots and others whom they could not identify. The chargesheet has quoted an analysis of

THE POLICE FOUND THAT **TAHIR HUSSAIN** HAD GOT HIS PISTOL RELEASED FROM THE NEIGHBOURHOOD POLICE STATION ON FEBRUARY 22ND. OUT OF 100 CARTRIDGES HE BOUGHT ON HIS LICENCE, THE POLICE HAVE BEEN ABLE TO RECOVER ONLY 64, ALONG WITH 22 EMPTY CARTRIDGES

Photograph by **ASHISH SHARMA**



Hussain's mobile number and said that Hussain was present in and around his house from February 23rd to February 27th. It claims that over his phone he was in touch with other rioters. The other accused in this case include Hussain's stepbrother, Shah Alam; his friend Irshad; his employees, Rashid Saifi, Arshad Pradhan, Mohammed Shadab and Mohammed Abid; and three others from the neighbourhood, Gulfam, Liyakat Ali, Riyasat Ali, and Arshad Qayuum.

Of them, Gulfam was arrested on March 12th, from Delhi's Nehru Vihar. Upon his interrogation, Gulfam, says the chargesheet, led the police to his rifle and a box containing seven cartridges. His arms licence revealed that he had purchased 200 cartridges, of which 100 were purchased on January 31st. Gulfam, according to the police, has not been able to account for the rest of those.

During their investigation, the police found several CCTV cameras installed at Hussain's house and office. But forensics was unable to find any recording for between February 23rd and 28th. 'There is no recording of persons visiting him in

his office/house prior to the commencement of riots/during the riots, as if he did not wish the events to be recorded,' the chargesheet says.

In his defence, Hussain had earlier said that he had made several calls to the police control room asking for help and that his building had just been taken over by rioters. But the police report says he hasn't been able to explain how his building stayed intact while other buildings around him, belonging to the Hindu community, were destroyed. As an example, the police have recorded the statement of one Pradeep Kumar Verma, who owned the building next to Hussain's and ran it as a parking lot. His property was totally destroyed, including 44 vehicles parked at the site. Verma, now a witness in the case, has told the police that of those accused, Shah Alam, Gulfam and Riyasat Ali along with some others broke open the shutter of his parking lot and burnt and damaged the cars inside and looted cash amounting to about Rs 20,000. He has identified Hussain among other accused as throwing stones and petrol bombs from the terrace. Another witness, Rajbir Singh Yadav, who was supervising food preparations for a marriage ceremony on the first floor of Verma's property, has in his testimony said that while the rampaging mob destroyed the food, Riyasat Ali looted Rs 62,000 from him. He has also, according to the chargesheet, identified Tahir Hussain and Liyakat Ali among the mob that indulged in rioting.

Kapil Mishra (centre) addresses the media on February 25



**THE POLICE HAVE RECEIVED FLAK FOR SKIPPING ENTIRELY THE DETAILS OF A SPEECH MADE BY THE BJP'S KAPIL MISHRA ON FEBRUARY 23RD. THOUGH THERE ARE CLEAR INDICATIONS THAT BOTH SIDES HAD PREPARED IN ADVANCE FOR THE RIOTS, MANY CONSIDER MISHRA'S SPEECH AS A TIPPING POINT**

**I**N ANOTHER CHARGESHEET filed in the case of the Intelligence Bureau staffer Ankit Sharma's murder, the police have claimed witnesses as having seen Hussain 'provoking and instigating the mob' against Hindus. Sharma was dragged outside Hussain's property on the evening of February 25th and his body was found the next morning in a nearby drain. Ten people have been arrested so far in this case.

The police have received flak for skipping entirely the details of a speech made by the BJP's Kapil Mishra on February 23rd. In video footage of the speech, Mishra is seen standing next to a senior police officer, giving an ultimatum to clear an anti-citizenship law protest site, failing which, he says, they would hit the streets. Though there are clear indications that both sides had prepared in advance for the ensuing riots, many consider Mishra's speech a tipping point. In a sequence of events offered by the police in its chargesheets, starting from December 13th (when an anti-citizenship law protests outside Jamia Millia Islamia turned violent) till February 25th, there is no mention of Mishra or his speech. Mishra's speech had invited a lot of criticism and the Delhi High Court questioned the police over their inaction against him and two other BJP leaders.

Civil rights activists have also accused the police of displaying communal bias against Muslims, demanding that all FIRs in the case be opened for independent scrutiny. In their response, the police have termed this accusation 'factually incorrect,' saying that the accused in rioting cases are from both communities. ■

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## T E N T A T I V E S

By **SIDDHARTH SINGH**

**T**here was something surreal about the resolution of a traders' body from Uttar Pradesh (UP) on June 8th. The Adarsh Vyapar Mandal resolved to open all shopping malls in the state but decided to keep shops within the malls shut for business. The next day reports suggested that this indeed had come to pass.

The traders' demands were self-centred: they wanted a rent waiver for the period of the lockdown in the previous months. But the story is emblematic in many ways about the teething troubles India is likely to experience as it opens up after an extensive lockdown to combat a viral pandemic.

The good news, as seen through Google's mobility data, is that India is indeed opening up, however slow the process may be. A month after the lockdown, on April 26th, mobility across India had come to a grinding halt. Traffic at transit stations—an estimate for public transport—fell by a whopping 66 per cent, a figure that rose by 19 percentage points by the end of May as the fourth phase of the lockdown came to an end. But overall, mobility had fallen by half across the country. In simple terms, traffic, including freight and individuals moving around, had come down dramatically. This attested to the success of the lockdown in keeping people where they were: at home. Again, data from Google Mobility reports showed that residential occupation—basically people staying indoors—rose by 22 per cent in April and declined marginally to 19 per cent at the end of May.

Mobility is the first step towards revving up India's economic engines. But just like the story of traders from UP, here too, there are mismatches. Key economic and industrial states are slow to open up. Maharashtra and Delhi are the biggest laggards. It is not surprising as these states have borne the brunt of the pandemic and now account for some of the largest growth rates of infection. Mobility data shows that Gujarat was the only large industrial state to open up fast by the end of May when compared to the first week of the lockdown in March. Not surprisingly, it is the economically poorer states that are the fastest to open. Madhya Pradesh displayed

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**SOME ECONOMISTS  
HAVE ARGUED THAT NOT  
SPENDING NOW WILL  
LEAD TO LONG-TERM  
DAMAGE TO THE INDIAN  
ECONOMY IN TERMS  
OF GROWTH FOREGONE  
AND A REDUCTION IN  
POTENTIAL GROWTH  
AS WELL**

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# T E P S

India is in a tight spot but there are signs of hope as the economy reopens

Photograph by ASHISH SHARMA



Select City Walk mall in New Delhi after it reopened on June 8

the maximum speed in this respect.

There were other green shoots as well. The Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) noted that the total number of people employed in May rose by 21 million. This was against the backdrop of continuing weakness in the Indian labour market: the unemployment rate continued to remain very high at 23.5 per cent, though this figure was the same as it was in April. But the good news is that both the labour participation rate and the employment rate improved.

There is no doubt that India's economy is in a spot. But it is important to separate the effects of Covid-19 and the administrative response to it—the lockdown announced on March 24th—from the pre-existing weaknesses in the economy. The aversion of banks to lend and the very low appetite in companies to borrow has been a persistent, 'twin balance sheet' problem for a while. What exacerbated the problem was the literal halt in the movement of the Indian economy after the lockdown.

The data, however, does not paint a one-sided picture of the end-of-days kind of scenario for the Indian economy. But one has to look at it dispassionately to separate what is real from what is imagined. Take the mobility data. Viewed in isolation, the image it creates is one of Indians just locked in their homes and not venturing out. This is impossible in an economy of 1.3 billion people with a predominant pattern of informal employment. But even if one leaves that aside, data shows that some changes were at hand. To give another example, collections from FastTags on national highways came down from Rs 1,840 crore in February to Rs 1,420 crore in March. This figure fell off the cliff in April to just Rs 248 crore. In May, a smart recovery to Rs 1,140 crore was seen. How does one interpret this? In May, the Union and state governments progressively relaxed district and inter-district movement for essential and then non-essential items. Then, the movement of individuals in their vehicles was also allowed.

**I**f these anecdotes paint a picture of revival after nearly 70 days of lockdown of varying degrees, the macroeconomic picture is grim. The news on the last Friday of May was expected to be unhappy and it was. India's economic growth had slowed significantly in 2019-2020 and had shaved off nearly two percentage points since last year. The last quarter—when the Covid-19 struck India—was harrowing; the Indian economy spluttered to 4.2 per cent growth compared to the previous year. In Gross Value Added (GVA) terms—another way to measure output—the economy grew by just 3.9 per cent during this period.

If the big numbers were disturbing, the fine print was harrowing. Take construction, the sector that employs a vast number of informal labour. In the fourth quarter of 2019-2020, the growth rate for construction clocked a negative 2.2 per cent compared to a healthy 6 per cent growth in the same quarter in 2018-2019. This number is a barometer of mass employment and should be seen along with the huge internal migration that has taken place in the last two months. It is unlikely that it will recover its high mark in the first quarter of 2020-2021.



AP

Farmers on the outskirts of Delhi during the lockdown, April 15 (top); Labourers load sacks of wheat on a truck in Amritsar, April 24

If the overall news was grim, there were hopeful tides as well. Agriculture, the sector that has borne the brunt of a historic deflation in the last four-five years, is recovering smartly. In the January to March quarter, it posted a growth of 5.9 per cent, much higher than the 1.6 per cent in the same quarter of the previous year. Overall, the sector grew by a healthy 4 per cent in 2020 (in GVA terms). The good news does not stop here. In May, sales of fertilisers across India rose by nearly 98 per cent over the same month last year. This was the seventh straight month when these sales continued to grow rapidly. This is the surest indicator that agriculture is on the mend and the great 'rural Indian crisis' that economists and activists had bemoaned may be ebbing.

What will also act as a cushion for the rural economy, at least in those states where government agencies purchase foodgrains, is the huge amount of cash that such operations inject in the system. In Madhya Pradesh, for example, wheat purchase from farmers this season has touched the Rs 20,253 crore mark. This gives a vital financial cushion to farmers and, in turn, allows purchases of non-durable consumer items that are expected to lead to the path for demand revival. At the moment, what is necessary for economic revival is ensuring a pick-up in demand. Given the uncertainty and stressed balance sheets, it is hard to see how investment will pick up without consumption perking up first.

HSBC India economists estimate that in 2018-2019, nearly 55 per cent of consumption expenditure in India was on essential goods and services and the remaining 44 per cent on discretionary goods and services. A clean demarcation along geographic lines is very difficult but it is not hard to understand that cities—where there are persons with higher incomes—account for a larger





GETTY IMAGES

share of discretionary spending on durable goods that lie higher in the value chain. The problem for the Government is in the difficulty of reviving discretionary spending on durable goods.

In the past, such as during the 2008-2009 global financial crisis, it was possible for the Government to spend and support demand. India was growing at a high rate and the Government's debt level was not elevated. Banks, too, were relatively free to lend. That enabled discretionary spending to continue. That support is not an option this time. But there is a silver lining as well.

'Typically, India's savings rate falls during slowdowns. But this time may be different. With households unwilling to dip into savings to fund discretionary consumption, and Covid-19

fears coming in the way of travel and suchlike, the savings rate may rise. Deposits are already growing rapidly at 11 per cent year-on-year despite falling rates at banks. Rising savings also means that consumption can't be counted upon to revive growth, but public sector borrowing may be easily funded for now,' the HSBC economists note in a report earlier this month.

This cushion, however, is not large. So far, the Government has been very careful in spending money. It has, for example, given money to the poor and the migrants who have been forced to go back to their homes. But beyond these necessary expenditures it has, rightly so, resisted demands to spend its way out of the crisis. Given poor

economic performance, tax revenues are extremely stressed and the only option for increased spending is to monetise deficits. This has led to a heated debate among economists. There are some who have argued that not spending now will lead to long-term damage to the Indian economy in terms of growth foregone and a reduction in potential growth as well. But there are others who have urged caution.

For example, HSBC India economists argue that, 'the current slowdown is more demand-driven. But stretched balance sheets imply that a strong and permanent demand stimulus

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**AGRICULTURE, THE SECTOR THAT HAS BORNE THE BRUNT OF A HISTORIC DEFLATION IN THE LAST FOUR-FIVE YEARS, IS RECOVERING SMARTLY. IN THE JANUARY TO MARCH QUARTER, IT POSTED A GROWTH OF 5.9 PER CENT, MUCH HIGHER THAN THE MEASLY 1.6 PER CENT IN THE SAME QUARTER OF THE PREVIOUS YEAR**

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may not be possible. Instead, India's best bet is to nurture the initial demand stimulus, which arises naturally as the economy unlocks, by ensuring that it is not met with supply-side constraints of finance, labour and logistics.'

'Finally, relying solely on a demand stimulus has shortcomings. A cut in tax rates can just push savings up if households are risk averse and not willing to spend. Instead, the Government should continue to ease supply-side constraints, for instance, by cleaning up balance sheets [via a simpler IBC process, etcetera]. This alone can lead to sustainable growth and jobs after the pandemic.'

So far, the Government has stuck to this script. This has not gone down well with those demanding a bigger fiscal stimulus. The issue is simple: the Government has not only to deal with a current reality of rising Covid-19 cases, healthcare costs, meeting urgent needs of the poor and migrants but also to keep in mind a highly uncertain world the pandemic has unleashed. It is better to be prudent and spend as and when the need arises. Unlike past crises when spending ensured not just survival but also a way to revived growth, this time round it is different. The instruments of last resort—deficit monetisation and higher taxes—are always available but to use them as measures of first resort is inadvisable. ■

# The Key to Rec

Every government needs to revisit history for an appropriate economic response

By JANMEJAYA SINHA and VINCENT CHIN

**R**arely are there pre-existing scripts to deal with a true black swan event. No government leader can truly be ready for a global health pandemic, combined with spiralling superpower tensions and a world economy that has barely recovered from the effects of the global financial crisis. One can therefore understand government anxiety and nervousness in taking bold actions. The role of sovereign governments has been enhanced because global coordination, cooperation and support have fallen to the lowest level in living memory. So it is critical for every nation to have a clear and bold agenda for reform and then act on it.

The current crisis is challenging because it seeks coordination across three different disciplines not used to cooperating with each other—health scientists, economists and foreign policy experts. These experts don't really know how to talk to each other, much less how to quickly align to allow for coherent policy actions to deal with an emerging crisis with multiple unknowns. This is the challenge compromising responses and their efficacy across the world today.

The clear fact that has emerged is that, whether we are in lockdown or not, the economy will not operate at full potential until we have a vaccine available at scale. After lockdown, discipline and procedures will be very important, especially until a quick, accurate and affordable test is available, or until an antiviral that works is available everywhere.

Restarting an economy from a self-induced coma of over two months is unprecedented. Whatever country we may be in, consumer demand for nonessentials has fallen—India had barely any car sales in two months, while April figures for clothing sales fell nearly 80 per cent year-on-year in the US. In the US, unemployment has reached nearly 20 per cent—the steepest fall in employment since the Great Depression. More worrying, nearly half of the global workforce, or 1.6 billion workers, are now in informal sectors which are the most exposed and least rescued areas of any national stimulus package announced so far.

There are no engines of growth anywhere in the world to pull the rest along. Exports and imports are down and the World Trade Organization forecasts that global trade is expected to fall by between 13 and 32 per cent in 2020; and many sectors (aviation, hotels, restaurants, malls) are just shut

down. How do we get the economy back?

We need to revisit our history books to think of the appropriate response. As job losses are mounting and capital expenditures are frozen, the global economy is likely to shrink by as much as \$10 trillion. Over the past 30 years or so, Keynesian economics has fallen out of fashion with the monetarists ruling the economic narrative. That may not be the right response for the economic crisis today. The global financial crises of the past two decades have exhausted monetary policy tools. Liquidity is high, interest rates are low, corporates have \$12 trillion of debt, and yet there is no inflation.

How does one counter job losses and a freeze on capital expenditures? There is an urgent need to stimulate aggregate demand. In the current crisis, if handled well, inflation threat is even more remote. With lockdowns and job losses, consumption has shifted to essentials without any fall in installed capacity. Depending on the country and the weights in the consumer price index, things like food, rent, oil and durable spend will reduce and so inflation is not to be expected. Depending on the balance of trade—especially for oil importers—there will be a big support that will further curb inflationary impulses.

In the Keynesian world, this time would be ripe for an aggregate demand push. Given major risk aversion in financial institutions, there will be a flow of capital back to the US from emerg-



# o v e r y

## as monetary policy tools are exhausted

ing markets. Debt markets will also be constrained, and so the time is right to prudently print money but be sharp in ensuring printed money is carefully spent. There are two time horizons for response. The first is immediately surviving the war. The second is a longer-term view of actually winning the peace that ensues after the virus is tamed.

There is a need to focus on five areas immediately to ensure surviving the virus.

First of all, alleviate misery for the temporary workers and other blue-collar workers laid off or without work. This is a basic moral imperative. Governments need to provide cash transfers and food stamps.

Second, wage support to keep workers on rolls will be better because it does not cause the emotional fear of job loss in spending patterns. It is important to provide job support for three to six months, especially to employees of SMEs. For larger corporates, they could provide loans to keep on workers. Governments must protect jobs so that the economy can bounce back faster when demand revives.

Third, consider their version of the New Deal, the Marshall Plan, or rather a 'Corona Deal', to build sorely needed infrastructure. With respect to infrastructure, the spending by printing money should not be inflationary, as it will raise productivity

and reduce transaction costs. One should go for the projects that can be started quickly.

Fourth, protect the financial sector, which will face a spurt in non-performing assets. Depending on the ownership of the sector, either buffer up capital or, if government-owned, evaluate the classification norms for loans to see if there are one-time exceptions possible. The capital formation capacity of an economy is a major determinant of how bad the economic downturn will be.

Finally, support for badly affected sectors—aviation, travel and tourism, auto—is inevitable but needs to be thoughtfully administered and governed. Bailout funds should support liquidity, but they also need to spur demand and even to take equity in struggling companies in badly affected sectors, while demanding a turnaround plan that is sustainable.

However, not all countries have the luxury to be comprehensive in all these areas. Governments need to prioritise which is most critical. Prioritisation is further complicated by differing, even conflicting, advice from various stakeholders and experts. The government that is able to bring together a wide range of stakeholders, and in a multidisciplinary way find an answer, will have the best chance of not just getting its priorities right but also finding the right path forward.

**S**mart governments will not just seek to survive but will prepare to get back into a world they did not leave with a clear strategy. Winning the peace in this new period after the Covid-19 war is won will require thought and care. But the autonomy that governments gain due to the crisis should not be lost. They should view the world with three different lenses. The first is the superpower rivalry that will get close to a cold war by the time the US elections take place in November. With over 40 million unemployed, a shrinking economy, and over 100,000 dead, President Donald Trump will classify China as the very clear enemy. This will create space for countries to enter global supply chains heavily dependent on China.

Global arrangements will change and countries will need to reassess their alignments. They could make claims to enter governing councils in multilateral institutions. The superpower rivalry will be difficult to navigate. Countries will need to decide whether they choose sides and, if they do, how to do that carefully and well.

Countries already know the long-term policy moves they could not find the political space to do before. While sceptics have doubted if governments can indeed execute such radical reforms, the quick response from governments in the past two months has proven that the political will to do so in times of crisis can bring about remarkable results. One such example is in virtual care, which has had its breakout moment with many providers making strides in weeks for what had previously taken years or decades. Denmark rolled out virtual consultation software for specialists in two weeks, Kaiser Permanente moved from 15 per cent of oncology care in virtual settings to 95 per cent in one week, and Queensland Health expanded their virtual care capacity from 90 to 1,600 users. Hence, governments should be bold in what they

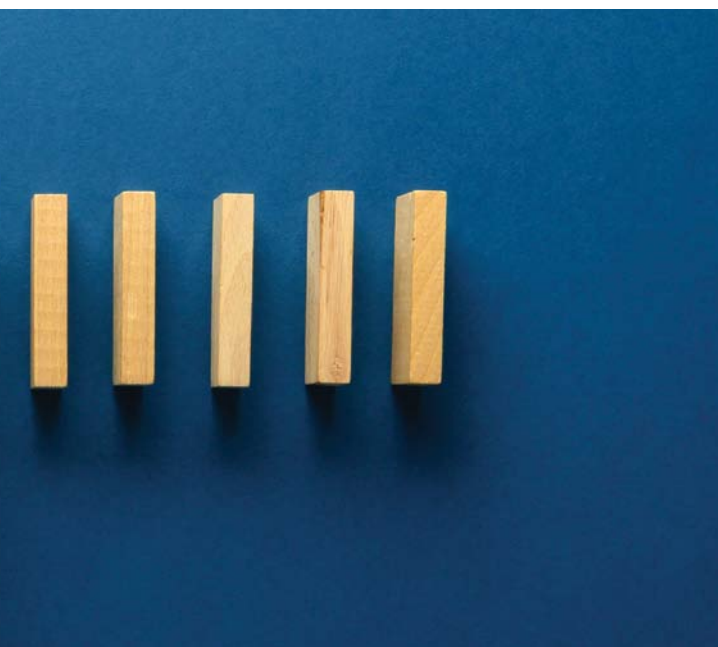


Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

aim to do. This extends within the confines of government, with an increased appetite brought on by the crisis to adopt new ways of working that span organisational silos and force teams to adopt an iterative, customer-centric approach. Multidisciplinary teams made up of health professionals, economists and service delivery experts as an idea is not new within government, but the scale that it has been adopted in recent months has delivered a revelation to governments that these organisational constructs deliver demonstrable value—and must be retained when the peace is won.

Finally, governments should also understand the important long-term changes that were already present and accelerate their actions. Be it with respect to sustainability and climate change or in digital adoption and data standards. For instance, as part of a green economy agenda, post-Covid-19 recovery presents an opportunity to make a push for a fossil-free, renewable electricity system, with Canada looking into replacing coal-fired power with some mix of largescale hydro, natural gas, and wind and solar.

Digital transformation in particular has seen rapid progress, with governments focusing on building data control towers that aggregate different public and private data sources to aid decision-making and support scenario analysis, deploying technology-centric services such as Bluetooth-based contact-tracing apps, and establishing digital platforms that help facilitate market operations in sectors where value chains have been severely disrupted. Now, governments need to ensure they not only retain this momentum and avoid returning to the old ways of working, but that they also continue to accelerate. They need to reset their digital strategies and project portfolios to ensure investments being made today can be reused in the future, ensure their workforces have the right tools and practices to return to the workplace, and adopt iterative, value-driven approaches to building platforms rather than traditional multi-year programmes—all the while keeping an eye on managing costs.

The pandemic has triggered long-lasting structural changes that will affect up to 1.5 billion jobs within the next decade. But governments also need to move aggressively to meet the crisis in the short and medium terms. Vast swathes of workers out of employment should be supported by governments to obtain new skills, to improve productivity in core sectors like construction and enhance semiskilled workers' capabilities. Governments

A worker at a reopened undergarment factory in Kolkata



REUTERS

**RESTARTING AN ECONOMY FROM A SELF-INDUCED COMA OF OVER TWO MONTHS IS UNPRECEDENTED. CONSUMER DEMAND FOR NONESSENTIALS HAS FALLEN—INDIA HAD BARELY ANY CAR SALES IN TWO MONTHS. HALF THE GLOBAL WORKFORCE IS IN INFORMAL SECTORS WHICH ARE THE MOST EXPOSED AND LEAST RESCUED**

must also use this crisis as an opportunity to enhance their digital skilling and education capabilities. Governments should examine best practices for delivering high-quality instruction remotely. Leaders should also make sizeable investments in closing the digital divide, ensuring students have widespread connectivity and online learning devices. Substantial investment in digital education will make societies more resilient to future waves of Covid-19, and to any future emergencies that may require swift transition to remote learning. It will also help reinvent and modernise education with cutting-edge learning models.

Covid-19 has presented a unique opportunity for countries to reflect on the most essential features of their systems to improve health outcomes at the same or

lower costs. As systems readied themselves for the pandemic, critical trade-offs were forced, such as extending the scope of practice for nursing and allied health workforces, and what care was really essential to continue inside the hospital walls. If countries are willing to re-imagine what kind of health system they want in a post-Covid-19 world, they have an unparalleled opportunity to enact change. Health systems globally should think innovatively about how they implement new care delivery models, data and analytics, policy setting, payments, and other important topics.

Governments should be quick to learn from other governments, but customise for their own economies. The crisis provides governments with great autonomy to undertake fundamental reform of their economy like India has done in abolishing the Agricultural Produce Marketing Committee (APMC). Crises like these, if well-navigated, will create political popularity and space for country leaders. Smart decisions will improve the prospects of the country for a long time to come. Deciding and acting appear difficult, but the stakes are high, and those who navigate well will improve the prospects for their country.

Leaders should not underestimate the fierce urgency of now to take action. As Thomas Paine wrote in 1776, 'We have it in our power to begin the world over again.' But only if we act. ■



*Janmejaya Sinha is Chairman India and Vincent Chin is Global Leader Public Sector Practice of the Boston Consulting Group. A longer version of this article is available at [open.themagazine.com](http://open.themagazine.com)*



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# THE SUNSHINE CONNECTION

**Studies show a correlation between Vitamin D deficiency and severity of Covid-19, but don't bank on it to save your life yet**

By **MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI**

**T**he problem with getting infected by Covid-19 is not so much the virus itself but the frenzy that it sends the immune system into. It is a fair bet that almost no one outside the medical profession had earlier heard of the term 'cytokine storm'—the body's overwhelming defensive reaction in the face of an unknown puzzling threat that makes it literally consume its own organs. It is what usually makes the difference between life and death. Without the cytokine storm, Covid-19 would be no more than a flu or a cold. There would be no lockdown, the shutting down of the global economy, the world would be just as it was earlier. There are a huge number of studies going on to understand why the cytokine storm happens in some cases and factors responsible for mitigating it. A team of researchers from Northwestern University set about looking at the role of Vitamin D and found severe deficiency might as much as double the risk of Covid-19-related complications. They looked at patients from countries that saw a large number of cases. Those with high deaths like Spain, Italy and the UK were also those where patients had lower Vitamin D levels.

A press release by the university of the unpublished study, which was put up in a preprint server, said that the team, led by Vadim Backman, 'were inspired to examine vitamin D levels after noticing unexplained differences in COVID-19 mortality rates from country to country. Some people hypothesized that differences in healthcare quality, age distributions in population, testing rates or different strains of the coronavirus might be responsible'. The release added: 'But Backman remained skeptical. 'None of these factors appears to play a significant role,' Backman said. The healthcare system in northern Italy is one of the best in the world. Differences in mortality exist even if one looks across the same age group. And, while the restrictions on testing do indeed vary, the disparities in mortality still exist even when we looked at countries or populations for which similar testing rates apply. 'Instead, we saw a significant correlation with vitamin D deficiency,' he said.'

Vitamin D has been around a long time on earth, at least for 500 million years, but its role became crucial as organisms left the waters and entered land. Its key function is to mediate the absorption of calcium bodies. When life was marine-locked, calcium was available in plenty in water and could easily be absorbed or eaten, but in land, that wasn't the case. The solution that evolu-

tion came up with was Vitamin D made through the processing of sunlight. In his book, *The Vitamin D Solution*, Michael F Holick writes: 'Land presented many new challenges, especially once life forms got bigger and had to find a way to satisfy their vitamin D requirement without relying on plants. This was millions of years, by the way, before humans came into the picture... So for reasons we don't fully understand, it was exposure to sunlight on the skin—producing vitamin D—that permitted these animals evolving on terra firma to be able to absorb enough dietary calcium for their vertebrate skeletons.'

In recent times, it has been found that Vitamin D has many other functions, one of which is modulating immune responses in humans. This idea was central to another study published last month in a paper titled 'The role of vitamin D in the prevention of coronavirus disease 2019 infection and mortality' in the journal *Aging Clinical and Experimental Research*. The UK-based researchers believe there was good evidence for Vitamin D being useful for prevention of acute respiratory infections in general and so it needed to be looked into in relation to Covid-19. They took mean levels of Vitamin D in European countries from available literature. Then the number of Covid-19 cases and mortality in each country was taken and a statistical analysis done. A negative correlation was found between number of cases and the levels of the vitamin. So also mortality. For example, in the data that they used, which was up to April 8th, the Scandinavian countries which had high mean Vitamin D levels, also did better than other European countries which had lower levels. Dr Cristian Ilie, Research and Innovation Director, The Queen Elizabeth Hospital Foundation Trust, who was part of the study, tells *Open* they 'found a crude correlation between low levels of mean Vitamin D and the number of cases per million diagnosed in various European countries, respectively, the mortality per million'.

As to why such a correlation should exist, he said, 'Vitamin D is involved in many of the body reactions, including innate and adaptive immune response. This makes it essential for the ability of our body to fight against infections. Lack of Vitamin D may result in a myriad of diseases, such as bone problems, higher risk for diabetes but also other medical conditions, such as acute respiratory infections.' On whether the correlation can be extended to tropical countries like India, Dr Ilie says they have already done that in another soon-to-be-published paper. 'We have found a correlation between low levels of Vitamin D and the severity of Covid-19. I can let you know now, before publication, that India was included in our second analysis,' he says.

Yet another paper on Vitamin D and Covid-19 conducted by researchers of Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland, was published in the *Irish Medical Journal* recently. Their release said: 'This study shows that, counterintuitively, countries at lower latitude and typically sunny countries, such as Spain and Northern Italy, had low concentrations of vitamin D and high rates of vitamin D deficiency. These

countries also experienced the highest infection and death rates in Europe. The northern latitude countries of Norway, Finland and Sweden, have higher vitamin D levels despite less UVB sunlight exposure, because supplementation and fortification of foods is more common. These Nordic countries have lower COVID-19 infection and death rates. The correlation between low vitamin D levels and death from COVID-19 is statistically significant,' said their release. It quoted Eamon Laird, the lead researcher assaying, 'Research like this is still exploratory and we need further trials to have concrete evidence on the level of vitamin D that is needed for optimal immune function. However, studies like this also remind us how low our vitamin D status is in the population (even in sunny countries) and adds further weight to some sort of mandatory vitamin D fortification policy. If the Nordic countries are allowed to do this, there is no reason Ireland, the UK or rest of Europe can't either.'

These are all correlation studies and there is nothing to establish causation—that giving someone Vitamin D can directly make Covid-19 harmless. But, even if we assume, that at some point more studies might show a stronger link, does it mean Indians are any better off because of it being a tropical country with greater exposure to sunlight? Not necessarily. Study after study have shown

that an extraordinarily large percentage of Indians have Vitamin D deficiency. A 2018 paper, 'Vitamin D deficiency in India', by AIIMS researchers in the *Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care* looked at the severity of the problem here by collating the information from all the studies that had been done. Almost everyone showed that more than 50 per cent of Indians had Vitamin D deficiency. 'The community-based Indian studies of the past decade done on apparently healthy controls reported a prevalence ranging from

50% to 94%, except for one study which reported a prevalence of 34.5% which can be due to the low cutoff. High prevalence was seen throughout the country,' said the paper. It also gave the reasons for why the deficiency exists. These included lifestyles being increasingly restricted to indoor, preventing exposure to adequate sunlight; something which was mainly an urban phenomenon. Diets not having adequate Vitamin D and calcium was another factor. 'Phytates and phosphates which are present in fiber rich diet, can deplete Vitamin D stores and increase calcium requirement; Increased skin pigmentation and application of sunscreens; cultural practices such as the burqa and *pardah* system, unspaced and unplanned pregnancies in women with dietary deficit can lead to worsening of Vitamin D status in both mother and child' were the other reasons.

Authors of studies related to Vitamin D and Covid-19 make it a point to caution against taking Vitamin D in the expectation that it will be protection against the disease. But until causation, if any, is established, it might be a good idea to take the free source of natural Vitamin D available to mankind—exposure to sunlight. It comes without any side effects and at the very least, you will still have good bones. ■

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## IN RECENT TIMES, IT HAS BEEN FOUND THAT VITAMIN D HELPS MODULATE IMMUNE RESPONSES IN HUMANS

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# BURDEN OF

When humans withdrew indoors because of the lockdown,

By **LHENDUP G BHUTIA**

**O**n April 21st, Shakuntala Majumdar received a call from the local animal husbandry department. A chaotic period had ensued for Majumdar, who heads the Thane Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (TSPCA) and runs an animal hospital in Mumbai's satellite city Thane, ever since the lockdown had been announced. She had been assailed with requests—from people unable to bring their pets to the hospital and over animals locked in without food and

care in pet shops. And as the number of Covid-19-positive cases increased in Mumbai and nearby areas, those who turned positive and their family members would be taken to quarantine centres and hospitals, but pets, if they had any, would be left behind, locked up. Majumdar had pressed her three ambulances for rescue and relief operations of animals, coordinating with authorities to allow pet-shop owners to feed their animals and rescuing those locked up in homes without care.

The call on April 21st however was for another set of animals. Around 78 horses used for joy rides on a nearby beach had gone without feed for nearly a month. Four horses had already





Stray dogs in Srinagar during the lockdown

# THE BEASTS

GETTY IMAGES

## the effect on animals was far-reaching and not salutary

died from starvation.

“They were just chewing whatever little grass they could find. All performing animals look undernourished. But these horses looked terrible,” she says. Eventually, TSPCA helped arranged for enough fodder to last them, and several more starving horses they discovered in other nearby areas, for a few months.

“If you ask me,” Majumdar says, “this lockdown has taken a very big toll on animals.”

In the early phases of the lockdown, as humans withdrew indoors across most parts of the globe, social media was inundated with photos and videos of how nature was hitting a reset button

and animals were reclaiming their spaces again. As it turned out, most of these were false. Dolphins did not return to the waters along Mumbai’s coast; they have always been there. Peacocks did not take over a road in Coimbatore. No dolphins returned to Venetian canals. No elephant broke into a Chinese village, got drunk off corn wine and passed out in a tea garden.

In fact, the lockdown has come as a shock to a wide array of animals. When humans withdrew indoors, their absence had a rippling effect in the urban ecosystem, upon the animals that depend on and are habituated to human activity.

“[Animals] didn’t get the memo about a lockdown being

enforced. So they got a big shock,” says Anindita Bhadra, who heads a laboratory that studies the behaviour of stray dogs at the Department of Biological Sciences of Indian Institute of Science Education and Research in Kolkata.

Bhadra has conducted several studies examining stray dogs’ behaviour. She has discovered, for instance, that strays can read human gestures; that they, depending upon their past experience (in the case of the study, people pointing to either an empty bowl filled with food or one that turns out to be empty), choose to follow or not such a pointing cue again; and that they learn to forage during their juvenile age.

Bhadra along with a team of researchers is now trying to study the impact of the lockdown on strays’ social behaviour. They are relying on a citizen-science partnership, asking people to record long videos of strays in their neighbourhoods or collaborating in a detailed survey.

“What we have found is that there has been a lot of migration among dogs. They have moved from places like bus stops where no food was found during the lockdown to neighbourhoods, for instance, places where volunteers went out in cars to drop food,” she says. Much of this migration has led to aggression, with frequent fights breaking out between dogs defending their territories and also some unusual behaviour. According to her, one individual living in a highrise in Kolkata, whom they were able to contact and verify his claim, recorded a group of about 15 dogs killing a calf and consuming some of its flesh. “Stray dogs are scavengers. And while they can kill other smaller animals like kittens, it is usually in play. But if they find nothing to forage, it is possible that they could try and hunt,” she says.

One of her bigger fears is that many strays would have entered their juvenile age during this period in the lockdown. “We have found that dogs learn to forage for food in this period of their lifetime. So for juvenile dogs who have spent the last few months staying close to places where volunteers drop food, they will never learn to scavenge for food once the lockdown gets lifted,” she says. A few years ago, she recounts, a neighbour raised a group of four stray puppies till they were around a year old. They fed the dogs, didn’t even allow them to fight when it was being distributed. “The neighbour, when leaving the area, left the dogs thinking they were big enough to care for themselves. But the dogs were useless as strays. They couldn’t look for food, didn’t mate with others or among themselves and would keep turning to humans for help,” she says. According to her, the lockdown could leave many of these strays in a similar predicament.

“As the lockdown is lifted, I’m sure there will be

a new set of challenges. There will be more dog-human fights [since many dogs have become aggressive], more accidents involving dogs [since many have become used to emptier roads],” she says.

The lockdown has also had a corollary impact on wildlife. A lot more poaching and illegal tree felling is being recorded. Some of it probably has to do with a distressed economy, with people losing their jobs and other sources of revenue turning to poaching. The lockdown has also meant locals who play the most crucial role in conservation—keeping a tab on and alerting authorities about suspicious activities in national parks and forests—have not been able to do so. But as fears of the virus and a distressed economy take their toll on wildlife tourism, many locals who depend upon this will also have one less incentive to be as involved.

Mokhram Dharnia, who heads a wildlife conservation group in Rajasthan, Jeev Raksha Sanstha, claims that hunting has increased in the last two months following the lockdown. Dharnia’s group has volunteers spread out across villages in western Rajasthan. Every time they find any suspicious activity, they tip off authorities or try to catch the hunters themselves.

“Every few days now we get cases of hunting of *chinkaras*, peacocks and grey francolins. Just some weeks ago, we found 25 peacocks poisoned in Churu,” he says. He also mentions another area near Jaisalmer where weighing scales were discovered near carcasses of blackbucks, indicating that the animals were killed to sell the meat.

Last month, Dharnia says, their group chased three poachers who had managed to hunt five deer in an area close to Bikaner. “They had chopped the deer and were carrying it in gunny sacks. They escaped but we were able to stop them from carrying away some of the carcasses,” he says.

In Assam, poachers have now managed to kill its first rhino in over 13 months in the Kaziranga National Park (KNP). The carcass was discovered without its horn last month. Such cases were frequent in the past: according to one report, there were 27 cases each in 2013 and 2014. But over the past few years, the park had managed to reduce their frequency. The creation of a dedicated and armed Special Rhino Protection Force last year is believed to have further strengthened the park. But ever since the lockdown was announced, the park has seen several attempts at poaching—occasions where even gunfire was exchanged between authorities and poachers. “The lockdown appears to have given rhino poachers free time to regroup and plan strikes in Kaziranga...,” KNP Director P Sivakumar told reporters after the rhino’s carcass was discovered.

Bibhab Kumar Talukdar, a well-known



**“ANIMALS DIDN’T GET THE MEMO ABOUT A LOCKDOWN BEING ENFORCED. SO THEY GOT A BIG SHOCK”**

**Anindita Bhadra**  
ecologist, IISER Kolkata



**“CONSERVATION ACTIVITIES THAT NEED PEOPLE TO GATHER WILL PERHAPS NEED TO WAIT FOR A FEW MORE MONTHS”**

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CEO, Aaranyak



GETTY IMAGES

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A leopard inside an empty water tank during the lockdown in Tikri village, Haryana

rhino expert, the CEO of Aaranyak, a wildlife NGO in Guwahati, and the Asia Coordinator of International Rhino Foundation, says that the recent rhino kill highlights a worrying situation. He points out that the carcass of the rhino was found with used AK-47 cartridges. “Earlier local poachers generally used .303 or .315 rifles. In the past few years some poachers have been found using the AK series rifles,” he says. “Cadres of some militant groups seem to be engaged in rhino poaching in Assam. A couple of militant groups operating in the Manipur-Myanmar border have been found to be involved, along with a few militant cadres from Karbi-Anglong [in Assam]. They engage local people as guides to hunt the rhinos,” he says. He points to another incident, where villagers were able to catch a poacher from Arunachal Pradesh who, along with an armed gang, was trying to hunt a rhino in the eastern area of KNP.

**A**ccording to Talukdar, while forest security officials and staffers have continued to keep vigil, on-field conservation efforts have suffered because NGOs and conservationists haven’t been able to coordinate and work with local communities. “Conservation activities that need people to gather will perhaps need to wait for a few more months,” he says.

In cities, conservation parks and zoos have also suffered. In Chennai, the Madras Crocodile Bank Trust, which depends upon ticket sales to run a conservation and breeding park of rare and exotic reptiles, had to raise funds for the upkeep of the park. In public zoos, while the lack of ticket sales hasn’t been an issue, they did face other problems. In some zoos, the lack of crowds has meant that some primates have become depressed. Zoos across the world have tried various tricks to get around the issue. At least one in Russia has put up a TV screen outside cages with chimps. In Patna’s zoo, staffers now gather around enclosures with primates, according to one media report, every few days and clap and make noises to lift their spirits.

But by far the most common problem that most zoos faced

in India was the lack of beef for its carnivores. In Mumbai, after the city’s only abattoir shut in the early part of the lockdown, the city’s Jijamata Udyan had to turn to chicken. The zoo’s carnivores, which include a pair of tigers, leopards and hyenas each, consume around 50 kg of meat everyday. “We used to feed them chicken sometimes before too, but when the shortage happened we had to ration whatever beef was there and give them chicken,” says Sanjay Tripathi, the zoo’s Director.

A similar situation unfolded across zoos in Gujarat too. Except for the Sayajibaug Zoo in Vadodara. This zoo, opened in 1879 by Maharaja Sayaji Rao Gaekwad of Baroda, has always had its own slaughterhouse. Curator Pratyush Patankar, anticipating a lockdown, chalked out a plan in advance: he contacted the local municipal and police officials, issued passes to suppliers who provided the buffaloes for slaughter and gave them his contact number in case they were held up at checkpoints.

The only difficulty, Patankar says, his meat suppliers have faced is that after the closure of *haats* where buffaloes are usually purchased, they now have to travel to villages to source them.

The Sayajibaug Zoo is in fact using the lockdown as an opportunity. They are trying to get the park’s two tigers, now away from public glare, to mate.

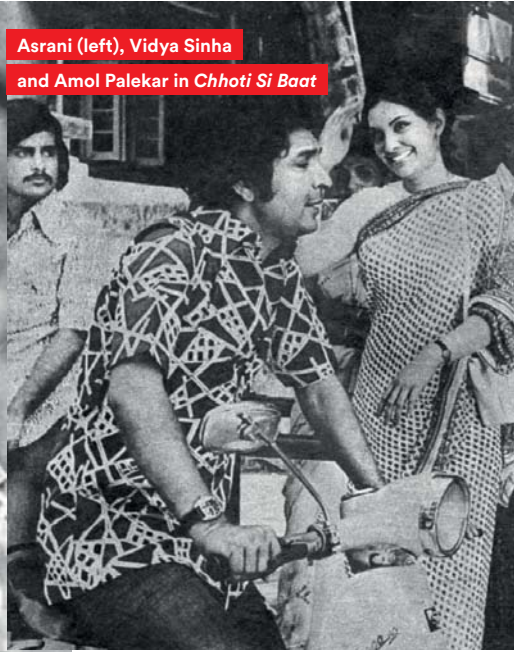
The zoo earlier had one tiger and two tigresses. But the park’s tiger enclosures, built in such a way that only one tiger could be kept at an enclosure at a time if the public was to be able to view them, meant that they couldn’t get them to mate with each other. In 2017, when they sent one of the tigresses to the zoo in Surat so it could mate with a tiger there, the encounter turned disastrous. The tigresses was killed by the male.

“It’s been tough ever since. It was tough emotionally for all the people who cared for that tigress in the zoo. And with such scheduled animals, it’s a lot of responsibility. But the people here have been telling me to try once again. And so far, it’s looking good. There’s bonding and no aggression,” Patankar says. “Fingers crossed.” ■

CINEMA



Vidya Sinha in *Rajnigandha*

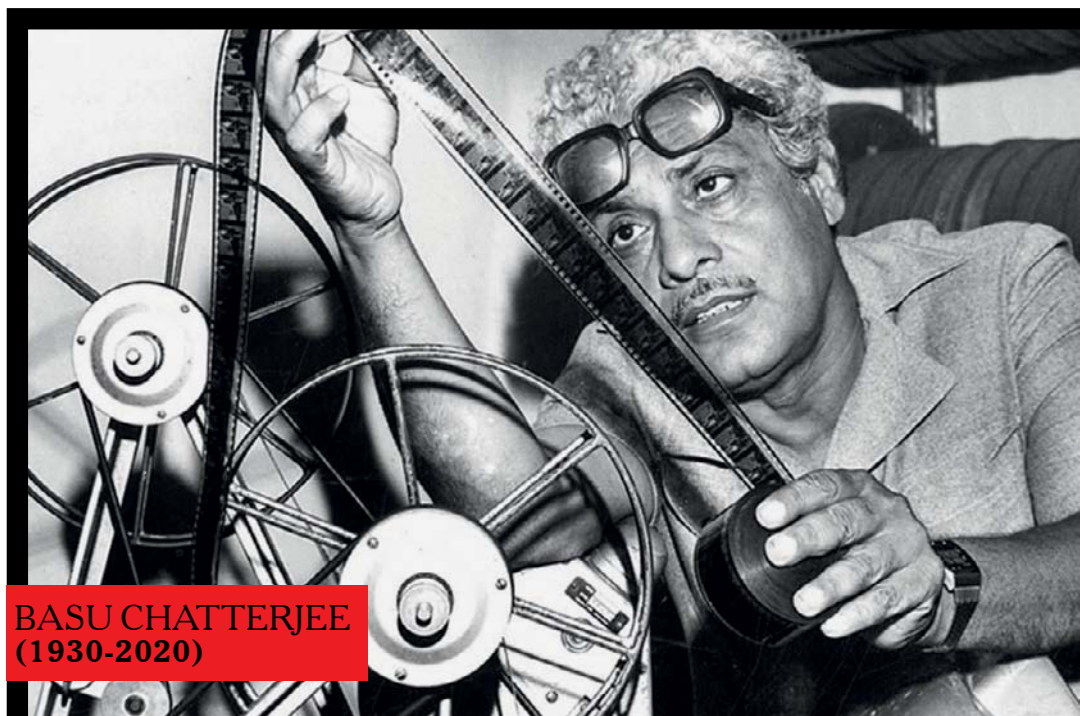


Asrani (left), Vidya Sinha and Amol Palekar in *Chhoti Si Baat*



# CONS

Basu Chatterjee's depiction of



**BASU CHATTERJEE  
(1930-2020)**

# UMING MODERNITY

the middle class negotiating the '70s has inspired a new generation of filmmakers **By Kaveree Bamzai**



**Amol Palekar in *Chitchor***

**I**MPROPER CONDITIONING. Defective verbal communication, Unstable self-confidence. This is a case of love's labour lost. And it needs special courtship pattern training." This is the diagnosis of relationship expert Colonel Julius Nagendranath Wilfred Singhof Khandala in Basu Chatterjee's little gem *Chhoti Si Baat* (1976). His subject is Arun Pradeep (Amol Palekar), a shy clerk in the Mumbai firm Jackson Tolaram, who cannot summon the courage to declare his love for working woman Prabha (Vidya Sinha). Colonel Singh, played by a pipe-smoking, pool-playing Ashok Kumar, schools Palekar in how to be a man in modern, middle-class India. From how to use chopsticks to how to shake hands, from how to look a woman in the eyes to how to play chess, the Colonel sends him back to Bombay a changed man with enough in his bag of tricks to dispatch his bumptious rival, Nagesh Shastri (Asrani).

If the cinema of Basu Chatterjee had not existed, it would have to be invented. Middle-class India had not found much representation in Hindi cinema before, with the reigning deity being the subaltern loner symbolised by Amitabh Bachchan who was cutting a swathe through Mumbai cinema with a series of searing portrayals, from the bitter police officer of *Zanjeer* (1973) to the resentful dockworker-turned-smuggler of *Deewar* (1975) to the angry illegitimate son with a grudge against his father in *Trishul* (1978). While Salim Khan and Javed Akhtar were giving the aristocratic upmarket Bachchan a working-class makeover, the middle class found itself increasingly reflected in movies which they usually watched on Doordarshan, due to lack of adequate theatrical spaces. At the height of ferment in India, which caused the 18-month suspension of fundamental rights during Emergency, Chatterjee's Palekar trilogy—*Rajnigandha* (1974), *Chhoti Si Baat* and *Chitchor* (1976)—created a new way of being for the middle class, which allowed them to focus exclusively on their lives.

Unlike Satyajit Ray's dark Calcutta trilogy—*Pratidwandi* (1970), *Seemabaddha* (1971) and *Jana Aranya* (1976)—which proved that the increasingly corporate India was no country for honesty, Chatterjee's cinema offered hope. Women could educate themselves and become part of the big city workforce of Mumbai like Vidya Sinha's best friend in *Rajnigan-*

*dha*, who has been married for four years but hasn't had time to think of having children and is working towards a possible move to America. Men could think of moving cities to join their girlfriends if she got the better job, just as Palekar tells Sinha in *Rajinigandha*. Families learnt to live together when two older adults decided to get married in *Khatta Meetha* (1978), mothers compared salaries of possible suitors with their daughters' in *Baton Baton Mein* (1979) and a married couple has to run away to Bombay to rent a room to find some anonymity and intimacy in *Hamari Bahu Alka* (1982).

**H**IS IMPACT ON today's filmmakers who are telling simpler stories rooted in their realities is unmistakable. Hardik Mehta, who directed the charming *Har Kisse Ke Hisse: Kaamyab* in 2018, chronicling the life of an eternal character actor, doesn't hail from a film family. He didn't go to film school either. His father worked in a government bank and, in his younger days, was posted in Mumbai, with the office in Nariman Point, close to where the fictional Jackson Tolaram of *Chhoti Si Baat* was. "He would tell me: 'Homework *toh tu kal bhi kar sakta hai par aaj TV pe Basu da ki film aa rahi hai*. Don't miss it [You can do your homework any time, but today skip it and watch Basu *da's* film on TV instead]. So we ended up watching some of his

Tina Munim and Amol Palekar in *Baton Baton Mein*



films but not all. Which is why I was so surprised that when I made a short film called *The Affair* (2017) about the lack of space for Mumbai couples, a friend pointed out that it's very close to *Piya Ka Ghar* (1972), and I was shocked to know that. Since, believe me, of the many Basu *da* films I had seen, somehow I had never seen *Piya Ka Ghar*, and look how life surprised me."

Chatterjee's *Piya Ka Ghar*, starring Jaya Bhaduri and Anil Dhawan, deals with a young couple trying to find space for themselves in a large family that lives in a one-room chawl in Mumbai. It was a subject that Parallel Cinema filmmakers, initially financed by the BK Karanjia-run Film Finance Corporation, would return to repeatedly. Sparked by Indira Gandhi's 1964 policy as Information and Broadcasting Minister, these filmmakers included promising newcomers, such as Mani Kaul from the Film and Television Institute of India, filmmaker Mrinal Sen (for his first film in Hindi) and newcomers Basu Chatterjee and Kantilal Rathod. As film historian Ira Bhaskar has written in *Routledge Handbook of Indian Cinemas*, 1969 saw the birth of Parallel Cinema with the completion of their films *Uski Roti*, *Bhuvan Shome*, *Sara Akash* and *Kanku*, respectively.

Chatterjee's *Sara Akash*, based on Rajendra Yadav's novella and shot on location in a middle-class neighbourhood in Agra, dealt with the same issue in a slightly less literal way: here the young couple tries to find its emotional space within a joint family. Bhaskar points to themes which Chatterjee would reiterate in his movies: adaptations of literary material especially from the Nai Kahani movement, use of real locations and mostly unknown actors and evocation of the everyday.

More than that, it was a preoccupation with class, rather than caste, and the city, rather than the village. Hardik Mehta says the way Chatterjee shot Bombay Parsi colonies and their quaint lanes was a huge inspiration for him in choosing Dadar Parsi Colony as the main location for his debut feature *Kaamyab*, where an old character actor of Hindi movies like



“A friend pointed out that my short film *The Affair*, about the lack of space for Mumbai couples, is close to Basu *da's* *Piya Ka Ghar*, and I was shocked to know that there is a Basu *da* film I hadn't watched”

**HARDIK MEHTA**  
film writer and director

Sudhir (Sanjay Mishra) would live. "Parsi colonies are very hard to get by to shoot, but I think the way a Parsi colony can convey the essence of middle-class Bombay [nothing else] can," he adds.

Chatterjee was the master of telling simple stories that celebrated the common man, the small town and the strong woman, when most films had heroines for song and dance only. In an era when action and masala films ruled the box office, he had the courage to tell ordinary stories and made these special with his craft. We could see ourselves in his films and completely relate to the situations. "That was his genius," says Amar Kaushik who made the rib-tickling social satire *Bala* (2019). "The 'new-age' and 'content-driven' cinema, as we call it today, were being created by him long ago. Thanks to him and Hrishikesh Mukherjee, I want my hero to be as relatable as Amol Palekar was in theirs," he says.

It explains the rise of actors such as



The greatest part about Basu *da*'s films was that we saw all of them with the family. My family was much like in the films, a joint family, so it was always a full house and everyone would wait for these films”

**HITESH KEWALYA**  
film writer and director



Whenever I watch his films, I feel the middle-class fragrance. No one showed the middle-class world better than he did. I love his *Baton Baton Mein* especially, with its middle class-*wala* romance”

**RAAJ SHAANDILYAA**  
film writer and director

class: there will be conflict and there will be resolution too, from birth to death.

Chatterjee's films taught Hitesh Kewalya, who directed the small town comedy *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* (2020), what works for an audience. He would watch these films on Doordarshan as a child. “These were family films with real plots, real performances and concerns of characters with lots of quirk thrown in. And the greatest part about them was that we saw all these films with the family. So as a child I laughed when my mom was laughing or my dad was chuckling... my family was much like the films, a joint family, so it was always a full house and everyone would wait for these films,” he says. Chatterjee's films, along with Hrishikesh Mukherjee and Sai Paranjpye, set the tone for the kind of stories he is trying to tell now. Chatterjee was head of jury at the Short Film Centre alongside International Film Festival of India, Goa, nearly seven years ago. Kewalya didn't win anything, but the fact that Basu *da* might have seen his film and reacted to it gave him a big high.

So crystal clear are the memories of Chatterjee's movies that Amar Kaushik can quote from one of his favourites instantly and vividly. Take the scene in *Rajnigandha* where Deepa (Vidya Sinha) is leaving Mumbai and Navin (Dinesh Thakur) comes to see her off at the station. Deepa waits for Navin to say something to her and express his feelings for her, but he doesn't. She even keeps waiting for his letters in Delhi. But the moment she meets Sanjay (Amol Palekar) again, she melts and realises ‘*Kya sach hai?*’ (Is this true?) and where her heart actually is. Sanjay might miss noticing her saree and always be late but he never forgets to get *rajnigandha* flowers for her. What a beautiful love story of a woman, her hurdles and discoveries about herself!

The agony, uncertainty and acceptance of being a middle-class Indian woman, one half of a young couple just trying their best to live and love in '70s India. That was Basu Chatterjee, the man who taught us how to consume modernity. ■

Ayushmann Khurrana and Rajkummar Rao, who can easily slip in and out of playing Mr Everyman. Raaj Shaandilyaa, the star writer of TV's hit show, *Comedy Circus*, and director of *Dream Girl* (2019), starring Khurrana, says Chatterjee's films carried the “fragrance of the middle class”. He loves *Baton Baton Mein* especially, for its “middle-class *wala*” romance, shown in a humorous way. And the diversity, which was more than just tokenism.

If *Baton Baton Mein* had Christian leads, *Khatta Meetha* had two old Parsis getting married. *Choti Si Baat*'s lead had two first names, Arun Pradeep, but no surname. Life in Delhi, but more so in Bombay, was all about BEST bus queues, local train huddles and coffee-shop breaks. As writer and actor Manu Rishi says: “Middle-class life is all about the conflict of dreams and needs. There's always a comparison with the upper class, that is until one sees a movie like *Khatta Meetha* one Sunday at 6 PM, and

you realise the beauty of the middle class and the lyrics of the wonderful song are embedded in you: ‘*Thoda hai, thode ki zarurat hai?*’ (Have a little, need a little more).”

**E**ACH OF HIS FILMS has a lesson in it, so lightly told as to be almost imperceptible, says Manu Rishi Chadha, who has written dialogues for iconic movies such as *Oye Lucky! Lucky Oye!* (2008). *Choti Si Baat*, for instance: that if there is truth with love, then one falls in love with the truth. There is no pretence, no extrovert or introvert, just a realisation that one's weakness is one's reality. Or *Rajnigandha*: your emotions tend to wander, your relationships weaken, your thoughts get tangled and your decisions can meander, but when you finally take a call, it is with a smile and just in time to keep the relationship from stumbling. That is the wonder of the middle

# INSIDE OUT

Three artists explore the changing relationship among the individual, the city and the home

By Poorna Swami



A DIGITAL DRAWING  
FOR LENTICULAR  
PRINT FROM  
*PAUSE IN A FLICKER*  
BY TANYA GOEL

TO WANDER THE city has become an illicit trade. We are advised to step out only for essential activities, perhaps for a quick bout of daily exercise—but *no dawdling!* To walk with no other purpose than to look upon the passing hours of the city has become for many a constant hankering. The unevenness of pavements, the stench of the fish market, conversations overheard at cafes without permission—these days, what we experience of city life and how we experience it have altogether changed.

Browsing through Tanya Goel's exhibition *Pause in a Flicker*, now on display online at Delhi's Nature Morte gallery, stirs a strange sensation. The images reveal fragments of Delhi from up close, and yet the city seems to appear only as its own ghost. Goel's exhibition is a reworking of her largescale installation designed for Art Dubai 2020. The installation comprises several lenticular prints, 'the type of photograph, usually used in commercial and promotional contexts, which changes as one moves past it, revealing multiple images within a single frame'. For the version of the work displayed in the digital 'viewing room' on Nature Morte's website, Goel has created digital drawings of the lenticular prints, rather than simply displaying photographs of the prints themselves. "Something I was very firm about," she says, "was that if I am going to do a virtual show, I wanted



“  
Cities are built.  
And everything  
that is in them is  
also landscaped and  
manufactured.  
The gardens, the  
roundabouts, even nature  
is an architectural element”

TANYA GOEL artist

Courtesy TANYA GOEL AND NATURE MORTE



it to be something... that was created specifically for a virtual experience.” On a computer screen, each image changes its appearance, depending on where you move your cursor. Goel says she was trying to simulate the physical experience of viewing a lenticular, in which you have to move your body from left to right to see the image differently.

Beneath the debris of abstracted architectural forms, both opaque and translucent, photographic hints of the city emerge. A dahlia in Sunder Nursery. An archway of an unnamed monument framing the silhouette of two idlers. These sites form and dissolve within a blanket of triangles and squares—we never see them clearly. Goel has long been interested in how we see colour. Before the lockdown, she often walked around the city collecting samples from demolition sites and then would break the samples down to their component pigments: cement, brick, tile. Citing Goethe’s theory of the afterimage, she says she is interested in how we see new images with the remnants of something we have seen earlier still etched in our minds. The lenticular, with its shifts in colour, allows her to give this idea form.

In the viewing room, without walking through the city, we still sense it somehow. We see the deceit in its colours. The discomfiture of its arrangement. The tenderness within its concrete skeleton. For Goel, the city’s architecture is manifold. “Cities are built,” she says. “And everything that is in them is also landscaped and manufactured. The gardens, the roundabouts... even nature is an architectural element.” It isn’t that Goel’s images, manufactured themselves, recreate familiar landscapes. Carefully abstracted visions, these instead offer us associations, visual pieces that are distinctly made of urban materials and yet not identifiable as any particular location.

As the images themselves change with our own movement, we are forced to pause and look at them and look again. At the same time, we face the odd conundrum of being dislocated from both the artwork and its subject. The gallery space is itself flattened into a two-

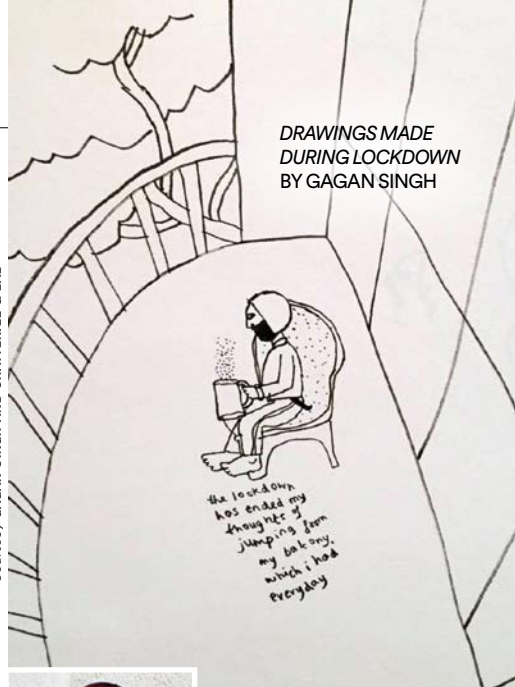
dimensional experience. From within an animated simulation of a white cube on our screens, we navigate an abstracted archive of the city, stripped of the familiar experience of sensing it through sound, smell and proprioception. With each change of gaze, we reorganise in our minds the city’s transience, searching for in-roads back to cover the distances.

For Mumbai-based visual artist Prajakta Potnis, this sudden distancing of the physical body from the city during mass quarantine has forced her to reassess a fundamental relationship in her work: that among the individual, the city and the home. In March, Potnis won the Prameya Art Foundation’s Artist in Residence award, under which she was to work on a project in Paris, supported by Cité Internationale des Arts and Institut Français. The three-month residency was to begin in July, but has been postponed indefinitely due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The project that Potnis had proposed was based on what was a simple idea of walking through the city and looking at it. Her starting point was French writer Charles Baudelaire’s 1863 essay ‘The Painter of Modern Life’, in which he imagines a character now ingrained in the history of art. The flâneur, a person who strolls through the city, observing its every detail without ever interfering, is a persona that has been taken on by artists and writers alike. Although one among the crowd, the flâneur never assimilates into the crowd. In 2012, during another residency in Paris, Potnis had taken on the role of the flâneur to create a work titled *room full of rooms*. In 2020, her plan had been to build on that work.

Finding the almost blasé gaze of Baudelaire’s flâneur problematic, Potnis chose to gaze at Paris through the eyes of the people who inhabited it. She says, “Who looks at whom comes with a lot of layers. Who is that eye who is casually walking through the city?” For Potnis, flâneuring became a way of asking questions around privilege and integration, particularly because she focused on Parisians who had moved to the city from elsewhere. One of her

COURTESY GAGAN SINGH AND CHATTERJEE & LAL



DRAWINGS MADE DURING LOCKDOWN BY GAGAN SINGH



“ I started to draw on the windows, hang wires in my balcony and put up works. The balcony was like an open studio where I painted from 2 at night to 5 in the morning”

**GAGAN SINGH** artist

main subjects was the home of an Algerian man. “A brown woman or black man walking down the street might not be able to do so without constantly looking over their shoulder,” she says.

While the archetypal flâneur inhabits the streets, Potnis connected the public spaces of the city with the privacy of the home. She walked into people’s homes, asked to photograph their possessions and also the view from their window. It was a way of taking on their gaze of the city. Even during the recent lockdown, Potnis says, “The window is our immediate access to the outside world, beyond our screens. You look and wonder for how long people will be wearing masks... You see the migrants and you see your own privilege.”

In a gallery, four slide projections of four persons’ homes play. On the walls, a collage of French and Chinese-made lace create the impression of peeling walls.

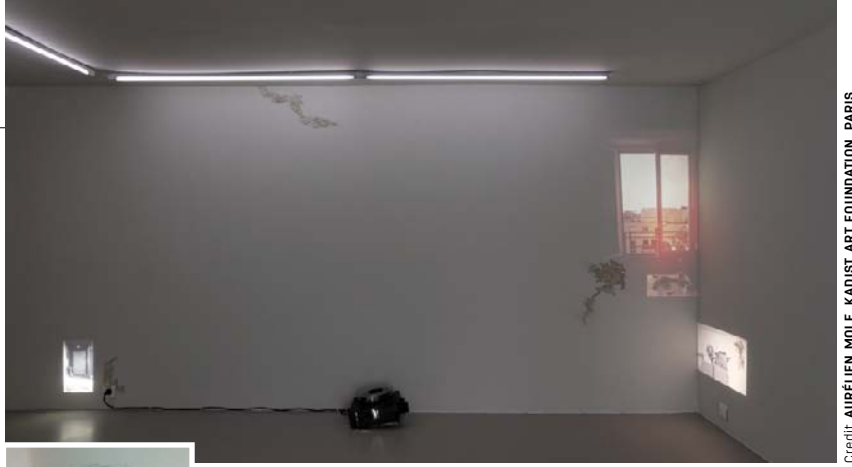
ROOM FULL OF ROOMS  
BY PRAJAKTA POTNIS

The four walls of the gallery themselves signify different kinds of borders and assimilations. The borders between the shelter of the home and the exposure of the city. The fragile ways in which people carry their home with them and how, in doing so, they perhaps remake the city itself.

Although she had anticipated returning to this work with her original method of documentation, Potnis explains that the lockdown in Mumbai has made her “anxious to rethink” this Paris-based work. “The project was so tactile,” she says. “Now, you don’t know how people will react to someone wanting to come into their home.” But another conceptual concern that has arisen for her is what the home and the city mean for each other after this period of immense change. As people have been pushed into their homes because of the pandemic, many have struggled to even reach their homes, while others still have been stuck in toxic homes, she points out. In India, she feels that the home has also become a site of nationalist agenda in recent months. “From their homes, people were clapping and lighting lamps to serve specific political interests,” she says.

Potnis views this time in which people have been pulled away from the streets as one of many “slippages”. A time when the absence of the physical body from city streets has come with political implications. She says of the lockdown, “There are all these arrests of students and people who dissent. And a lot of it is under-reported. And you can’t do much about it. You are no longer allowed to put your body out there. The body is often all you have to stop something from happening.” Potnis’s latest exhibition, *A Body without Organs*, which deals with the body and capitalism, is currently on display on the website of the Mumbai gallery Project 88.

While Potnis continues to contemplate our changed relationships within cities with an outward gaze, Delhi-based artist Gagan Singh found himself turning inward during the lockdown. Earlier, his practice had relied on long walks



Credit: AURELIEN MOLE, KADIST ART FOUNDATION, PARIS



“

A brown woman or black man walking down the street might not be able to do so without constantly looking over their shoulder”

PRAJAKTA POTNIS artist

around the city. He says, “I like walking to a market for kilometres... have a coffee and come back.” During his sojourns, he would find a cafe in which to sit down and draw what he was thinking. But that ritual changed suddenly once the lockdown was announced. “I could not go beyond the balcony,” he says.

The unexpected restrictions on movement stoked what Singh describes as “mental sufferings”. Inside his home, he had to care for his mother who had broken her leg, and outside, lay a fear of contagion. To deal with these sufferings, he began to draw scenes based on his new home-contained life. Without the city to serve as inspiration, he says he felt a “total loss”, a sense of having public spaces “taken away” by the law. So his home invariably became his primary site. “I started to draw on the windows, hang wires in my balcony and put up works,” he says. “The balcony was like an open studio where I painted at 2 AM at night to 5 AM in the morning.”

A selection of Singh’s drawings are on display on the website of the Mumbai gallery Chatterjee & Lal with the title *Drawings Made during Lockdown*. Each drawing is a small pen illustration centred on a figure that resembles Singh himself. Predominantly black-and-white, the drawings are occasionally accented with a stroke of red or orange. Singh says he returned to materials he had not touched for more than a decade. “Dried-up coloured inks, watercolour, paper rolls, I started

to consume everything,” he says.

Although the drawings are a way for the artist to work through ‘sufferings’, they are also obviously funny—silly even. In one drawing, he has sealed everything from the sink to the dog to himself in protective plastic. For Singh, humour is “a way to mock something, thereby critiquing the viewers gaze”. Even though his mother was crying in pain, he chose to make the drawing about her “passing gas”. To rely on humour during distress became both a coping mechanism and a means of commentary. Singh says, “I drew on a banana as the best way to explain the curve which every country was trying to flatten. I guess humour defuses tension.”

The limited scope of Singh’s drawings is striking. He doesn’t look beyond his balcony but instead obsesses over domesticity and its mundaneness. He explains this as a reflection of his current moment. During the lockdown, the city came to be defined for him in terms of its restrictions: colour-coded zones, curfew timings, closures. That in turn limited his source materials and so he resigned to a narrower palette.

Displeased as he seems with these changes, he has also begun to think about the nature of the city that was at the heart of his daily practice. He now wonders if the city as a site inherently lends itself to control. “Maybe that’s why you call it a lockdown,” he says, “you can lock it. You can’t do it to a forest. In a forest, you would just run away.” ■

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# Gibberish Galore

The enduring pleasures of nonsense stories and verse

By Aditya Mani Jha

“I NEVER REALLY THOUGHT of Sukumar Ray as a writer for children,” says Arunava Sinha. Translator of over 40 books of Bangla fiction and poetry, Sinha’s latest work, *Habber-Jabber-Law* (Talking Cub/Speaking Tiger Publishing), is a translation of Sukumar Ray’s *HaJaBaRaLa*, a classic Bangla nonsense story (with some verse-adjacent elements) written in a style that resembles Lewis Carroll’s *HaJaBaRaLa*, although commonly described as children’s literature, has a legion of adult fans as well, thanks to its satire and bite. According to Sinha, “In my generation, our introduction to Sukumar Ray was not through books, but through him being quoted by people around us, mainly adults. Adults would quote bits and pieces of Sukumar Ray to describe their acquaintances. His pronouncements about people were so accurate and judgmental that I can’t imagine what it must be like to read him as a child!”

Clearly, adults are just as susceptible to the pleasures of nonsense as children. To that end, *Habber-Jabber-Law* was always “written and marketed” for adults as well, according to Sinha. This shows in the translation, where Sinha has made some distinctly grown-up jokes, including a sly reference to Edgar Allan Poe and a grammar-conscious goat named ‘Wren and Baartin’. This is a different approach from the last time *HaJaBaRaLa* was translated into English, by Sampurna Chattarji, who included it in her Sukumar Ray anthology *Wordygyurdyboom!* (2004) (a third translation, by Sukanta Chaudhuri, was published by Oxford University Press in 1997).

Chattarji, an accomplished English-language poet, gives us a wonderfully rhythmic rendition, focusing on onomatopoeia, replacing puns with words closest to the original in intent. Sinha however, is more interested in making multicultural puns and allusions aimed at a modern-day adult reader. In a section about a fortune-telling bird, for instance, Chattarji translates ‘Shree Kakeshwar Kuchkuche’ (‘kaak’ is ‘crow’ in Sanskrit and Bangla, so ‘kaakeshwar’ would translate to ‘king of the crows’) as ‘the Right Honourable Gravenus Ravenus’, while Sinha goes for the allusive ‘Corvus Corax’ which is the scientific name of the raven and also resembles the ‘ka’ sounds of the original.

While *HaJaBaRaLa* was quite clearly inspired by Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass*, the realm of nonsense verse has been populated by many other first-rate writers down the ages. *The Puffin Book of Nonsense Verse*, selected and illustrated by

Quentin Blake (the beloved artist behind many illustrated Roald Dahl books), is a good starting point, if one wishes to acquaint oneself with the history and the future of this genre. Blake puts together an outstanding collection of artists-of-gibberish past and present, beginning with the 19th-century poet and illustrator Edward Lear (1812-1888).

Lear was a prolific author of nonsense ditties for children. He specialised in the nonsense limerick, four lines of absurdist fun capped off with a darkly funny or rude conclusion. The five-line set followed the AABBA rhyme scheme (Lear is counted among the pioneers of this form) and was generally accompanied by a humorous sketch drawn by Lear himself. *The Book of Nonsense and Nonsense Songs*, a popular selection of these limericks, begins with this gem:

“There was an old man with a beard,  
Who said, “It is just as I feared!—  
Two Owls and a Hen,  
Four Larks and a Wren,  
Have all built their nests in my beard!”

John Ruskin, one of the pre-eminent critics of the Victorian era and Lear’s contemporary, was moved enough to write: ‘I really don’t know any author to whom I am half so grateful for my idle self as Edward Lear. I shall put him first among my hundred authors.’ In later years, poets like Shel Silverstein and to a lesser extent, Ogden Nash (better known for his other work which although funny, couldn’t be called nonsense) took up Lear’s mantle, becoming prolific and acclaimed creators of nonsense verse.

In the introduction to the volume, Blake writes about how the pleasures of neologism—coining new words—has historically been one of the reasons why authors write nonsense verses (weirdly enough, this tendency if taken to its logical endpoint is a medical phenomenon called ‘jargon aphasia’, wherein the patient speaks in an imaginary language they are utterly convinced makes sense). According to him, ‘There is another aspect of the nonsensical suppose-we-make-it-different experiment that didn’t show itself until later on, in the nineteenth century. It was the idea of making up new words; words like *frabjous* and *vorpal*, which sound as though they mean something but actually don’t. I

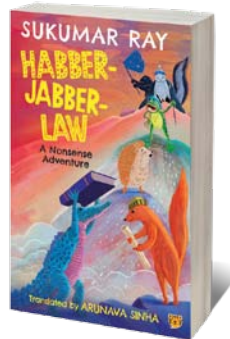


Illustration by SAURABH SINGH



**WHILE HAJABARALA WAS QUITE CLEARLY INSPIRED BY LEWIS CARROLL'S THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS, THE REALM OF NONSENSE VERSE HAS BEEN POPULATED BY MANY OTHER FIRST-RATE WRITERS**

can't help wondering if the urge to do this came into being because printing was becoming more common, words were being organised into dictionaries, and so at least a few writers began to feel that a little anarchy was called for.'

Many of Blake's latter-day and contemporary selections are A-list authors dabbling in nonsense, like movie stars making cameo appearances in a soap opera. And so you have Samuel Beckett, Anthony Burgess and Mervyn Peake with nonsense

verses of their own; Beckett's entry is 'Vladimir's Song' from the evergreen play *Waiting for Godot*: 'A dog came into the kitchen / And stole a crust of bread. / Then cook up with a ladle / And beat him till he was dead.' The most delightfully silly among these cameos is John Updike's 'Pooem'. Imagine the foremost chronicler of suburban American decay, winner of two Pulitzers, letting his hair down and coming up with lines like these (*Upupa epop* is the scientific name for the hoopoe).

*'I, too, once hoped to have a hoopoe  
Wing its way within my scoopoe,  
Crested, quick, and heliotroopoe,  
Proud Upupa epops.'*

The Indian counterpart for Blake's anthology is 2007's *The Tenth Rasa: An Anthology of Indian Nonsense* (Penguin), edited by Michael Heyman, Sumanyu Satpathy and Anushka Ravishankar. Not only does this volume collect and translate nonsense poems from over a dozen Indian languages (including Hindi, Bangla, Assamese, Tamil, Malayalam and so on), it also includes the most famous examples of nonsense lyrics from Bollywood (like Amitabh Bachchan's gibberish section from the *Amar Akbar Anthony* song 'My Name is Anthony Gonsalves') The real value-add for this book, however, are the editor's notes that accompany each poem, as well as Hyman's thoughtful introduction that talks about the methodologies employed by the editor.

This context is invaluable, not just for record-keeping and historicism, but also to keep track of the endless permutations of wordplay and multilingual mischief offered by Indian languages. Take one of Hyman's Assamese selections, a translation of a Nabakanta Barua poem called *Naugao*, which has been translated as the Hinglish neologism 'Ninepur' here — in Hindi, 'nau' means 'nine' while 'gao' means 'village'. But if you're unfamiliar with Assam, you'll probably miss the fun fact of 'Naugao' being phonetically identical to 'Nagaon', which is an Assamese town seventy-odd miles east from Guwahati. In the fictional Naugao or Ninepur, poets are punished severely.

'For composing a verse / The town locks you up tight / In a bamboo-bar cage / Where you're left overnight.'

As the editors point out, the mode of punishment is identical to what Sukumar Ray prescribed in *Article Twenty-One* or *Ekushe Aainin* Bangla (also collected here, translated by Sampurna Chattarji): 'All poets who've ever versified / Are caught and caged quite mortified.' In this way, we see the cross-pollination of nonsense across India.

By the time you're done reading *The Tenth Rasa*, similar patterns emerge across space and time, reaffirming the evergreen nature of the genre—not to mention the rewards offered by a close reading of these verses. Sceptics who'd downplay the possibilities of the genre would do well to remember the words of Wittgenstein, who did more to expand our understanding of language than most: 'Don't for heaven's sake, be afraid of talking nonsense! But you must pay attention to your nonsense.' ■

# Garden Variety Crimes

Reading Agatha Christie and other gardening pleasures



By **Shylashri Shankar**

**F**ED UP WITH the relentless and depressing march of Covid-19, I retreated to tending my garden and thinking about murder. This is an ode to the inimitable Agatha Christie and the role gardens played in her books. Plants, flowers and trees were not only a tool of murder but also living, breathing characters with tales to tell. We know of the

mortal danger of foxglove leaves, mushrooms, oleander tea and horseradish. In *How Does Your Garden Grow*, strychnine is concealed in an oyster and the shells are hidden (in plain sight) as decoration in the garden. But a greater effect is produced by her use of nature as a harbinger of evil. In *Nemesis*, three spinster sisters live in a manor surrounded by an old vineyard, a crumbling greenhouse and an overgrown garden that hides troubled memories and an actual body. In *Dead Man's Folly*, the gardens and woods (modelled on Christie's Devon holiday home, Greenways) provide the setting for a murder during a treasure hunt plotted by her alter ego Ariadne Oliver, a mystery writer.

For someone who spent her childhood in a large house with 'a kitchen garden, the garden proper and the wood', it is not surprising that gardens feature so prominently in her books. The choices made by her characters—of flowers and plants and the type of planting (wild cottage gardens or manicured and ordered ones)—show the British-foreigner divide and social class.

It comes through in the attitude of Belgian Hercule Poirot and the English Jane Marple to gardens. Both have logical minds and are extremely sharp, and both created associations between personalities, emotions and crimes. Both of them could put themselves in the shoes of the murderer. But their views on gardens and nature are diametrically opposed. Miss Marple's knowledge of gardens helps her solve cases. The solution to a case rests on the gardener's appearance on the wrong day; Miss Marple says: 'A real gardener would not come to work on Whit Monday.'

Poirot, though, did not care much for nature. Not for him a ramble in the woods. How, pray, would the gloss on his patent leather shoes survive the stains and scratches of such an expedition? Here we see the distinction between a Continental attitude to gardens—they have to be useful—as compared with an English one—they have to be beautiful. A well-tended neatly

arranged kitchen garden was more likely to bring a murmur of admiration from Poirot, with his mania for order and symmetry taken sometimes to absurd lengths, than a wild English garden with daisies and cosmos and daffodils allowed to run riot. In *Dead Man's Folly*, the chauffeur stops the car and points out the River Helm and Dartmoor in the distance. 'It was clear that admiration was necessary. Poirot made the necessary noises, murmuring Magnifique! several times. Actually Nature appealed to him very little.' It is not surprising that when Poirot fondly contemplates his retirement to a pretty cottage in an English village, he also talks of growing vegetable marrows. Which he does in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*.

Miss Marple, on the other hand, takes a great deal of pleasure in pottering around in her garden in St Mary's Meade. She prefers flowers and 'did not care much for vegetable gardens'. Between tea and her frugal evening meal, Miss Marple liked to work in her garden or indulge in a spot of birdwatching. 'Miss Marple always sees everything,' muses the Vicar in *The Murder at the Vicarage*. 'Gardening is as good as a smoke-screen, and the habit of observing birds through powerful glasses can always be turned to account.' Which Miss Marple does in the book when she solves the murder by examining the goings and comings of the suspects who have to pass her garden to enter the victim's driveway. And when her aches grew with age, Dr Haydock's decree—'No stooping, no digging, no planting—at most, a little light pruning'—was obeyed with great reluctance. Alas, the garden had to be surrendered to a jobbing gardener 'who neglects the sweet peas and the roses in favour of asters and salvias'. What's wrong with that, a non-gardener might ask. Through that one phrase, Christie brilliantly captures the social milieu of Miss Marple's England.

To understand Miss Marple's anguish, we have to understand what these flowers meant for a social class that was rapidly disintegrating. The early half of the 20th century, particularly the inter-war period and the Great Depression was a time of great upheaval in the fortunes of the upper classes in England. Miss Marple lived in a time when the class structure of British society was in turmoil. Great stately homes were being sold off, and the new aristocrats, the captains of industry like Oswald Coote in *The Seven Dials Mystery*, were busy snapping these up. But they came from beginnings as humble as the housekeepers and gardeners who now worked for them. Miss Marple herself belonged to a class of provincial gentlefolk that produced Canons and Deacons and Vicars, but found herself in straitened circumstances. Not surprisingly, she and her class clung to one area, gardens, where they could show off their station in life. Opting to grow



**AGATHA CHRISTIE HERSELF HAD GROWN UP IN A LARGE HOUSE WITH NEATLY SECTIONED GARDENS. AT THE TIME SHE WAS GROWING UP, LIKE EVERYTHING ELSE, GARDENING IN ENGLAND TOO WAS UNDERGOING A REVOLUTION. THE ENGLISH COTTAGE GARDEN STYLE WITH ITS EMPHASIS ON COLOUR, ARRANGEMENT AND FRAGRANCE CONTINUED, BUT NOW THE URBAN WORKING CLASSES WERE COMING TO IT IN GREAT NUMBERS**

fragrant flowers such as roses and sweet pea popular among the Victorian upper classes and scoffing at the jobbing gardener's suggestion of salvia and asters.

Agatha Christie herself had grown up in a large house with neatly sectioned gardens. At the time she was growing up, like everything else, gardening in England too was undergoing a revolution. The English Cottage garden style with its emphasis on colour, arrangement and fragrance continued, but now the urban working classes were coming to it in great numbers. Old world damask roses, lavender, Sweet William, portulaca were popular. So was sweet pea, a popular flower in Edwardian times. The colours echoed the pastel shades so favoured by fashionable ladies, accompanied by a wonderful scent, writes Margaret Willes in *The Gardens of the British Working Class*. In fact, *The Daily Mail* hailed the sweet pea as the most English of flowers and Britain as the nation of gardeners. Brightly coloured borders and beds, peacock and hen topiaries, gnomes and clipped yew hedges were adopted by working-class gardens to ape the fashions of the upper classes. Fields were being converted into Developments, and small gardens had rock gardens.

In *The Murder at the Vicarage*, a rock brought to Miss Marple's Japanese Garden gives her a clue to the murderer's identity. Miss Marple frequently uses plant and garden lore to emphasise evil. In *The Four Suspects*, her knowledge of different varieties of roses

and their names help her crack the case.

In the Poirot books too, Agatha Christie uses the character's attitude to gardens to establish his or her personality and class. In *Dead Man's Folly*, Mrs Folliott, the former owner of Nasse House, is congratulated by her neighbours at the fete given by the new owner. They behave as if it were her house still. One of them compliments her on the rose garden and on cutting back the berberis, an evergreen hedge plant, and how well it showed the blue of the hydrangeas. These conversations later help Poirot figure out the identity of the murderer.

Social snobbery also breeds in the veins of gardeners and the children of the staff. In *A Pocket Full of Rye*, Inspector Neele, whose father was the gatekeeper in a lodge, muses with disapproval on the gardens of the new rich like the Fortescues of Yew Tree Lodge. 'The gardens were highly artificial—all laid out in rose beds and pergolas and ponds, and living up to the name of the house with large numbers of clipped yew hedges. Over on the right, behind the rose pergola, there was a bit of actual nature left, a vast yew tree of the kind one associates with churchyards.' Later in the book, Pat, an Irish peer's daughter is strolling through Yewtree lodge with her black

sheep of a husband; it is his father's house.

*'I hope I'm not hurting your feelings if I say this is quite the nastiest garden I've ever been in...no expense spared. All the right rhododendrons and all the right bedding out done in the proper season, I expect.*

*What would you put in an English garden, Pat?*

*My garden would have hollyhocks, larkspurs and Canterbury bells, no bedding out and none of these horrible yews.'*

*Gardeners show the new rich their lowly place. Lady Coote (who was the daughter of a hardware store owner) has a conversation with MacDonald, the dour Scottish head gardener of Chimneys, which the Cootes are renting for the summer.*

*'I was wondering—could we have some of those late grapes for dessert tonight?'*

*'They're no fit for picking yet,' said MacDonald.*

*He spoke kindly but firmly.*

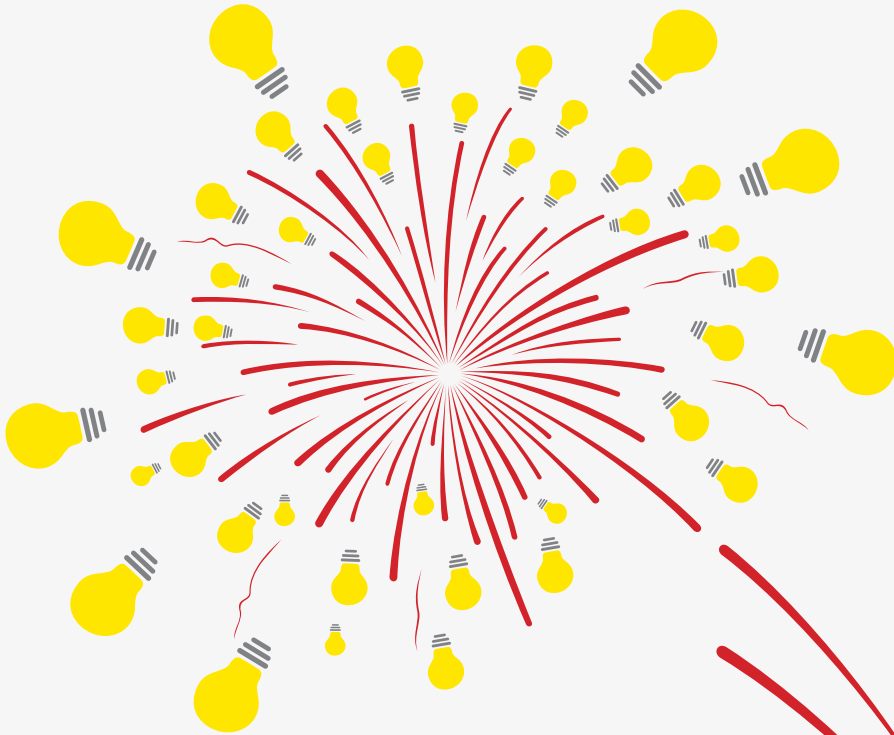
*She plucked up courage and told him she had tasted one yesterday. MacDonald looked at her and she blushed. She was made to feel that she had taken an unpardonable liberty.*

*In a later part of the book, after the Cootes leave and the Earl and his daughter Bundle are back in their house, Bundle has a conversation with MacDonald; 'Let's have some of those grapes in from the far house. I know it's the wrong time to cut them because it always is, but I want them all the same. See?'*

See, entitled insouciance brimming from the page! ■

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# 'Shooting in India Is like Performing at the Colosseum'

**T**HE FILM *EXTRACTION* is based on a graphic comic. It tells the story of Tyler Rake, played by Australian actor Chris Hemsworth (best known for his role as Thor in the Marvel series), a mercenary who must extract and rescue the kidnapped son of an imprisoned international crime lord. The film is packed with action, and its director Sam Hargrave is also its stunt coordinator. The film also features Randeep Hooda and parts of it have been shot in Ahmedabad, Mumbai and Dhaka.

## What can you tell me about shooting in India?

Yeah, I was more recognised there than I am probably in any other place in the world and it was very unexpected. *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) had just come out and it was consumed endlessly over there. So, we would leave our hotel in the morning and we would have 15-20 motorbikes and trucks following us, chasing us down the streets. And then we would get to the set and there would be hundreds of thousands of people watching day to day and cheering at the end of every take. It was sort of like performing at the Colosseum or something. And I got to say, it added an energy to the movie and a support that we couldn't have matched or gotten anywhere else. And the people were so enthusiastic and kind to us. We were concerned about the disruption we were causing with what we were shooting. But the people loved it as sheer entertainment, a kind of street show that they were given each day. I had a fantastic time



*Chris Hemsworth*

and enjoyed plenty of the local cuisine. I have such fond memories of the people and the experiences there.

## What did you get to see in Ahmedabad?

I didn't see much really, we had no time off. I arrived and went straight to rehearsals and we would shoot all day long on the streets, so no sightseeing. But we were right in the thick of these communities, so we were definitely in the atmosphere there. It was the most intense shoot that I have ever been a part of.

## Intense in what ways?

There was a lot of choreography that went into all the fight scenes, and I only had two or three weeks of rehearsals, I wish I had had two or three months. So, when I got to India,

we got right down to it and there wasn't a moment to spare. I have never done so much physicality as was required in this film. It was exhausting but very satisfying, and I am thankful for it.

## What is the lockdown like in Australia?

The kids are keeping us really busy, and anyone with kids can identify with that I'm sure. Attempting to home school, where most of that time is taken up negotiating to do the homework. I have so much more respect for teachers—now more than ever. My mother was a teacher. And so that's been a challenge, we live in a small coastal town in Australia. We are not in a densely populated city. So, I feel for those people who are in apartments and those

situations. But we are very fortunate to have a backyard. Here in Australia we did a pretty good job of flattening the curve and minimising the risk by complying with social distancing and all the other advice that was given. I don't think that we ever got to a place that was as intense as in many places around the world. We were able to go out and exercise and so on. That's unfortunately not the case for a lot of people. But I really appreciate this time that I have with the kids. I have travelled so much over the last 10 years, under normal circumstances, I would have been somewhere in the world doing press tours, so, to do this from home and spend more time with the family, that's a positive.

But this is such a challenging time for everyone. ■



**RAJEEV MASAND**

## Streaming Sequel

**Mahesh Bhatt** came out of a 20-year self-imposed exile from direction to helm *Sadak 2*, but very reliable sources within Bollywood reveal that the film has now been confirmed to go straight to streaming on the Hotstar platform. A sequel to the filmmaker's 1991 hit starring daughter **Pooja Bhatt** and **Sanjay Dutt** will star the original pair and also **Aditya Roy Kapur** and younger daughter **Alia**.

Given Alia's popularity at the box office, industry insiders are surprised that the Bhattas decided to skip a theatrical release and go directly to streaming, but producer **Mukesh Bhatt** has told friends that it did not make sense to wait indefinitely for a theatrical release window. Plus with the now Disney-owned Fox Star Studios being a producing partner on the film, there was some pressure to premiere the film on the Disney-owned Hotstar platform.

While *Sadak 2* will be Alia's next release, her other big film *Brahmastra* will likely not make its intended December 2020 release. The 27-year-old actress has two or three days of shoot left to complete and co-star **Ranbir Kapoor** has at least 12 days or so of work to finish on the project. A song featuring Ranbir was being planned for shoot in July, but the makers are waiting to see if they can go ahead with it under these restricted conditions.

Alia also has a fair bit of shoot left to complete on **Sanjay Leela Bhansali's** film *Gangubai Kathiawadi*, which was originally slated for a Diwali release. The film's production wrapped when the coronavirus pandemic hit, and sets are reportedly still standing, taking up costs dramatically.

The actress, sources close to her reveal, is trying to focus on family, boyfriend Ranbir and fitness. She is making every effort to not obsess over things like incomplete films and pending shooting—things she has no control over.

## The Heartthrob

**Taapsee Pannu**, who has been isolating in her Mumbai apartment with sister **Shagun** and sister-in-law and stylist **Devki**, took to social media to reveal which Bollywood heartthrob all three had a soft spot

for. The actress put up an Instagram story earlier this week of **Hrithik Roshan's** debut film *Kaho Naa... Pyaar Hai* playing on their television screen and wrote: 'This house can't get enough of @hrithikroshan so we start from the beginning.' But it was Hrithik's response to Taapsee that generated the most excitement online. The actor added her original post to his own Instagram story responding with two emojis and this line: 'NOW THts a compliment! Made me smile' (sic).

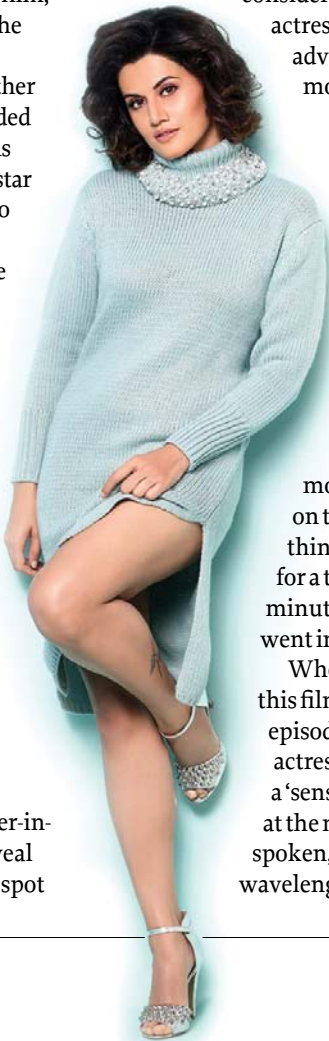
## The Comeback Trail

A brand new thriller series that's all set to drop on a streaming platform shortly marks the comeback of a leading lady who's been on an acting hiatus for some years now. There's considerable buzz around the show because of the actress, but also because it's been created by an advertising-turned-feature filmmaker whose last movie was both a commercial and critical hit.

Not many are aware though that the series was originally conceived as a feature, but it was shelved literally weeks before it was meant to begin filming. The aforementioned filmmaker had managed to rope in an A-list actress to take the lead in the film, but mounting disagreements over creative vision and, reportedly, her acting fee led to her last-minute exit.

Apparently, the film falling apart was both a financial and emotional blow to the famously sensitive filmmaker who took months to recover and move on. He put the film on the backburner and concentrated on other things, including a mythological-action series for a top streamer that also fell through at the last minute. It was another blow for the filmmaker who went into a shell.

When he returned to work, he decided to put this film back on the anvil, but recrafted it as an episodic series. He reached out to the reclusive actress who was on a break when he learnt she was a 'sensitive soul', not unlike himself. She jumped at the material, but also at having found a soft-spoken, compassionate filmmaker whose emotional wavelength she fully matched. ■



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