

NITIN GADKARI: CORONAVIRUS LAB-MADE

DIGITAL ISSUE

Outlook k

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The GULF Boomerang

A 50-year-old dream may go bust. Lakhs will return, without jobs, in India's biggest reverse migration from a world scarred by Covid. The story from Ground Zero: Kerala and Dubai.



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COVID Crisis: Marginalized Children Need Support and We Are Responding

CORONAVIRUS, as a global pandemic, threatens children's rights across the world, including India, and exposes them to potential disruption to their education, healthcare, protection, and overall well-being. Children are missing out on social interaction with friends, peers, family members, teachers, and adult caregivers. In India, children constitute 39% of the population and will face multi-dimensional risks during and post the crisis.

Save the Children India has had a history of being the first responder to any crisis that affects children or their community adversely. The same applies to the current health emergency that has impacted all but some more than the others. All our resources, support staff, partner NGOs, and health experts have joined forces to stand up firmly in solidarity and support of the most affected and children living on the fringes struggling to make their way out of this emergency unscathed.

During this time, it is imperative that we take cognizance of the adverse impact CORONAVIRUS can potentially have on the most vulnerable and marginalized girls and boys, with particular focus on girls. This includes children without family care, specifically children in street situations, children on the move, homeless children, migrant and internally displaced children, refugee children, child laborers, children in child care institutions, children with disabilities, children living with underprivileged single parents (especially with mothers).

While we do not know as of now, how long this is going to last, but what we do know is that we will be the last one to leave.

As the COVID crisis unfolds, Save the Children is mounting a long-term and comprehensive response for marginalized children and their families in India. We are going the extra mile in these uncertain times. COVID-19 has hit us all hard, but the situation is has been the more testing for those living on the fringes of society, the most marginalized children of India, and their communities.

Save the Children has also been undertaking sensitization activities across communities; however, through the adoption of ways to minimize the gathering of people.

Save the Children's Response to COVID-19 in India Is Currently Focused on Multi-Level Risk-Mitigation:

- Bringing Immediate and short-term relief, food security, health and & hygiene kits, and more.
- Enabling continued education, health & nutrition, and protection to most affected children and their families.
- Ensuring long-term support for the most affected communities, including mental health for children, livelihood for caregivers, providing continued education and learning.
- Working with key stakeholders- the government, local bodies, partner NGO's working for the cause of children and policyholders to ensure children's needs are prioritized in these dire times.

Save the Children is mounting one of the biggest humanitarian responses to address the crisis. As of 4 May 2020, more than 35,900 people have been reached out with food kits, hygiene kits have been distributed to more than 8,000 families. More than 450 children have received a supply of Vitamin-A fortified milk.

Close to 46,000 individuals have received support at ensuring their surroundings are hygienic, and efforts are being amped up to ensure their good health. In addition to this, we have also sensitized and spread awareness among more than three lakh people through information dissemination.

We have an enormous task at hand, and we need all the support we can get. If we fail to act now, we will fail to protect a generation. Thus our journey to bring relief to the hardest-hit people and every last child and their family will continue.

**Join the movement, donate online at:
www.savethechildren.in**



**Save the
Children®**



18/5/2020



The Only Constant

VARAM

Kanak R.N.: This refers to the cover story *Things That Got Covided* (May 18). The pandemic has led to the denial of basic human rights to billions of people around the globe regardless of national boundaries, religion, political system or social status. We will have to chart a new path to maintain economic progress. It is too early to predict what this transformation will be until we find a vaccine to end this disease. Hopefully, policymakers will take lessons from this experience and accordingly design policies.

NAINITAL

Vijay Singh Adhikari: Your cover story touched the right chords and reflected that in history the only change is constant—every institution or superstructure, no matter how powerful and effective it might seem, will someday become irrelevant. This apocalyptic scenario is an epoch-making event in the history of humanity as never before has the whole world come to a grinding halt. Epidemics

dismantle the economic and social order. Given the intensity and magnitude of the crisis, neoliberal economies should be concerned. This catastrophe has brought to the fore the failure of private hospitals in providing adequate services. State intervention and investment in healthcare and disaster management and effective monitoring strategies

helped contain the virus in places like Korea and Taiwan. The future lies in equal distribution of resources and reining in the unbridled growth of private capital. I feel it is not the kind of regime that matters, but whether citizens trust their leaders and whether those leaders are competent to deal with crises that matters in the end.

FROM THE Daak Room

Doughty Street, London
December 12, 1838

Respected Sir,

I have given Squeers one cut on the neck and two on the head, at which he appeared much surprised and began to cry, which, being a cowardly thing, is just what I should have expected from him—wouldn't you?

I have carefully done what you told me in your letter about the lamb and the two "sheeps" for the little boys. They have also had some good ale and porter, and some wine. I am sorry you didn't say what wine you would like them to have. I gave them some sherry, which they liked very much, except one boy, who was a little sick and choked a good deal. He was rather greedy, and that's the truth, and I believe it went the wrong way, which I say served him right, and I hope you will say so too.

Fanny Squeers shall be attended to, depend upon it. Your drawing of her is very like, except that I don't think the hair is quite curly enough. The nose is particularly like hers, and so are the legs. She is a nasty disagreeable thing, and I know it will make her very cross when she sees it; and what I say is that I hope it may. You will say the same I know—at least I think you will.

I meant to have written you a long letter, but I cannot write very fast when I like the person I am writing to, because that makes me think about them, and I like you, and so I tell you. Besides, it is just eight o'clock at night, and I always go to bed at eight o'clock, except when it is my birthday, and then I sit up to supper. So I will not say anything more besides this—and that is my love to you and Neptune; and if you will drink my health every Christmas Day I will drink yours—come.

Your affectionate friend,
Charles Dickens

P.S. I don't write my name very plain, but you know what it is you know, so never mind.

📌 **Wouldn't You?** Six-year-old Hasting Hughes sent a letter to Charles Dickens with recommendations for changes to certain characters in his novel *Nicholas Nickleby*. This is an excerpt of Dickens's response.

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In conversation with



Satish Padmanabhan
Executive Editor, Outlook

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Send in your questions for Dr. Tharoor and don't forget to tune in.



The Slump

LUCKNOW

M.C. Joshi: This refers to your cover story *Is My Job Safe?* (April 27). From end-March onwards, most companies have either sacked employees or asked them to go on indefinite leave without pay. Some have slashed salaries by as much as 85 per cent. Millions of jobs will remain at risk unless we manage to come up with a vaccine or cure.

NAVI MUMBAI

C.K. Subramaniam: The pandemic has inflicted colossal damage on an already weakened economy. The industrial ecosystem is collapsing, which has rendered many jobless. Gloomy forecasts by several agencies point to a bleak future for the country's manufacturing sector. The problems of industries are manifold, ranging from credit availability, payment of fixed costs and fund crunch to difficulty in encashing their assets to maintain solvency. The non-availability of labour is a challenge as migrants are scrambling to return home. In these circumstances, we need to think big to lift the economy.



KANNUR

K.R. Nambiar: This refers to the story *Front-end Leaks* (May 11). It is easier to blame retail investors for chasing higher returns and not taking in to account the risks. Retail investors trust fund managers and expect 0.5-1 per cent higher returns than fixed deposits and preservation of the principal amount. Fund managers are professionals expected to weigh risks before buying debt instruments. In the case of Franklin Templeton, fund managers chased returns without due diligence and bought low-quality debt instruments. No one can tell with certainty as to when investors will get their money back and what amount. Retail investors, as always, bear the brunt and get blamed. I am afraid the "front-end leaks" may close the tap of fund flows by retail investors to Franklin Templeton mutual funds in India.

BANGALORE

H.N. Ramakrishna: This refers to *Got an Aspirin?* (May 11). Aspirin will not resolve the Madhya Pradesh imbroglio. Its long-term use leads to internal bleeding and that is neither good for the



individual nor the party. Scindia did not walk out Congress for altruistic reasons—he and his followers were power-hungry and the Congress could not fulfill his appetite. As has been the case in Karnataka, Goa and other states, BJP dangled carrots in front of elected representatives, whose thirst for power and scant concern for the public that elected them is unfortunate. Citizens have shown their unhappiness in bypolls by not voting for

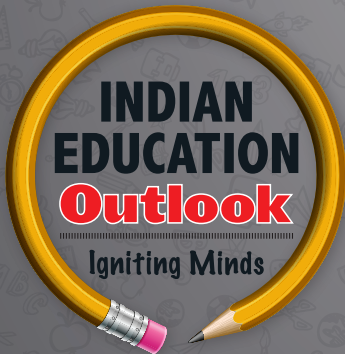
these turncoats. Long-time party loyalists rightfully refuse to accept the entry of turncoats. These incidents prove the need to urgently modify the anti-defection law, with citizens' right to recall their elected representatives. Why should we bear the cost of byelections due to the greed of legislators?

BHANDUP

Gundu K. Maniam: This refers to *Rishi Kapoor Diary* (May 18). The star remained jovial and determined to live life to the fullest right through the two years of his treatment across two continents. Family, friends, food and films remained his focus and everyone who met him during this time was amazed at how he did not let his illness get the better of him. He was grateful for the love of his fans that poured in from the world over. I am sure that he would like to be remembered with a smile and not tears. His loss is devastating for the Hindi film world. RIP Rishi! 📺

#indianeducationconclave

Outlook



Anand Kumar
Founder, Super 30

Interview

with



Giridhar Jha
Senior Editor, Outlook



HOW TO STAY FOCUSSED ON YOUR IIT-JEE GOAL DESPITE **COVID-19** DISRUPTION

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May 17, 2020 (Sunday), At 6 PM



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PTI

The Indian Railways resumed passenger train operations partially from May 12, weeks after suspending services due to the lockdown. But scores of passengers who reached their destinations were left stranded on the roads outside railway stations with no transport available for onward journeys.



The Gujarat High Court has declared state minister **Bhupendrasinh Chudasama's** election in 2017 as void on grounds of malpractice. Congress candidate Ashwin Rathod has challenged the victory of BJP's Chudasama—the education, law, and parliamentary affairs minister—by 327 votes, saying the returning officer had rejected 429 postal ballots illegally.



Maruti Suzuki India's board has approved supply of a derivative of the Vitara Brezza to Toyota Kirloskar Motor, which will then sell the vehicle under its own brand name. Toyota and Suzuki had executed an MoU in February 2017 for mutual supply of products and components among other things.

Ball's In Other Court

Bureaucracy to judge merits of its own earlier decisions

Naseer Ganai in Srinagar

TWO recent developments in Jammu and Kashmir appeared as small, almost invisible blips on the radar, escaping major public scrutiny in a country battling a mystery virus and in lockdown mode. First, the Jammu and Kashmir High Court left it to the bureaucracy to take a final decision on ending a nearly 150-year-old tradition of shifting the capital twice each year known as the 'Darbar Move'. Then the Supreme Court also left it to the bureaucracy to decide whether the security scenario was good enough to restore 4G telecom services in Jammu and Kashmir.

In both cases, the judiciary has faced criticism for allegedly abdicating its responsibility, and asking the bureaucracy to judge its own earlier decisions. "It is strange that courts have come up with long observations but have asked bureaucracy to take final decisions," says CPI-M leader and former legislator Mohammad Yousuf Taragami. He was particularly harsh on the 4G issue. "The Prime Minister is a strong advocate of digital India but bureaucrats are excluding J&K from this dream. They are creating all these issues that force people to move to courts to seek justice. We trust Supreme Court for its judgments and the bureaucrats cannot be our judges," Taragami adds.

Ever since the Centre stripped Jammu and Kashmir of its special status, a large section of Kashmiris have been critical of the government's subsequent moves, including the ban on 4G services and the discarding the practice of relocating the capital from Srinagar to Jammu in winters and vice versa for the summers. Every year, in May and October-Novem-

ber, the capital and secretariat shift from one capital city to the other city to escape the extreme weather conditions in the two regions. The summer capital opens in Srinagar in May and the winter in Jammu in October.


A division bench of the high court called for discarding the practice, "given the magnitude of the problems which arise..." and "the expenses involved". The court described the Darbar move, started in 1872 by then ruler Maharaja Gulab Singh, as a practice that nurtures inefficiency and

UMER ASIF



CAPITAL GAINS File photo of workers loading boxes of documents during a Darbar shift

leads to lack of governance.

In the 4G case, the top court left the final decision to a special committee headed by the Union home secretary. While the government had claimed that high speed internet will lead to increase in terrorism, the petitioners said that most cases of militancy happened when there was no internet in the state. On August 4, 2019, a day before the government revoked Article 370 of the Constitution and bifurcated Jammu and Kashmir into two Union territories, the government had imposed a communication blockade. It was later restored but internet services has confined to 2G low speed connectivity. 

RETURN TO SWADESHI



Manish Tewari
Lok Sabha MP, Congress



Seshadri Chari
Veteran Swayamsevak
and National Executive
Committee Member, BJP



Bhavna Vij-Aurora
Political Editor,
Outlook



Puneet Nicholas Yadav
Assistant Editor,
Outlook



Mirza Arif Beg
Special Correspondent,
Outlook

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on

May 16, Saturday, 6:00 PM



Nurses at Rajiv Gandhi Government Hospital, Chennai, pay tribute to Florence Nightingale on May 12, her 200th birth anniversary, celebrated as International Nurses Day

PTI



JITENDER GUPTA



Vande Bharat Mission is one of the largest government operations to get back Indians stranded abroad due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Union civil aviation minister Hardeep Singh Puri spoke to Preetha Nair about the logistical challenges involved in the evacuation and the plans ahead.

How has the Vande Bharat Mission fared so far?

→ There are three separate and distinguishable components to this exercise. One is the identification of the people who want to come back. There are about nine million Indians working in the Gulf countries alone. If you take into account Indians in the US and UK, that's a much larger number. We did an exercise initially with the ministry of external affairs primarily through India's missions abroad. They came to the conclusion that 190,000 of our citizens in those countries find themselves stranded.

How did you work out the modalities to get them back?

→ We got off to a good start and it's the just the beginning. This is not an arrangement where the final details are cast in iron; we will review it as we go along. When we started out, we were clear that 190,000 is a conservative number. If you have to bring them all back, it will become a major exercise. First, we had to prioritise among those who wanted to come back. No matter what precautions you take, international travel at the time of a pandemic is fraught with risks. Various measures such as disinfecting the aircraft and pre-boarding screening at the point of evacuation were in place. Asymptomatic passengers are a risk factor, but we want to minimise the risk of spreading the infection. The most important thing is that the receiving state governments must have quarantine arrangements in place.

How long will it take to evacuate all the stranded people?

→ It will take time. In the first week, we are only looking at evacuating 14, 800 people and 64 flights are in service. I hope to increase the numbers greatly and also open up civil aviation slowly. We will improvise as we go along.



INTERVIEW

'Airlines Can't Operate on Free Tickets'

Many of those who lost jobs in the Gulf countries are unable to afford paid evacuation.

→ We are always sympathetic to our countrymen no matter where they are. That's why we are doing this great social service. But you can't run an airline operation on the basis of free tickets. Airlines is a capital-intensive industry. Air India cannot run on government subsidy. Who will carry out the evacuation if Air India is sold? May be the private airlines will carry it out. We are taking the plane empty on one way and charging a reasonable amount while coming back. We are not charging exorbitant amount.

Will you rope in private airlines for the rescue operation?

→ Some of the private airlines have sent their crew on leave without pay. There is an element of public service involved. We will be open to the idea if they are keen

What about NRIs stuck in India?

→ Operations have started for UK, Singapore and selected destinations in the US. There are a few glitches. For example, a flight went to San Francisco, but the American authorities did not want the students to come back as the universities are closed. Countries in the Middle East are not taking back anyone other than their citizens. As far as UK and the US are concerned, there is no problem.

Rating agency Crisil says Air India disinvestment looks uncertain due to the COVID-19 crisis.

→ The disinvestment process is on track. Everybody is entitled to their views. These are all back of the envelope calculations. At this stage, it's difficult to make an assessment of how much the loss is. It will depend on how long the lockdown continues. During the lockdown, there is no revenue. We took loans from banks and we have to repay the loans or the interest. The need of the hour for different segments of the economy is to survive.

CHAMBAL

Echo In The Ravines

Jeevan Prakash Sharma

A curious mystique envelops the lives of famed dacoits who have haunted the ravines of the Chambal—a mixture of terror, awe and respect, balancing acts of altruism and bloody crime. Such are the emotions evoked when one names Man Singh and Lakhan Singh. Such, despite a career in kidnappings and murders, is the case with Mohar Singh, who died on May 5.

Ruling the ravines from 1958 to 1972, Mohar Singh was the last of a generation of bandit chieftains whose reign of terror still haunts the memories of locals.

“In 1972, when Jayaprakash Narayan suggested to the then PM Indira Gandhi that he should negotiate terms for the surrender of Chambal’s dacoits, she had said she would agree only if Mohar Singh, too, gave up arms,” archaeologist K.K. Muhammed says.

While three state police—UP, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan—put a reward of Rs 12 lakh on him, villagers respected him for helping the poor—doling out dowries as well as money. “I had told my 100-plus men that if they had even touched a woman, they would be shot,” Mohar Singh had told



Outlook in September 2019.

Most men who disappeared into the craggy ravines of Chambal were impelled by caste-ridden injustice and police atrocity. Mohar Singh’s journey has a similar backstory.

A member of the Gurjar community from Mehgaon village in Bhind district of MP, his relatives deprived him of his rights to ancestral farmland. He fought a legal battle but the police favoured the rich. It was the last straw. When most chieftains rebuffed on account of his youth, Mohar decided to go it alone, recruiting local youths. The focus on petty kidnappings changed to bigger prey as the gang grew in numbers.

His biggest quarry, which shook the entire nation in the mid ’60s, was the kidnapping of a statue smuggler from Delhi. Mohar decided to surrender in

Mohar Singh with a portrait of him in his prime

1972, with a pre-condition that he wouldn’t be awarded the death sentence. Subsequently, his sentence was commuted to a 20-year jail term. Good behaviour earned him an early release in 1980. He settled down as a farmer, dabbling in politics on a couple of occasions. He also acted in a film on his life, *Chambal Ke Daku*.

Few months before his death, he had written a letter to the PM Narendra Modi for the restoration of the Bateswara temple, a historic structure in the ravines constructed by the Gurjara-Pratiharas. “Many of his stories will become folklore now,” says Anurag Gurjar, president, Akhil Bhartiya Veer Gurjar Mahasabha. □

brevis



Bob Dylan has shared that his 39th studio album—*Rough And Rowdy Ways*—will release on June 19, his first of original songs since 2012’s *Tempest*.



French Resistance member **Cecile Rol-Tanguy**, who risked her life during World War II by working to liberate Paris from Nazi occupation, has died. She was 101.



Roy Horn of Siegfried & Roy, the duo whose magic tricks astonished millions until Horn was injured in 2003 by one of the act’s famed white tigers, has died. He was 75.



Yogendra Singh, founder of JNU’s sociology centre, has died at 87 at his daughter’s home in New Delhi. He had a cardiac arrest.



Dalit Ezhilmalai, a leader of the Pattali Makkal Katchi and former health minister in the Vajpayee government (1998–99), has died. He was 74.

Mixed Shots



IN THE BEDROOM, DEER?

EVERYTHING is possible in Mumbai, they say. You finish your supper, wash your dishes and retire for the night...only to find your roof crashing down and a deer next to you!

That's what happened to Savita Singh and her family, who live in a slum adjacent to IIT Bombay. But the herbivore was not parkouring on rooftops before it landed in their single-room house—it was fleeing a hungry leopard. The deer, presumably relieved to have escaped the cat's clutches, remained calm and was easily rescued. □

MERA INDIAN-AMERICAN MAHAN

IF Indian-Americans can set high standards of achievement, they can also plumb the depths of chicanery. Rajvinder Singh, who runs Apna Bazar in California, has been charged for price gouging during the pandemic after the governor's emergency declaration. But he is not a patch on Amardeep Singh, the first man to be charged under USA's Defense Production Act during the pandemic. He had hoarded and was reselling 5.5 tonnes of PPE at a mark-up of 1,328 per cent! Now only if they had stayed back in India—they could have easily caught a flight out of the country before the law caught up with them. □

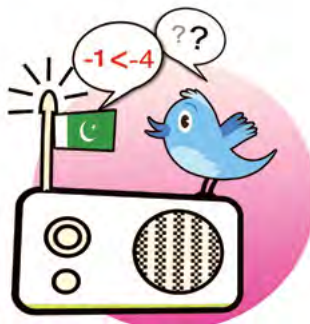


SNAKE SUSHI?

PERHAPS he took inspiration from a Bear Grylls show or maybe he mistook it for a meaty noodle. When an inebriated man returning from a liquor shop spotted a rat snake in Mustur village in Karnataka, he wrapped it around his neck and bit it to death. Some claim he was angry at the non-venomous reptile for crossing his path. The man is now under arrest. Hopefully, nobody is crossing his path in jail. □

UNDER THE WEATHER

AFTER the Indian Meteorological Department began announcing weather forecasts for the Pakistan-occupied territories of Gilgit-Baltistan and Muzaffarabad, its Pakistani counterpart tried to get back by announcing the weather for Ladakh. Only, it botched up by declaring a maximum of -4C and minimum of -1C. The land of Aryabhata immediately pounced upon this mathematical blooper (among negative integers, the number closest to zero is the largest) and made jokes about Pakistan's "minimum" IQ on Twitter. If only they had paid as much attention in maths class as to plotting revenge. □



The WHO and the UN's postal agency have released a commemorative postage stamp on the 40th anniversary of the eradication of smallpox, with the head of the global health body expressing gratitude to top Indian-origin UN official Atul Khare. In May 1980, the 33rd World Health Assembly issued its official declaration that "the world and all its peoples have won freedom from smallpox." It happened on the back of a 10-year WHO-spearheaded global effort that involved thousands of health workers around the world administering half a billion vaccinations. The stamp recognises the global solidarity in fighting smallpox and honours millions of people working together. Until it was wiped out, smallpox had plagued humanity for 3,000 years, killing 300 million people in the 20th century alone.



"Only 20 people are allowed to gather for a funeral because the spirit has already left the body. Thousands are allowed to gather near an alcohol shop because the shops have spirits in them."

Shiv Sena MP **Sanjay Raut** on the government easing restrictions on the sale of alcohol



Episode - 3

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**ACTOR
TAAPSEE
PANNU**
on her career in films
and future plans

in conversation with



Mitrajit Bhattacharya
Columnist & Author



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JITENDER GUPTA



Union minister for MSME, road transport and highways **Nitin Gadkari** talks to **Bhavna Vij-Aurora** about the way forward to revive the economy post-COVID-19. Excerpts from the interview:

PM Narendra Modi has announced a Rs 20 lakh crore economic package to help India become self-reliant post-COVID-19. Is it as per your expectations?

→ We have got more than our expectations, especially

with regard to MSMEs. I thank the PM for this historic package. More than 11 crore workers employed in small, cottage and rural industries have been given relief. The MSMEs will not only survive, but continue to grow. Their contribution to the country's economy is 29 per cent, and it will increase in the years to come. I have interacted with more than 4 crore stakeholders in the past 20 days. It has helped me understand

'The World Is Wary of China. It's Good For Our Country.'

their ground-level problems better. Based on our discussions and their written representations, we identified the problems and made recommendations to the finance minister and the PM. The package will give the much-needed push, creating an atmosphere of positivity and confidence.

What are their main concerns?

→ People are worried about their future. In a situation like this, it is the duty of all stakeholders—leaders, ministers, media—to encourage people and inculcate confidence. In the game of life, sometimes you get success and sometimes defeat. It is in times like these that you have to fight and win.

People are fighting two wars—one against the coronavirus and the other for their survival.

→ This coronavirus is an artificial virus, prepared in the laboratory. That's why we don't even have any vaccine or a perfect detection system. But in due course, I feel, we will have a vaccine.

So, we have to create confidence in the minds of the people to fight with the virus and fight the economic war. There are serious problems that vary from state to state,

region to region, industry to industry. Maximum problems are related to banks, some are related to payments, some to expansion, to adopting new technology.... Now, migrant labour is also one of the problems. We are discussing with all stakeholders—Assocham, CII, plastic association, chemical association, chambers of commerce—and trying to resolve their problems.

Are you convinced that it is a man-made virus?

→ As far as my knowledge is concerned, it is not a natural virus. It was prepared in the laboratory. That is the reason our medical experts and scientists don't have any solution yet. There is no answer anywhere in the world—from the US to China. Everyone is doing research and finding out ways to fight it.

We are trying to ease the lockdown and open up industries, but the migrants are going back home. How will you open up without labour?

→ Industry is not 100 per cent dependent on migrant labour, which mainly comes from Bihar, UP, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh due to lack of employment in their area, and goes to Maharash-

tra, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. Now industry is open, but migrant workers are not ready to reside there. They want to go back to their homes. This mentality is due to fear and lack of confidence. However, after some small-scale industries reopened, a lot of people want to return. We have started work on the national highways and there is 75-80 per cent traffic on the road. The work has to start, but the entire world has to understand the new art of living by taking coronavirus into consideration. Mandatory use of masks, maintaining more than a metre's distance between two persons, hand-washing and sanitising have to be followed stringently.

So we have to learn to live with coronavirus....

→ Yes, because we don't know any date on which we will be free from this and it is unpredictable. We have to learn how to fight corona and live with it at the same time.

Investment in infrastructure is critical to revive the economy. How will you get funds for the big projects?

→ We need more liquidity in the market. Without liquidity, the business cycle cannot run. It is time for the country to invest the most in infrastructure—road projects, shipping, ports, inland waterways, railways, aviation, power. In road projects, we are successfully using private-public investment. In my last tenure, with three ministries—water resources, roads, shipping and ports—we awarded works worth more than Rs 17 lakh crore. Sagar-mala project alone was worth Rs 16 lakh crore. Most part of the project is already completed. Now in the road sector, we are going for

Bharatmala, and we are trying to get funds from various sources, including FDI, pension funds, insurance funds, World Bank and ADB. We have already maintained road construction at the level of 30 km per day and, in next two years, we have fixed our target—it's a target, not a commitment, that we will start works on projects worth more than Rs 15 lakh crore. For this, we need foreign investment for the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI).

Do you think other countries, also battling coronavirus, will be willing to invest?

→ Of course. There is a lot of surplus in the Japanese and the US economy. Even South

"We are asking ambassadors of various countries how we can help them set up industries in India. The states are ready. Many are changing their laws."

Korea has surplus. And now the majority of investors want to invest in a secure way. NHAI has AAA rating; it's a world standard company and people have faith in it. We have assets and our present income at the end of the year will come to Rs 40,000 crore. By building logistics parks, roadside amenities, bus ports and green express highways, our target is to increase the income to more than Rs 1 lakh crore. We can monetise on the basis and get the money. Even Indian banks and agencies like LIC are interested to invest in NHAI. So we do not have a problem of resources at present.

With China under fire from the world for its handling of

coronavirus, do you think that's a business opportunity for India?

→ Hundred per cent. It's a blessing in disguise. The Japanese prime minister has made a statement offering incentives to his people who have invested in China to shift out. The entire world is wary of China and this is a golden opportunity for India. Our MSMEs can upgrade the technology and increase export potential. They can attract foreign investment too. We are specially concentrating on this issue and interacting with ambassadors of various countries, asking them how we can help them in setting up industries in different parts of India. The state

governments are also ready now, and many of them are changing their laws. The total atmosphere is very favourable for investment and if we get some foreign investment at this time, it is going to increase our exports, reduce our imports and create more employment potential.

As part of the central team, you are overseeing coronavirus management in some districts of Maharashtra. Why is the fight so difficult there, especially in Mumbai?


→ Mumbai is the commercial capital of India and a lot of people come from abroad. Also, the Nizamuddin incident complicated the situation in Mumbai. The

Maharashtra government is trying its best. This is not the time for politics. We are also supporting them. Together we are trying to see how we can stop the spread of coronavirus. But it is a difficult task as the situation is very bad. In due course, I am confident that we will be able to stop it.

MSMEs generate huge employment. How are you planning to deal with job losses?

→ There is a committee working on it. We are trying our best to resolve the issue. Japan has sanctioned 12 per cent of their GDP for fighting against coronavirus. The US has sanctioned two trillion dollars. You cannot compare our economy to theirs. The state governments don't have money to pay next month's salaries. Industry doesn't have money to pay labour. The banking system is also under stress. Bharat sarkar is also facing problems as we have already reduced our revenue. All stakeholders need to come together, think together and work together. There needs to be coordination, cooperation and communication to march ahead.

A positive outcome of the lockdown is that pollution levels have gone down....

→ Also, more than 1,50,000 people die in road accidents every year in India. This number has reduced. So economy, ethics and ecology, these are the important things. Economy and ecology need to go together. I have talking about biofuels for the past 10-12 years. Today everyone has accepted it. So ethanol, methanol, bio-diesel, bio-CNG, electric and hydrogen fuel cell is the future. 



CROSS CONNECTION
Congress leaders interact during a video call.

PROS AND CONG

Congress prescription for Centre a bitter pill for party-led states

Puneet Nicholas Yadav

ON May 5, when the Centre decided to hike excise duty on petrol and diesel by Rs 10 and Rs 13 respectively, the Congress's media cell chief Randeep Singh Surjewala was quick to slam the move. "To fleece people in this fashion is economically anti-national," Surjewala said while reminding the Centre of the hardship faced by "common Indians" because of the coronavirus lockdown. For added dramatic effect, he also claimed that the new hike would allow the Narendra Modi-led government "to loot Rs 1.60 lakh crore annually from common people".

The steep hike in excise duty on petrol

and diesel has come amid growing concerns among common citizens over retrenchment in workplaces and massive job losses in the informal sector during the ongoing lockdown. When clubbed with the earlier hike effected on March 14, the increased excise duty on petrol and diesel now stands at Rs 13 and Rs. 16 respectively. The opprobrium over the hike, thus, seemed warranted.

However, while criticising the Centre for an "economically anti-national" activity, Surjewala struggled to answer whether Congress-ruled states would reduce VAT and service tax they levy on fuel to soften the blow on the aam aadmi. Surjewala's discomfiture, in effect, made it evident that his party's governments in a handful of states had hit an economic hurdle.

In early April, interim Congress president Sonia Gandhi had constituted an 11-member consultative group of party leaders to outline a vision for dealing with the ongoing crisis. This group, chaired by former Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh and with Rahul Gandhi as a key member, was tasked with making sector-specific suggestions to the Centre for India's economic revival in the post-lockdown period. The belief within the party, say Congress sources, was that while Modi would discard the panel's suggestions, Congress-ruled Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Punjab and Puducherry could implement these measures drawn out by the party's brain trust of economic and policy experts like Singh, P. Chidambaram and Jairam Ramesh. Rahul's 'in conversation' series with domain experts such as Raghuram Rajan and Abhijit Banerjee was supposed to add heft to these policy prescriptions.

However, with states forced to divert a large chunk of financial resources towards sprucing up health infrastructure and relief efforts and the Centre unwilling to loosen its purse strings for releasing financial assistance, the Congress's grand plans of brinkmanship through better governance have gone awry.

A clear indicator of this was the fact

that while Surjewala was busy attacking the Centre, Congress-ruled Punjab, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh hiked VAT on petrol and diesel. In Punjab, for example, the price of petrol and diesel shot up by Rs 2 per litre while in Rajasthan, VAT was increased twice in the past 48 days, resulting in a six per cent hike in the tax on petrol and five per cent on diesel. Of course, other BJP and non-NDA/non-UPA states too increased VAT on fuel but the decision of Congress-ruled states to follow suit took the sting out of Surjewala's attack on the Modi government.

A member of the Congress consultative group tells Outlook that suggestions given by the panel like stimulus package for MSME sector or direct cash transfers and free rations for 50 per cent of the population are for the Centre to implement. "We had hoped that our states would be able to adopt some of these measures at their level

their depleting financial resources and lack of support from the Centre.


Manpreet Singh Badal, Punjab's finance minister tells *Outlook*, "Under the GST regime, states have limited revenue sources and are dependent on the Centre for GST dues and other assistance... if the Centre decides to hold back our dues or only part with nominal assistance, how do we manage our affairs, particularly when the fight against COVID-19 has to be fought first at the district and state level?" Badal says his state is presently "losing Rs. 150 to 160 crore daily in revenue" and foresees a cumulative loss of Rs. 20,000 crore this fiscal if things don't improve fast. Punjab, says Badal, has no other option but to increase levies that are under the state's control. The Centre, he says, is yet to release Punjab's GST share of Rs. 1322 crore due for the last quarter.

Besides VAT on fuel, the other big

because of the lockdown; the hike in excise was necessary to cut our losses," says a close aide of Gehlot.

In Chhattisgarh, the lockdown has had an ironical effect on the Bhupesh Baghel-led government. When Baghel led the Congress to victory in the state polls in December 2018, a key manifesto promise made by his party was to impose purna nashabandi (total prohibition) in Chhattisgarh where around 35 per cent of the population is reportedly addicted to the amber stuff as per an AIIMS study. Now, Baghel has directed home delivery of alcohol at an additional charge of Rs. 125 per delivery. Tipplers in Chhattisgarh have also been allowed to purchase 5,000 ML of alcohol in a single order.

Punjab, the land of the 'Patiala Peg', is caught in a stalemate between the state's cabinet and the chief secretary on finalising its new excise policy for 2020-2021. A meeting of the state's cabinet ministers with chief secretary Karan Avtar Singh recently ended with most ministers, led by Badal, staging a walkout after they disagreed with the top bureaucrat's "pro-contractor" suggestions. Badal has now urged Amarinder Singh to take a call on the new excise policy and decide if the duty on alcohol, which contributed Rs 5,200 crore to the state's kitty last fiscal, should be hiked. With only 1.5 per cent of the state's over two lakh industrial units currently under operation, Punjab is staring at a major economic crisis if the state's doesn't take urgent corrective measures. The Punjab CM has now set up a panel steered by Montek Singh Ahluwalia to suggest a roadmap for economic recovery.

When asked what instructions the party's consultative group had given to Congress chief ministers for reviving the economy in their respective states, Rahul Gandhi had recently told reporters during an online press conference that the group will only "assist the states and not give any orders". The Wayanad MP, however, urged the CMs to be "compassionate" while contemplating any hike in taxes and levies. With their own finances in doldrums and central assistance nowhere on the horizon, Congress chief ministers clearly have a tough task ahead while Modi and finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman hold on tightly to their purse strings. 



"If the Centre decides to hold back our dues how do we manage our affairs?"

MANPREET SINGH BADAL
Finance Minister, Punjab

"To fleece people in this fashion is economically anti-national"

RANDEEP SINGH SURJEWALA
Congress media cell chief



but for these to be implemented they need financial resources which are, unfortunately, very limited currently."

A recurring complaint by non-NDA ruled states over the past two months has been that the Centre has been miserly and even discriminatory while releasing their share of the GST dues and devolution of taxes. Congress chief ministers Amarinder Singh, Bhupesh Baghel, Ashok Gehlot and V. Narayansamy have also written to Modi requesting early release of these dues along with a financial assistance package but to no avail. In their interaction with Sonia Gandhi, the chief ministers have repeatedly referred to

revenue generator for the states is excise duty on liquor. With the Centre easing lockdown rules, various states have allowed sale of alcohol while maintaining social distancing (more in theory than practice). The states latched on to this window of opportunity. Gehlot's government in Rajasthan hiked duty on liquor by 10 per cent (a modest increase compared to the 70 per cent hike ordered by Arvind Kejriwal in Delhi), enabling the state to earn an additional Rs 800 crore in revenue. "The annual excise collection from alcohol in Rajasthan is around Rs 15,000 crore but the first month of the new financial year saw zero sales



EDUCATION 2.0: A FORCED LEAP INTO DIGITAL LEARNING

Dr. Madhu Chitkara
Co-founder-Chitkara Education Trust

Education sector has taken a major hit in the current global scenario impacted by Covid-19. The positive is that the sector has found a new and strong footing on digital platform. The situation is showing early signs of restoration of campus education after two months of shutting down of all schools, universities and institutions following Coronavirus. Educationists and academicians believe that learning can never stop, and campus education is now reinventing itself on the virtual world. The educationists have had to find alternative realm of teaching in reshaping the education in the country and is giving a blueprint to it by **Dr. Madhu Chitkara**, an eminent academician and one of the co-founders of Chitkara Education Trust.

How do you see the present scenario of education sector amid this pandemic?

The scenario does not look good for anybody in the world. It is the challenge for educational institutions as they have a young crowd. Students are at home now and it is difficult for us and the parents. We are forced to shift to the alternative mode of teaching that was not a regular feature. Thanks to the technology, we are all still well connected. Five years ago, we tried to bring in online courses in our university. We have also started online assessment and teaching to develop new things within our faculty members and students. All the students are using e-learning platforms during this crisis. The attendance has seen a huge surge for e-classes. So, we have been able to seize control of the current scenario. We did the first semester in second week of March and during lockdown 2nd semester was to be performed online, but there was

problem with Jammu, Kashmir and North-East students due to poor connectivity. Recorded lectures had been provided to them. Final year students are appearing for the papers online and their placement interviews are being conducted online.

18th May onward Government is expected to impose Lockdown 4.0. What will be the impact of such a long period lockdown on campus education?

I am worried about the students. As lockdown stretches students could panic. They are already restless because the lockdown started right at the time of their annual examination, admission and placement. I cannot believe a time like this has befallen on mankind. However, for the academic this cloud has a silver-lining. In the past 44 years I have spent my life teaching. Never did I get so much time at home. So, preparing self for

the lockdown was a challenge. It is a different experience, something I am now cherishing. The morning routine is still the same, but work is now online keeping in touch with the staff, students and monitor things via internet. At the same time, Chitkara is working on introducing new concepts. The institution has started research on Covid-19, keeping students creative and making a difference.

Many relaxations have been given amid Lockdown 3.0, but education sector is still on standstill. How do you see the scenario for academic calendar 2020?

We are worried about the students as there is a big number. Making social distancing is a big challenge. We had made a task force. Even in Lockdown 3.0 we called up 33 per cent faculty members. If things become normal under Lockdown 4.0 then we would love to welcome students back in

the campus. So, we are preparing to institute a normal working culture alongside Covid-19.

Big companies withdrew job offers of about 50,000 pass-outs of B-Schools, including from some IIMs amid COVID-19. What would you say about the campus placement this year?

No doubt this year placement will be lesser than the last year. Our interactions with the industry leaders indicate that they are very hopeful that within 3-4 months things will improve as some sectors like construction has already started work. Hospitality is all blocked and it will take at least 3-4 months before it reboots. As we talk about industry, 650 industries came to our campus last year. Automobile industry last year was in bad shape and this year 2-3 industries will not be in a good shape. Situation could influence students to go for further higher education.

HRD Minister has announced that remaining exams of 12th would be conducted by 1st to 15th July, and the new session from September onwards. But by then almost first quarter of this academic calendar would be over. How would the students meet

this gap? Is there a possibility of cut in syllabus or shortened period of session?

It is not a problem at all. Normally 1st year of PG classes starts in the first week of August and that's why there will be no loss of 1st quarter. As of now students have to join their classes from 1st September. There is 1-month gap for PG students. Other classes start in June-July and even they can cope up as government has announced that there would be six-day-week and no holidays on Dussehra and Diwali.

This time do you think the number of new admissions could be less as parents in private sectors are losing their jobs in a big way?

Admissions will not be a big problem as students from senior secondary classes will go for higher studies. The concern is only for those students from faraway places like North-East, Jammu and Kashmir because the parents may avoid sending them for away from their home.

Amid Covid-19 online education platform has been emerged in a big way. Is it a threat to campus education, as there are huge investments on campus?

No. You might remember that

in 1985 computer education was introduced in the regime of then Prime Minister, Mr Rajiv Gandhi, as part of education policy. At that time, being a school-teacher I was worried about the future of teaching and teachers. Technology is popular and important, but teacher and campus will always be there. They learn various informal activities from the campus. Even Laboratories activities can be possible only in campus. They wanted to come to the campus. It will be hybrid mode of teaching. Blended classrooms with dual approach to education have been developed. It is a positive change in education system.

Everything cannot be done online, but we are trying to provide every possible help to our students. With all the e-learning classes we are trying to make our students comfortable. A platform named 'My Anatomy' has been developed for the evaluation of the students and students are comfortable. We have established CURIN (Chitkara University Research & Innovation Network), a network of people who explore, innovate and think differently. Amid lockdown students are doing a good job as shown by our hospitality students who are sharing online live recipes while our yoga teachers are sharing yoga exercise poses. Apart from studies they are more proving to be more creative.

In rural and sub-urban areas penetration of internet and broadband is less in comparison to metros and cities. It is still 85% in urban, and in rural areas it is below 60 per cent. Then how e-learning possible in rural India in a big way?

Although smart phone and internet is a big problem in rural areas, Government is doing a great job even in these areas. Rural teachers are also working on online education through broadcasting lectures on TV channels and Radio. Everybody is working to cope up with the problem in innovative ways.



Do We Really Know Our Kids?

The 'BoisLockerRoom' reveals that we have never been so alienated from the world of children. And it may get much worse.



EVERY

time a heinous crime or an act of violence involving children is discovered, we seem

to get rudely jolted from our slumber and ask every inconceivable question as a society from the experts and the not-so-experts. Raising children is often like a recipe now, an industry in itself—how to raise them, what to feed them, how to educate them. Yet, when an incident happens such as the one where a group of adolescents formed the 'BoisLockerRoom' chat room and its contents came to light, it tells us that somewhere we as a society are not going in the right direction. The children were from the best schools and so-called good homes of the elite, where they got the best care, attention and facilities. Why do such perfectly normal children whom you can't imagine being law-breaking delinquents carry such violent fantasies? A few friends told me that when they discussed this with their children of the same age, they showed no surprise. The banality surprised them all. Their children said there were others in their class who used such language. "Violent fantasies, what are they?" one of them exclaimed. "We grow up with them. Some turn it into action."

So, is it a problem of a generation getting lost to us or is it just an aberration—a group of young boys and parents whom we can call 'the other' and console ourselves that we are not like them, and that some factor like biology, upbringing and genetics can explain their behaviour? As a clinical psychologist who has worked alongside the police on many cases of heinous crimes by children and investigated them for counselling, I note with deep concern the radical and overwhelming change that has taken place in the way children think, feel and behave about issues of sexuality and sexual identity. What we see today is part of a continuum and less of a break or aberration—a sign and



a warning that the world is changing faster than we know and creating a toxic masculinity in the minds of our children.

Many adolescents nowadays form groups to chat about issues that would shock the generation that was adolescent 30 years ago, when they grew up reading Enid Blyton and Nancy Drew. Their fantasies were about forming groups like Secret Seven who rid society of crime and saved people. They did not discuss gory details of the anatomy of a female classmate and what they would do if they got a chance to be with her alone. They were obedient and it was assumed that all of them would turn out to be law-abiding citizens and role models in the society, which would pass on to the next generation. In the school where I studied, talking about girl's bodies in crude or derogatory language was seen as a disgusting act that the peer group wouldn't approve of. Anyone doing so faced ostracism. Fantasies about girls revolved around emotions; they had a finesse, subtlety and tenderness. Girls' bodies were not objects that could be hurt at will.

Earlier, children felt needed, and that gave them a sense of responsibility and added depth. Not anymore.

Today, the fantasies of children, including their sexual fantasies, have undergone a complete change. Adolescents read books like *Paper Towns*, with a hero like Margo, who is not only free-spirited, but also rebellious, breaking every rule without guilt—someone who doesn't bother about parents' feelings or social compulsions and charts his own course. Major characters in books and films run away without telling their parents, showing they care little about the opinion of their families. Everything in their

eyes has turned relative, from values to definitions to relationships—no value remains absolute anymore, values that may prevent heinous crimes from taking shape. The thinking is that if it feels right, then it must be right. Everything from a crime to achieving a goal is admissible by breaking rules that were considered sacrosanct a generation ago. Those rules are now seen as being laid down by elders to prevent hedonism. The thrill no longer comes from being obedient, productive members of society, but from becoming rebels without a cause by flouting every rule. Explanations like life is a process or a journey that needs perseverance, hard work and long-term planning are seen as ridiculous and unnecessary. What makes one a hero now is the pursuit of instant gratification at minimal cost.

In the midst of all this, one question remains unanswered and it is perhaps the most basic of all. What are children for, in the eyes of parents and of society? The earlier generations had it defined and coped with issues that were equally complex like ours but more direct. They had the awareness that children are for the family's and society's survival. It boiled down to this principle alone. As a result, children felt needed and they understood it early enough. It gave them a sense of maturity and responsibility, and added depth. This may be much less today and will become virtually unknown to adolescents in the future. Not because they lack something, but because we—parents and society—are raising them differently.

Earlier, families had a great deal of work to finish every day. Everyone had to participate in it in a big or small way. For my generation, our day began with getting up in the morning and standing in the line for milk for an hour before getting ready for school and waiting at the bus stop for hours. We had to help our families in getting ration and do many chores. Today, many parents cringe at the thought of asking their children to do the same and are not sure if they are exploiting or abusing them. It is uncertainty that is 'king' now.

So, how do our kids grow up today? They live in a digital world—a fantasy place where everything is possible and nobody needs to wait for anything. It's a world where everything is available

without delay. Unrestrained violence indulged in by giants in a sports arena doesn't tell them about the pain one feels on the body when hit; computer games in which the players shoot and destroy their enemies don't tell you about empathy. 'Quality time' and 'play dates', the two most telling expressions today heard by counselors, have become the new mantra that have replaced the spontaneity that existed earlier.

For a million years, parents and children needed each other for survival. Families evolved over time as an institution that addressed social and physical needs that perhaps no longer exists in the materialistic cultures anymore. For a century now, family relationships have been based not on survival, but on emotions—and we all know that they can be as volatile and unpredictable as they can be, coming today from sources that are not real world and real people, but from a virtual world. Family cohesion as a glue—perhaps the biggest factor that led to the prevention of the development of criminal tendencies and personalities—no longer finds any takers.

In this changed world, what are children for and why don't they feel needed? Living in the digital world, where everything is relative and comes from a virtual reality, and with parents equally confused on how to raise them, breaking rules and forming groups that flout social norms become

the source of feeling wanted. The digital world, accessed through laptops and mobile phones, offers secrecy and a safe world that has become substitutes for those who are not taught anymore about boundaries, ethics and compassion. The empathy necessary for feeling the pain of others no longer comes naturally as part of growing up.

Therefore, parents in the digital era are doing something that their forefathers would find impossible to believe. They are going to experts and non-experts to understand how to raise their children; they are reading books on how to deal with children's issues and

make them succeed in life. Books on raising children are the new bestsellers and, in the advice columns of newspapers, counsellors regularly advice parents on how to stop violence and increase their mental performance.

Groups on the internet create a sense of anonymity and erase our individuality that earlier took years to build between parents and children and stayed as a cushion against adversities. Today, it levels out many feelings and raises those that become nightmares for the children and parents alike, even for society and law enforcement like the recent cases show. It gives a sense of identity and false self-esteem to the child, who believes it to be his true self. The chat with peers discussing forbidden topics gives a high that doesn't come from human interactions or relationships. It erases shame and guilt in no time through the peer group by making it relative to other acts. In the digital world, the peer group does much more. The virtual identity formed in it, the violent fantasies, the bizarre thoughts, all assimilate to create a personality that suppresses the aimlessness and confusion of real life, among the real people for which the children have no answers.

The history of the past 50 years is teaching us that raising a family now and in the future will become more of a choice than the necessity it was for our ancestors. As the digital world takes over our lives and our children's minds, an increasing number of our children will no longer feel needed by us and we will feel we don't need them too. The children will not believe that they have a purpose, a meaning to live for. They will search for it in the virtual world by forming groups where unrestrained feelings and violent fantasies will swirl and shape them in a spiral, engulfing their sexual feelings and creating predatory thoughts that makes them feel in control and powerful. We as parents need to think and ask ourselves if we want our children to live in this world of the future. ❑

(Views are personal)

Breaking rules and forming groups that flout social norms have become the source of feeling wanted.

Riding The Rails

Karnataka's ability to send back migrant workers hinges upon an imperfect registration process

Ajay Sukumaran in Bangalore

MIGRANT workers in most host states have faced the brunt of the nationwide lockdown—underfed, penniless, frantic with worry and desperate to reach the haven of their faraway villages. But Karnataka's flip-flop on travel made matters worse for them last week. Having first requested for trains to ferry workers to their home states, the government did a U-turn by stopping them. Then, rattled by the Opposition accusing it of treating workers as 'bonded labour', the B.S. Yediyurappa-led administration resumed the 'Shramik Special' trains.

The Karnataka High Court has directed the state government to place on record its policy of enabling migrant workers to reach their home states. That apart, labour unions and activists are still apprehensive about the way ahead, especially with the route some states—like Uttar Pradesh—have taken by amending labour laws.

"There's requirement for a rethink on how we go forward," says Maitreyi Krishnan of the All India Central Council of Trade Unions (AICCTU). "The Interstate Migrant Workmen Act," she says, "is the least implemented Act you can find. Hardly anyone is registered, it's hardly enforced." The Act protects the rights of migrant workers to stop them from being exploited by contractors. The lack of an accurate estimate of migrant workers, many say, is the first stumbling block. "There was never a proper estimate. But the thing is in



Labourers gather in Bangalore hoping to get on a homebound special train

the last two months they could have done a survey and planned, which they didn't," says Vinay Sreenivasa of the Alternative Law Forum.

The Karnataka labour department, indeed, had a helpline and had drawn up a database of workers to supply ration kits during the lockdown. It counted upto 2.1 lakh people across 588 camps in Bangalore. These included three categories—people working on large projects and staying in camps, homeless workers housed in government hostels and workers who were scattered across the city. The plan was to clear the camps in a systematic way and police teams had visited each camp to explain the method, but things went haywire when registrations started, informs an official. "Suddenly, we had 10,000 people on the roads," says the official, explaining the decision to stop the trains. Officials reckon that when the railways' online reservation system opens up, it'll be possible for them to better communicate timings and reservations to workers through SMS.

Volunteers who reached out to those in distress say that many calls they

received were from people going without food. "At a time when they have not been paid for about 40 days, when most of them have been abandoned by employers and literally hunting for food on a regular basis, I cannot begin to imagine how much their dignity would have been crushed," says Rajendran Narayanan of Stranded Workers Action Network (SWAN). Fifty per cent of those who called SWAN over the last month had less than one day of ration left and at least two-thirds had less than Rs 100 left with them, he says. If workers hadn't been paid, wasn't it unrealistic to assume that they would be able to register on the government portal online, asks Narayanan. By providing kiosks and helpdesks to register to travel back home, the government can smoothen out the process, he thinks.

Maitreyi Krishnan of AICCTU says that complaints against employers over unpaid wages should be acted upon. The Karnataka labour department has received around 700 such complaints, which will be placed before a special task force.

Vinay Sreenivasa says that the government needs to come up with a proper estimate of workers and thereby, the frequency of trains needed to ferry them. So far, a little over 2 lakh migrant workers from about 23 states have registered on the government's Seva Sindhu website. But labour unions such as AICCTU estimate that the numbers will increase once the state government undertakes an off-line identification of those wanting to return to their home states. □

It was unrealistic to assume starving workers abandoned by employers would register online, says Rajendra Narayanan of SWAN.

As COVID-19 frontliners are busy guarding your health,



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नाबार्ड के कर्मचारियों ने 9.85 करोड़ का अंशदा मुंबई, (विशेष): वैश्विक महामारी से सामना करने

Nabard disburse ₹12,767 cr to state co-op banks, RRBs

RRBs to provide ₹50,000-crore refinance facility to AIFIs

THE NATIONAL Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development Tuesday said it has disbursed ₹12,767 crore to state co-op banks and regional rural banks

Nabard disburses ₹12,767 crore to State Co-op Banks, RRBs

HAKRISHNAN
 The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on Friday announced a ₹50,000-crore refinance facilities to three AIFIs - Nabard, the Small Industries Development Bank of India (SIDBI), and the National Housing Bank (NHB). The refinance has been taken by the RBI to meet the credit needs at a time when the economy is facing a sharp downturn.



नाबार्ड ने दिया बैंकों को ₹12,767 करोड़ का कर्ज
 मुंबई। राष्ट्रीय कृषि एवं ग्रामीण विकास बैंक ने मंगलवार को कहा कि बैंक ने मंगलवार को कहा कि राज्य सहकारी बैंकों और क्षेत्रीय ग्रामीण बैंकों को ₹12,767 करोड़ का कर्ज दिया है।

Window of Responsibility, Not Opportunity



GETTY IMAGES

Changes already afoot in the pre-COVID era will accelerate and intensify. What's in store for Indian higher education?

IS the dynamic of international education and student travel going to change significantly in the years to come? In fact, even before the world switched into crisis mode following the COVID-19 pandemic, there had been clear signs of shift that were about to disrupt dominant patterns of global higher education. For some, the signs were worrying; for others, it indicated good news.

An article with what now sounds like an ominous title, 'International student mobility trends to watch in 2020', published in U2B in January, right before the pandemic breakout, read some already-beginning shifts that indicated movement of international student focus away from traditionally attractive western destinations to locations in East Asia. A Trump-led US and a post-Brexit UK have come to shape rabid nationalist rhetoric and sharp anti-immigration policies that have started to discourage international students from targeting these countries as their destination for higher education in the way they did before.

Conservative governments in these countries have significantly cut higher education budgets, forcing universities to raise their tuition. This has made them less attractive for international students. Moreover, these students now face poorer prospects of recovering their debts through employment in these countries after completing their studies; nationalist policies have increasingly closed off already impoverished job markets to international candidates. Added



A large-scale impact on the Indian landscape as a whole of the potential Asian turn in student mobility is unlikely.

to that has been the rise of a global middle class from Asia, and the expanding investment in higher education in China, South Korea and Singapore. All this has led to the beginning of a destination shift for international students from countries in the post-industrial West to locations in East Asia. Research by the Institute of International Education has pointed to a steep 7.1 per cent decline in international enrolment in US Business Schools between 2017-18 and 2018-19, from 196,054 to 183,170.

Education expert Rahul Choudaha sums up the patterns of 21st century global student mobility in three waves: "Wave I from 2001 to 2008 shaped by the 9/11 attacks; Wave II from 2008 to 2016 shaped by the global recession; and Wave III from 2016 onwards, influenced by the new political order of anti-immigration rhetorics, the resultant rise of Canada, Australia and Asia, as well as socio-economic shifts changing the patterns of mobility from countries like China, India, Nigeria and Vietnam." The fourth wave, Choudaha, predicts, will be one of "digital disruption", where technology will become the most important determinant of patterns of affordability, access and diversity in international education.

Much of this was already in the crystal ball of global higher education experts. What has the COVID-19 pandemic done to them? A March 26 article in the *Times Higher Education* reported a talk by Simon Marginson, director of the Centre for Global Higher Education at the University of Oxford, where he predicted that international student mobility will take at least five years to return to some semblance of normalcy. The severe economic blow suffered by the global middle class in the post-pandemic economic depression, especially in the developing nations of sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, will severely shrink the movement of international students to western universities.

As international education becomes “a buyer’s market” where universities scramble for “scarce international students”, health security will “for a long time become a major element in the decision-making of families and students about where they go for education”.

Marginson also pointed out that East Asia was likely to recover quicker than other regions both in terms of the pandemic and in terms of resuming on-campus instruction. While this will help resume international travel for East Asian students, he said it will also lead to countries like China and South Korea becoming “larger providers of regional education than they have been”. Consequently, a significant part of the student traffic traditionally headed to North America, western Europe and the UK will shift to locations in East Asia. “That effect,” Marginson said, “is likely to be permanent.” In other words, the COVID-19 pandemic will simply accelerate and intensify to a great extent patterns of change that were already in motion in the pre-pandemic world.

What does this mean for institutes of higher education in India? As with many economic narratives, the prominence given to East Asia in this predicted trajectory of international student mobility excludes India. We know that some of this 21st-century Asian excitement over innovative, internationally oriented higher education has been a reality in India as well. It is quite likely, however, that this international enthusiasm, already disabled in a country with a far higher poverty rate than more powerful East Asian economies, is also harder to experience on a wider scale since it cannot easily enter the vast and resource-crunched system of public higher education.

Outside of a handful of high-powered institutes of science and technology, it is hard to see public institutes of higher education substantially benefiting from a potential Asian turn to global student migration. A large-scale impact of that turn on the nation’s higher education landscape on the whole, in effect, remains beyond the pale of reality. It might, however, indicate a significant moment of responsibility for a small but influential segment of this landscape—the new, private universities, which were already set up as interna-



Much depends on how a small but influential segment—India’s new, private universities—respond to the situation.

tionally oriented in the first place.

In a suggestively titled article, ‘Stay in India, Study in India: Higher Education in the Corona Era’, C. Raj Kumar and Sreeram Chaulia of O.P. Jindal Global University have drawn attention to the many serious obstacles to studying abroad to be inevitably faced by Indian students in a pandemic-altered era. These include an uncertain and insecure international environment, prohibitive cost without assurance of value, and increased restrictions on employment, immigration and now on international

travel itself. The one positive outcome of all this is the unexpected opening for leading Indian higher education institutions to retain a greater share of the nation’s students and keep them rooted to their home country.

Following Marginson’s five-year projection to “normalcy”, Kumar and Chaulia identify this as “a five-year window to revolutionise India’s domestic higher education horizons”. If students choose to study in India instead of abroad, apart from addressing their immediate academic and career needs, they will “also contribute to the bigger cause of transforming India from a ‘sending market’ of students into a ‘retaining market’, and eventually even a ‘receiving market’ for foreign students”. The tragedy of the pandemic, the authors rightly say, “is a revolutionary inflection point whose ultimate winner could be Indian higher education.”

What is crucial is that the institutes of higher education that are able to meet this redirected student need look at this “revolutionary inflection point” less as a window of *opportunity* than as one of *responsibility*. That could mean much in terms of how they respond to the situation, especially as the new academic year unveils at the end of summer. What would be the structure and texture of that response? That is the question to which we would need to turn next. ▣

(With research input by Harshita Tripathi. Views are personal)

COVER
COVID-19
STORY

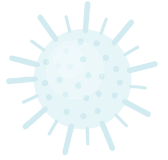


Arab whirling dervishes

Yalla Bye, Al-Hindi



Theyyam of north
Malabar



Siddharth Premkumar
in Thiruvananthapuram

One day, historians will call this the Gelded Age. The earth was to have become a neon-lit orchard—flat, endless, endlessly networked and buzzing. Like a super-extended Dubai or Singapore. Only the ripening of fruit was awaited.... That's when the blights struck, in a rapid series of crippling blows, beginning 2008. In Davos last year, they were still indulging their hubris, talking Globalisation 4.0. But now, at the grim daybreak of a new decade, the promised land looks *void ab initio*: shaky and paranoid at the centre, rough and uncertain along the margins.

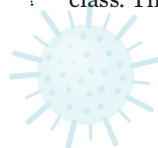
That flat piece of ceramic appears warped, and the prophets are falling off the edges—there goes Fukuyama, and there Friedman, along with all that tropey economics. As we embark, blindfolded, on the Timid Twenties, India marks its first quarter with the largest repatriation exercise it has ever done. Indians are being brought back from some 31 countries, by air and sea. And the densest lines on this ragged march of history will be traced across what was till the other day a Gilded Corridor...stretching from Kerala, a jobless tropical paradise, to the Persian Gulf, the other end of the rainbow where the pot of gold was.

It may not be a full stop to the story of the diasporic Indian, the NRI, the Raj and Simran of *DDLJ*, the global desi with fine taste in cheese. But it is certainly a semi colon, an ellipsis...a dream interrupted, very rudely. The literary stars will still hang in there, chronicling their elegant anguish—it's the dregs that will fall back. India is dignifying this return exodus with Sanskrit names like 'Vande Bharat mission', lending a dab of nationalist pride. But the future looms fairly grey and sobering. What will lakhs of them do back home? As we speak, they are tracing a Trail of Tears—some 67,833 evacuees from El Dorados around the world. The most vulnerable among them only marginally better off, in degree of distress, than those internal migrants marching on India's highways. In a Covid-hit world, they are all flying in to a stir-crazy home front apprehensive of what they represent: disease, disorderliness, a dead weight on the economy. Over a third of those, 25,246 in all, are

headed to Kerala. But that number is only a fraction of the five lakh non-resident Keralites – a figure that is itself just the tip of an 'iceberg' that will eventually hit the tens of lakhs as Corona marches on – just registered with NORKA-Roots, the nodal agency for NRK affairs. Several more have been sent on unpaid leave, had wages slashed or withheld, or just shunted out without notice. As the caravan dust settles, some reckon the returnees to Kerala alone will number in lakhs.

The sea is choppy: the same sea that, over two millennia ago, linked Arabia and Kerala on the Incense Route. Frankincense and pepper flowed between what the Romans called Moscha Limen and Muziris—a dotted line between ancient Oman and Malabar. But now the winds bear intimations of despair, hastening a long-predicted end to one of the world's most compelling rags-to-riches stories. Policymakers and migration experts are chary of calling time on it, but the common Malayali feels it on the skin. It's been a saga in the sun—over half-a-century of oil, blood, money, sweat, consumerism and tears—an orientation of the land that led to every fifth home in Kerala being a 'Gulf house'. Has the sun finally set on that endless dream?

A favourite aphorism in the state goes, 'When the Gulf sneezes, Kerala catches a cold'. The Arab could trust the Indian to keep a secret too—"al hindi ma yikhabar," old Muscatis would say. From Kachhi old-timers, "Al Hindi" had come to mean the new Malayali professional/underclass. The depth of the linkages, as often fraternal as they





IPRD KERALA

Arrival lounge A stranded Indian returns from Doha

were servile, may have shallowed but still held true across all of West Asia's upheavals: endless war, recession, ISIS, and localisation regimes (like Saudi Arabia's *nitaqat* policy that hit the hardest). The numbers spoke emphatically: six GCC nations, says the Centre for Development Studies (CDS) at Trivandrum, account for close to 90 per cent of all Keralites overseas! It also pegs the diaspora at 21 lakh. So nearly a tenth of Kerala's 3.34 crore population lives outside India (which is what led to those jokes about the Malayali tea shop on the moon). And each NRK supports four people back home. By 2020, diasporic Kerala was to hit a short-term high of 20-25 lakh on account of (re)migration spurred by diminished savings as also the loss of lives, homes and livelihoods to the devastating floods of 2018-19. Then COVID-19 happened.

The wave had otherwise been ebbing. The Kerala Migration Survey (KMS) 2018—the eighth in CDS's series of labour flow studies—reckons one out of every five households in Kerala is home to an emigrant—down from about one in four in

2008. The graph for 2013-18 showed a dip of roughly three lakh emigrants; eleven of the state's 14 districts registered a negative growth rate at least once in that span. And returnees over that period numbered a considerable 12.95 lakh—60 per cent of total emigrants. So one in seven households has them: a social fact as much as an economic one.

But such portents dimmed in the afterglow of inbound remittances, named “blood money” by KMS co-author S. Irudaya Rajan. And why not? It's been Kerala's lifeline. In 2014-18, it rose from Rs 71,142 crore to Rs 85,092 crore—accounting for 35 per cent of Kerala's GDP and 39 per cent of its bank deposits over that period. Over Rs 30,000 crore of that, says CDS, flowed into households: towards savings, paying bills and school fees, repaying debt, funding weddings (including dowries), building/buying a home, maybe adding that second storey. Entrepreneurs started businesses, the faithful gave tithes, everyone bought a car or gold. Giant ad hoardings for marble and granite flooring, fancy condos and gold—lots of gold—dotted Kerala's paddy-fringed highways. All of which fed the enduring characterisation—despite some sensitive portrayals of their lived-in realities in film and literature—of the ‘Gulf Malayalee’ as both tragic figure and showy parvenu. The vitriol directed recently at Corona ‘super-spreaders’ in Pathanamthitta and Kasargod typified the baseline social response to a perceived sense of NRK ‘entitlement’. CM Pinarayi Vijayan had to weigh in with an admonition for it to cease.

But now, the hype about remittances crossing Rs 1 trillion sounds sonorously empty. The World Bank says the crude oil shock will choke flows from the UAE and Saudi Arabia—the two biggest headsprings for Kerala. State finance minister Thomas Isaac reckons Kerala's economy will shrink by 10 per cent, with nearly every sector, including the milch cow of tourism, expected to be “devastated” by the pandemic. Rajan expects remittances to dip by 15 per cent in 2020. Prolonged abstinence from the state's twin vices—liquor and lottery—will exact costs as well. It's this cheerless landscape that awaits a possible mass influx of muddled, panicked returnees.

For decades, though, those headsprings in the Arab oases have watered Kerala, and altered its social landscape—creating a viable, buzzing middle class out of a vast former serfdom, caste groups like the Ezhavas, newly freed by Communist land reforms but jobless. (Their move en masse to a capitalist mecca being a matter of no small irony.) The Gulf was also a singular factor that helped the Mappila Muslims of north Kerala level off some historic socio-economic disparities. A lot of Malayalis took on blue-collar jobs (proverbially, things they would NOT do in Kerala); young Mappilas mostly stuck to the same small-scale



A curious and colourful Genoese world map from 1457. The depiction of India and much of Asia is clearer—the imagery is based on descriptions by traders and travellers like Marco Polo and Niccolo dei Conti. Kerala's Uru (Below right) and Dubai's Dhow—the boats that carried goods between Malabar and the Arabian peninsula in the old days.



businesses as back home: convenience stores, textile shops, electronic shops, local supermarkets, hotels. Some scaled up auspiciously. Out of rural coastal Thrissur, for instance, came the LuLu Group's M.A. Yusuff Ali, the billionaire who now owns the Scotland Yard building, a stake in the East India Company, part of Cochin airport, Asia's largest mall....

THE returnee story also contains, in a disembodied way, those who won't be back. "When the money doesn't reach, that's when the questions begin," says Shafeek Madavoor, who would have been on one of those home-bound flights if he could afford it. The 38-year-old security guard (and part-time lyricist) has had time to indulge his partiality for the poetry of Aimé Césaire, the Caribbean theorist of negritude who had a thing or two to say about exile. Shafeek has been holed up in his hovel-like room in Dubai, which he shares with six others, for nearly two months without "even basic salary". It's the bitterest sort of déjà vu. An earlier stint in Dubai had left him bed-ridden with pleural effusion. "I served that company for seven and a half years, but they still deducted 4,000 dirham (over Rs 80,000) from my dues when I had to return to Kerala for

treatment. Later, my doctor said I would've died of pneumonia had I waited any longer," says Shafeek, who takes his surname from Madavoor village, Trivandrum district.

Why go back then? "Because there's nothing for me back home. Do you think I'd be here if there was any other option?" he asks. Like thousands, Shafeek is trapped in a cycle of indentured servitude. "I have to repay loans for my treatment, also the *hundi*." That last is an informal money order middlemen use to pay the 'kafeels', the Arab sponsor: the much-criticised 'kafala' system of immigration suretyship.

A half-hour drive from his home is Sonapur, the 'city of gold' that best sums up the Dubai mirage. Once a "Dharavi-like slum" in the badlands housing labourers from across the world, and mostly Malayalis among them, it has had both a literal and figurative facelift. Now these gilded dorms also room migrants from elsewhere in India. The impetus for this renovation came in 2013 after Dubai was awarded the 2020 World Expo. That "hot air balloon" was almost meant to burst, and the "Men behind the curtain" issued an edict to the workers that essentially said, "Click your heels together three times and go home", says Nida*, a migration watcher based out of Abu Dhabi. In this land of Oz, workers



AP

make convenient straw men when things don't go to plan. "If I could, I would. For all its faults, there's no place like home, my beautiful country with its high sesame shores," says Shafeek, dipping into Cesaire, seeking solace in poetry. Across the border, Shaji* in Muscat finds it in drink. The proscription on alcohol during Ramzan notwithstanding, the 27-year-old from Kottayam needs the sauce to forget about his pregnant wife back home. Having been laid off and overstayed his visa, Shaji is an 'illegal'. His days are now spent in 'Bombay Gali', a chawl-like warren in the migrant hub of Ruwi that houses undocumented workers from the subcontinent. Between the backalley cricket under clotheslines, the cut-price Bollywood shows (hence the name) and the 'katakata tawa' grub at the Balochi hole-in-the-wall—a culinary call to prayer for the Gali's denizens—"it is not a bad life if it were not for the threat of prison hanging over my head", Shaji says. Raids to catch 'boat people' (who come by dhow mainly from Gwadar in Balochistan) also net those who overstay. Shaji has dodged them so far; the cops are focused on the pandemic. "The child is supposed to be my Eid gift. Now, I don't know when I'll meet them," says Shaji. He hasn't registered for repatriation since that would "defeat the purpose". "I'm here to make money for my family, not spend it (a seat on the Kochi flight costs Rs 14,000). I won't leave till I have sent back enough to pay our debts and build a house...unless they catch me. Where will I find well-paying work back home?"

It's a story P.M. Jabir hears "maybe 150-170 times a day" in his Muscat office. The Thalassery native is a director at the state government's Kerala Pravasi Welfare Fund, but for nearly four decades, Muscat's

workers have known him as Jabirka (Big brother Jabir). "Thousands of daily-wagers in the souks, farms and factories have been out of work during the lockdown as their sponsors have no income. Luckily, during Ramzan, they get biriyani for iftar, even so their condition is pathetic. Some 10,000 undocumented workers should go home...they can't because of various reasons, including the kafala system," says Jabir. (The sponsors withhold passports, illegally of course, till 'dues' are cleared). He speaks of some 22,000 registrations on NORKA's repatriation portal and "at least 50,000" more with the embassy.

RETURNING to Kerala can be its own rite of passage. Sujathan, an Oman returnee who runs a seafood shack in Kovalam, sees himself as one of the lucky ones, having only been cheated of an investment once. One district over in Punalur taluk, Kollam, P. Sugathan, who'd built his seed capital as a mechanic toiling for over three decades in Oman, committed suicide in February 2018 after his entrepreneurial dreams got caught in the usual cobwebs...bribes, intimidation, work disruptions by CPI youth activists. The commonalities in their names, emigration history and experiences have stuck with Sujathan. "In the Gulf, we learn to trust our own because there's safety in that. Here, that makes us easy pickings for cheats and corrupt officials," he says. The suicide of Nigeria-returned Sajan Parayil in Kannur last June framed the issue in stark relief: he'd risen from a Rs 15 weekly wage labourer to a Rs 15 crore businessman, but was finally strangulated by municipal-level red tape. Kerala's suicide rate is 23.5 per cent, a robust

In Malappuram, one in three households is an NRK, and gets 21 per cent of Kerala's total remittances.

13 percentage points above the national rate. That would be a space to watch as lakhs of youths stare at a futureless vista—with the one guarantee of a viable life, the Gulf, taken away.

It's just one of Kerala's many dichotomies: a vibrant start-up ecosystem, a proactive IT department, but also that old reputation for militant trade unionism. The World Bank's ease-of-doing business rankings place it consistently near the bottom among India's states—21st in 2018. "Despite its love of consumerism, Kerala's polity is decidedly left-of-left. There's a certain distrust of market forces and entrepreneurship," says D. Dhanuraj, chairman, Centre for Public Policy Research, Kochi. If anything, it's Communist strongman Pinarayi who can pull off a reversal of that, he feels. Pinarayi does wield an orderly hand when he wants. For all the usual Indian bureaucratic faults, schemes for returnee welfare—including for collateral-free loans of Rs 10 lakh—are hitting 100 per cent utilisation. The irony isn't lost on bank officials whose default position used to be the bent-over-backward asana for wooing NRK investments.

PAN the camera to Malappuram, the district that finds itself frequently picked on for being Muslim-majority. One in three households here is an NRK household. It boasts the highest number of migrants, about 4 lakh, and gets 21 per cent of Kerala's total remittances. But the flow of returnees is the highest too—nearly a quarter of the total, with about one in four households having a returnee. Naturally, some are worried. Not Pratheesh Mullakkara, secretary of a 16,000-member pravasi welfare cooperative society. "Visit our Up Hill head branch. You can't miss the bakeries, poultry shops, dairy farms, beauty salons, teas stalls and tailor shops we helped them set up. Last year, we exhausted our Rs 5 crore fund within the first two months itself," he says. Ajith Kolassery, NORKA recruitment head, says due diligence, government support and follow-up—"a capital outlay of 15 per cent of project cost up to Rs 30 lakh, plus subsidy in case of timely repayment"—explains the scheme's popularity. "Abouquet of schemes for NRKs is in the pipeline. Whether these are rolled out is predicated on whether the Centre allows us to borrow the funds we need," says R. Ramakumar, a Kerala planning board member and economics professor at TISS. The finance minister was less circumspect. "All the schemes we were planning for the diaspora will be delayed," Isaac says.

Benoy Peter, executive director of the Perumbavoor-based Centre for Migration and Inclusive Development, has a different kind of ambition. He sees returnees as carrying skill-sets honed in hyper-global locales. "A registry of skills needs to be created," he says. That will facilitate optimal deployment, as also reskilling/upskilling to improve remigration prospects—he sees Africa as the next frontier. With public funds scarce, it may work best if those who are able to do so invest creatively in the

Bihu in the times of Covid-19

The handloom sector has a long tradition of excellent craftsmanship in India. It is also the country's second largest employment generation sector next to agriculture. The weaving community consisted of a wide range of ethnic groups reflecting their caste and community identity in the weaving pattern, style and motif.

In the villages of North east India one the most melodious sound that one hears is the clacking of the loom. Each community has a different feature in their handloom.

The weavers in every home produce exquisitely beautiful handloom product. It has been a traditional occupation for women who produce clothes for the family members. It is also a source of livelihood, especially in industrially backward States of North-eastern region (NE region) of India for a large section of rural women.

The women weavers of North east region perform multiple roles of being handloom producers and trading of handloom products. As there are no cloth mills, or large number of power looms in the region, weavers put their hard labor by working manually. In the process of earning income, they preserve our culture and heritage by laboriously producing traditional clothes. The combination of bright colors and unique patterns are the signature of North-East India's weavers. Weaving reflects some of the most important features of each community. For them it is nothing less than a ritual that is performed with love and devotion, a ritual that exhibits a vibrant color palette, patterns and themes. Naturally abundant Assam, the motifs are also inspired by flowers, trees, birds, and animals- Kinkhap, Gos buta or tree motif, Sangoi tenga buta or flower buta. The womenfolk who do the weaving for the household produce shawls, blankets, durries, gamochas, mekheles, chaddars and today even cushions and curtains.

But recently the Covid 19 pandemic has taken the glistening shine off the Assam's silk industry. It was just ahead of the mid-April Rongali or Bohag Bihu, that the strike of Covid pandemic affected the entire handloom industry of the state, the festival that promotes the major start of its sales.

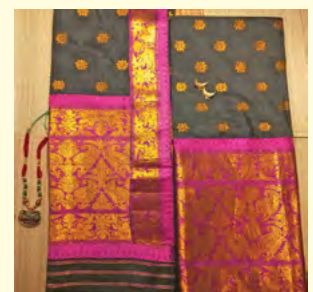
Due to this pandemic, marriages have been postponed, cancelled and also the much-awaited Bihu celebrations has been put on hold. Business is said to go down by 70-75% and this will be a direct affect on the Weaver's as the shop owners or the business owners are finding it extremely hard to pay the weavers and maintain the long standing association with them.

The handloom community across India knows the importance of the lockdown, which only got extended till 17th May, as today we can say that to be the only weapon to fight the novel Coronavirus. But as they stand with the people and the government, somewhere within them lurks the fear that the virus may spare their lives but not their livelihoods.

The weavers give heart and soul in vibrant creations. We need to find out more ways and means through which the income of weavers can be increased.



By Anushka Das, Assistant Professor, School of Fashion at World University of Design





V.V. BIJU

future. Rajan of CDS suggests the state must attract NRK investments towards social schemes, shares and other financial instruments. “They invest heavily in such traditionally prized, but non-performing, assets like land and gold. To shift this pattern, the trust deficit would need to be overcome,” he notes.

To that end, some contend, NRKs need a political voice. In February, the statutory Kerala NRI Commission formally sought an amendment to the Representation of the People Act to enable NRIs to vote by proxy. “It is not frivolous and deserves to be heard by the Union law ministry,” says Justice (ret’d) P. Bhavadasan, the body’s founding chairperson. The 600-odd petitions he has heard have given him a bird’s eye view of a festering social canker. “Most NRKs don’t have savings. Roughly 65-70 per cent of their life’s earnings are remitted to their families; about 10-15 per cent goes towards living expenses in their host country. They spend under 10 per cent on themselves,” he says. That’s why, he says, “less than a quarter of the returnees can be said to have integrated fully into society”. Over 25,000 returnees are “on the street,” he says. The Dubai-based Pravasi Bandhu Welfare Trust too had found that 95 per cent of NRIs across the GCC return home with next to no savings. The stigma of failure means they rarely report it too. For every Yussuf Ali, there are thousands of

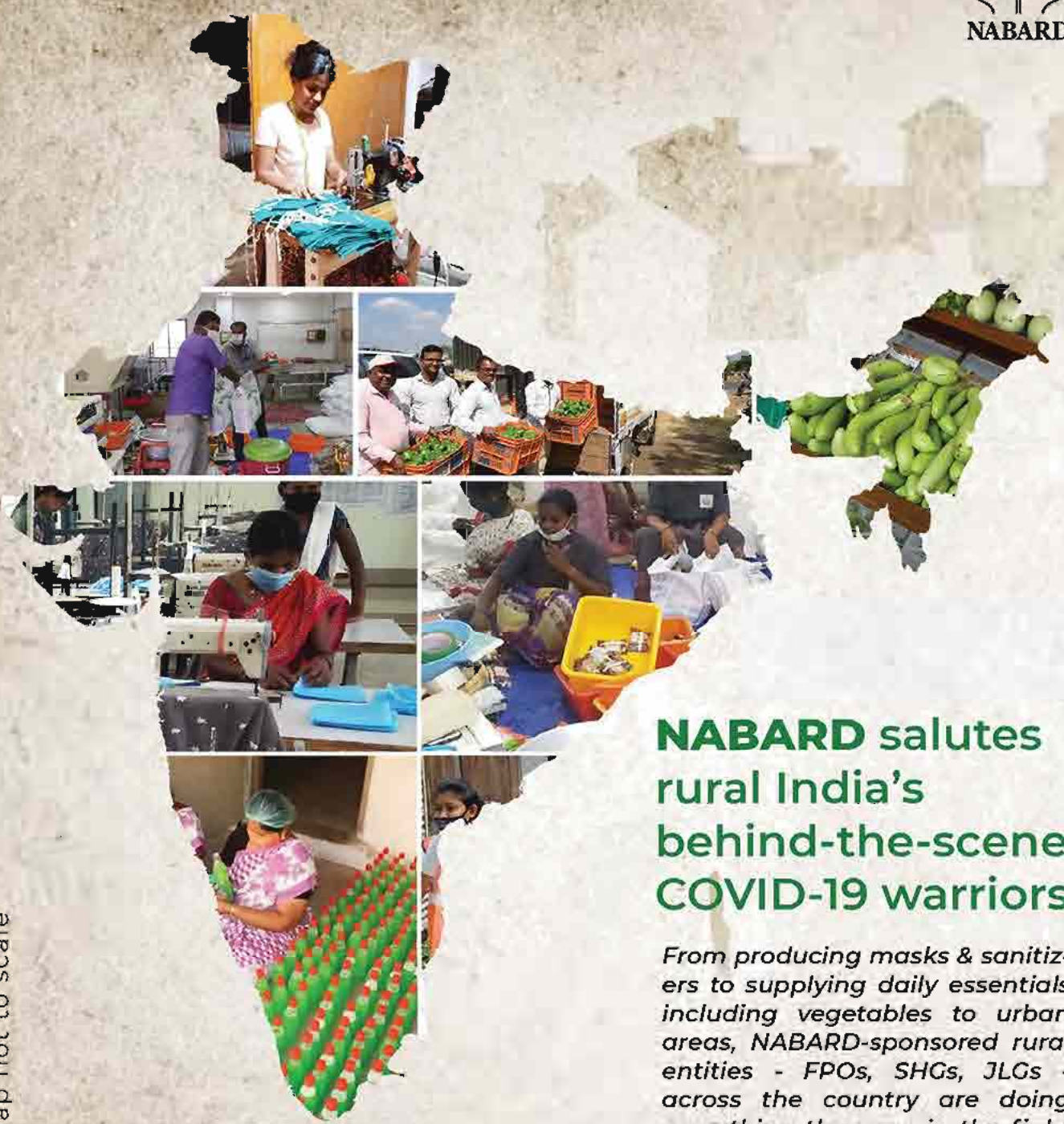
cautionary tales.

Shihab*, a returnee from Saudi Arabia, was determined not to become one. He spent 30 years setting up a chain of Kerala-style *thattukadas* (dhabas), putting his children through college and slowly creating a nest-egg before taking a golden parachute so as to spare his old *arbab* (boss) the vagaries of the Kingdom’s colour-coded nitaqat regime. It was no mid-life crisis then that spurred him to buy a 4BHK on the Kochi backwaters. “It was a retirement investment for my wife and me. It was our little slice of paradise.” Shortly before noon on January 11, paradise was lost as carefully placed emulsion explosives tore down the two residential blocks of Alfa Serene—aptly named the ‘Twin Towers’. “Our world came crashing down,” says Shihab, who still feels the sting of the clapping, hooting, hollering, breathless TV circus. For most NRK owners of the downed towers in Maradu, found to be in violation of CRZ norms, the experience was Kafkaesque. The only silver lining the COVID lockdown afforded them was that it put a stop to the voyeurs indulging in ‘debris tourism’ around the desiccated husks of the flats. How may one label that site? A memorial to hubris? A graveyard of dreams? Or an art installation for the next Muziris Biennale? ■

(*denotes name change)

“Less than a quarter of the returnees can be said to have integrated fully into society.”

Map not to scale



NABARD salutes rural India's behind-the-scene COVID-19 warriors

From producing masks & sanitizers to supplying daily essentials including vegetables to urban areas, NABARD-sponsored rural entities - FPOs, SHGs, JLGs - across the country are doing everything they can in the fight against coronavirus.

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Towers of **SILENCE**

UAE's stalled economy is disgorging Indians it can't support.
But most plan a return, unwilling to give up on their Dubai dreams.



AP



Indian workers check a manhole for a drainage system; and Emirati women at an empty mall in Dubai

Chiranjib Sengupta in Dubai

RAMESHWAR Nath stares at the white-and-ebony foyer of a five-star hotel above the calm turquoise waters of the Dubai Canal. Once brimming, the vast foyer—like the rest of the hotel—is now forlornly empty. For the past 15 years, Rameshwar has refurbished guest rooms, touched up nooks and crannies. The gussied-up hotel guests and the clatter of fine china still takes some getting used to for the 50-year-old painter from a village in Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh. “It was thanks to this job that I was able to feed my family back home and send my kids to school,” he says with pride.

Enter COVID-19: the tourism and hospitality sectors started feeling the heat as nations closed borders. Hotels that line the arterial Sheikh Zayed Road or the Jumeirah beachfront must wait out the pandemic before even trying to make their way back to the city. Some hotels have been converted into isolation facilities for the mildly symptomatic who don’t need critical care.

As soon as he heard of a massive repatriation of distressed Indians from the UAE, Rameshwar—placed on three-month ‘leave without pay’—registered. “I need to go home and get treatment for my liver infection. But I don’t know if or when the call will come,” says Rameshwar, one of the more than 2 lakh Indians who have registered for a seat on the Vande Bharat Mission—a veritable tide from a community that makes up roughly a third of the 9.6 million population of the UAE, 90 per cent of whom are expats.

As the pandemic took hold, authorities restricted movement, closed schools, malls and commercial establishments, set up nightly disinfection programmes covering all public areas and worker dormitories and conducted a record 1.2 lakh COVID-19 tests per 10 lakh people. Since then, it has also provided free tests and treatment to all expats who test positive, waived fines for overstaying or expired visas and arranged food and other essentials for workers. Community service groups have caught many who slipped through the cracks.

After imposing stringent restrictions on movement and protracted quarantines in localities with a high density of workers, such as Naif in the Deira area, the UAE eased the



Workers wait in line for food and work in the UAE during the pandemic

lockdown two weeks ago—allowing its cavernous malls and restaurants to reopen and resuming public transport with strict precautions in place. The aim is two-fold: to stimulate the retail and services sectors and cushion the economy from further damage while remaining vigilant. The result? A new normal of thermal scanners, face masks, long queues at hypermarkets and enforced social distancing in a city characterised by throngs. A distinctly similar social discipline pervades neighbourhoods, from the mostly Indian bastions of Bur Dubai and Karama to the glistening skyscrapers of Dubai Marina and the lush greenery of Emirates Hills.

But despite this balancing act, the stark economic realities have not spared the UAE as businesses have felt the impact of plunging consumer demand and the incapacity and reluctance to spend for anything but essentials. Distressed companies have moved to furlough or terminate expat staff, or, like Rameshwar, place them on unpaid leave. Over 2,000 people flew to six Indian states in the first week, including to Lucknow, Rameshwar's home airport. India has made it clear that the repatriation flights must be paid for. For the flights last week, passengers paid AED 750 (Rs 16,000) for a ticket. Rameshwar says he will somehow arrange the money when his turn comes. Indian missions have also been able to help out a small number who couldn't afford the tickets. At a time when every dirham counts, some have sold their family gold in the souqs to pay for the ride home.

BUT not everyone is as desperate to leave Dubai. When Mohammad Sameer arrived 18 years ago, his dream was to lay down a solid foundation for life. "I came to the UAE to work at a printing press. Before that, I was in Saudi Arabia for five years," the Mumbai native says. The company withstood the financial crisis of 2008-09, but folded up in 2017 as work orders dwindled. "I was able to manage till last year. Since then, I have had to change jobs three times in the last six months. I'm currently a real estate agent with no salary--just commissions. When you can't even step out for a cup of tea, who will go house hunting? It's really tough to survive, but I haven't lost faith in Dubai. I haven't got a penny in my pocket, but if I can hang around for a few more months, I am sure there will be better opportunities here," Sameer says.

A swift and smooth repatriation of the several thousand stranded Indians has been a key demand made by the UAE to India in recent weeks. With the evacuation finally getting underway, workers have heaved a sigh of relief, but it will be a massive logistical efforts—a fraught exercise at



the best of times even between two countries that have historically enjoyed friendly relations. One of the signs of this bonhomie that has blossomed in recent years is the planned Indian pavilion—a four-storey showcase of the nation's innovations and technologies across 5,000 years—at the Dubai Expo 2020, for which India has allocated \$50 million.

All that will have to wait for another year, as Expo Dubai will now run from October 2021 to March 2022—a delay that will allow all 192 participating countries to safely navigate the pandemic. With Dubai aiming to complete 1.6 lakh hotel rooms in time for the mammoth event, Rameshwar hopes there will be plenty of opportunities to come back to. "The UAE has a special place for Indians. They have thrived here within the regulations of the country and mostly got along very well with the mix of populations here," says Rima Sabban, associate professor of sociology at Dubai's Zayed University.

"There will be short term pains for the returning Indian diaspora, but then in future there would be lots of opportunities for suitably skilled workers and countries like the UAE will be keen to welcome them back. The UAE has already built an infrastructure for 10 million people. So after an initial slowdown, a very vibrant economy will come from this region," says K.V. Shamsudeen, chairman of the non-profit Pravasi Bandhu Welfare Trust in Dubai.

Neither Rameshwar nor Mohammad are giving up on the Dubai dream yet. "I came here with a plan to stay for four years. After 15 years, this feels like home and has given me the chance to build a life for my family. Of course, I will come back," Rameshwar says.

Sameer is just hoping to keep off a repatriation flight. "Everybody here co-exists peacefully. Just one job... any job. Inshallah, I'll get it and then there will be nothing else to worry about. Well, other than the virus," he says.

(Chiranjib Sengupta is an assistant editor with Gulf News)

UAE provided free treatment to expats who tested positive, waived fines and arranged food for stranded workers.



Bridging the Gulf
PM Narendra Modi during a visit to Abu Dhabi in 2019.

AP

COVER
COVID-19
STORY

Fraught Homecoming

India aces the logistics of bringing back its citizens. But a deeply frozen world economy will ruin migrants' livelihoods and slash remittances.

Pranay Sharma

NOT just a section of our brightest talent who have measured their worth against the best in the world and made us personally, collectively and, increasingly, officially, proud of their accomplishments, migrants from India engaged in modest professions have also played a large role in being ambassadors of Indian history and culture. The generations of truckers in Canada, say, have played a crucial role, as have top academics in the US. As a leading country of origin for international migrants with an impres-

sive diaspora of 17.5 million that sends nearly \$80 billion every year as remittance, it is extremely difficult for any Indian government to be indifferent to its plight.

This, perhaps, is more so for a ruling dispensation that has used nationalism as its main political plank, seeks to use the diaspora and its growing political-economic muscle to further India's image and interests, and has to address the rising aspiration of a young nation, where many look for a future out of India.

Against this backdrop, on May 7, began Vande Bharat (Hail India)—an evacuation operation to bring home nearly 15,000 Indians stranded by the coronavirus lockdown

across the world. The first batch of 300 people arrived in India from Dubai in the UAE in two special Air India flights on May 7. As the operation unfurled, involving 64 flights and Indian naval warships, many more were brought back from 12 countries including the US, UK, Singapore, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bangladesh and Maldives. Earlier, India had evacuated its nationals from China's Wuhan and Japan's Yokohama at the onset of the March-end lockdown.

As the COVID-19 pandemic spews venom and continues to disrupt normal life, operation Vande Bharat may continue until June or beyond to bring back nearly two lakh Indians home, possibly creating a new record in evacuation history. But its success notwithstanding, the one question dominating diplomatic discourse in South Block is: what will be the future of migration? The question has bothered policy planners in different countries over the past months. For India, which has drawn so much economically and politically from its migrants, its import is much more profound.

It concerns not only the fate of a large number of those workers, professionals and students who have returned home, but also the large numbers who were all set to leave for foreign shores. The lockdown and its concomitant upheaval have put their future on hold.

INDIAN officials point out that though the evacuees include quite a few who have lost their jobs, their numbers haven't yet become a major concern for the government. However, the possibility that the number of jobless Indians stuck in foreign countries could go up substantially in the coming months is also being factored in by South Block and shared with the concerned state governments. "I will not be surprised if another one lakh Indian workers return home from the Gulf by September," says former MEA secretary Anil Wadhwa.

The Indian foreign ministry estimates the size of the Indian diaspora to be over 30 million, of which 18 million are People of Indian Origin (PIOs), while 13 million are non-resident Indians. Out of this, over 8.9 million Indians are in six countries and of which 70 per cent are in the Gulf nations. Even if one goes by the UN figure that puts the size of the Indian diaspora to under 18 million, India is still the leading country in the world in terms of remittances its workers have been sending over the years. In 2018-19, India received the highest remittance in the world--\$ 79 billion, a 14 per cent jump from the previous year.

Therefore, the possibility of a substantial loss in remittance in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic is real and has wide

ramification for the government. "According to the World Bank estimates there can be a drop in 23 per cent in Indian remittance" says Wadhwa.

Thus, aside from a battered domestic economy, India now has to deal with a severe blow washing ashore. "There is uncertainty, the world is in turmoil. We need to make adjustments," says former Indian ambassador to the US Navtej Sarna. "Most countries in the West are hit both on the health and the economic sector. There have been regular job losses. All these factors will play a major role in deter-



Homeward bound An Indian student in Dubai before taking the repatriation flight to home.



GETTY IMAGES

mining the future scenario," he adds.

Indeed, separate country- and region-specific conditions that played a key role in the emergence, and aggravation, of the current crisis may have existed even before coronavirus bared its fangs. But they all merged in the sudden onslaught of the pandemic. According to the Indian foreign policy establishment, three factors have been key—the depressed economy, negative response to the issue of migrants or immigration in many countries and flaws in the health system in these nations. Many of these extant factors reared their heads and took centre stage once the pandemic bit into them.

For instance, in the Gulf, depressed petroleum prices forced oil producing countries like Saudi Arabia to invest in non-oil sectors. But it got worse because of the oil price war between Riyadh and Moscow. Instead of stabilising at \$60 a barrel, it plummeted to \$20, aggravating the economic situation. This, in turn, jeopardised the grand development schemes in the region like 'Vision 2030' or 'Dubai 2020 Expo' or UAE's plans of big investment in non-oil sectors to attract large scale foreign investment. As a result, huge construction and infrastructure plans and

In 2018-19, India received \$79 billion in remittances—the highest in the world. That might reduce sizeably.

related service and hospitality industries suffered. The scaling down of 'non-essential' construction led to rampant joblessness, affecting Indians, among others. The coronavirus piled on to this billowing crisis, forcing Saudi Arabia to cancel the Umrah and Haj, the second-highest revenue earner for the kingdom after oil and forcing it to cancel plans to scale up the number of pilgrims from 18 million to 40 million. For both Saudi Arabia and UAE, the involvement in the protracted, intractable war in Yemen is another factor—a huge drain to their exchequers, a reason perhaps why

Indians are the largest recipients, Sarna explains that only 17 per cent were given to Indian firms working in the US. The rest are granted to Indians who work for American companies like Apple, Google, Amazon etc. These Indians are engaged in highly technical jobs that require special skills and Sarna does not see any immediate threat to them.

Wadhwa, on the other hand, says that in a post-COVID world there is likely to be a lot of emphasis on 'economic sovereignty', where most countries will try to keep their production close to the market. "In such a situation,

India can be one of the countries to benefit if production moves away from China," he feels.

However, movement of people from one country to another could be the biggest casualty as most countries will be wary of open borders. "Both for economic and health reasons, countries will want to employ locally and not encourage outsiders," says Sarna. But he also argues that to fulfil demand of essential commodities, countries may be forced to look beyond. "Things that can be made locally will be done by one's own people. But when special skills are required, there will always be a demand for outsiders. And it is in a situation like this that there will still be demands for Indian professionals," says Sarna.

The fate of students in foreign lands is another aspect that worries policy planners. Many are stranded; many face an uncertain future. There are 7.5 lakh Indian students studying in 90 countries across the world, of which 50 per cent are in the US, Canada and Australia. Crucially, many

of them would typically take up jobs and settle in foreign lands, becoming future influencers for their land of origin and potential sources of remittance. There are four lakh outbound students from India every year. "Perhaps parents and the students will have to deal with this uncertain situation until it normalises," says Wadhwa.

But Sarna, who has served both in the UK and the US, feels leading universities and colleges are unlikely to put their reputation on line and will try to address the problems that students, especially those stranded and uncertain

about their academic careers, are facing. Also, international students are also a major source of revenue for these countries. "Because of the possible drop in number of international students the UK is likely to lose over 2.5 billion pounds this year," says Sarna.

However, measured analysis and cautious optimism could go awry—even as COVID-19 spends its venom—if the global system gets used to the "new normal" now being brutally begotten. If so, an uncertain world beckons us for some years to come—a world characterised by shorn hopes and truncated livelihoods. **Q**



Such a long journey Doha-based Indians arriving at the Thiruvananthapuram airport.



IPRD KERALA

both are desperate to extricate themselves from it.

Factors like these have worsened the effects of the combined COVID-19 health crisis and the economic stoppage it forced in almost all Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. It also made them wary of migrants—the first to suffer during any crisis. As a result, nearly two lakh Indians from UAE and 65,000 from Saudi Arabia have registered with Indian missions to return home. Some may return to reclaim their jobs. But the prospect in the Gulf looks bleak.

The scenario could be slightly different in the US. While Donald Trump's diatribe against immigrants predates COVID-19, the grave crisis has certainly sharpened it. Indications suggest it is likely to remain on the political centrestage until the presidential elections in November. "I think the issue will continue to remain important even after the election," says Sarna.

However, Sarna points out that much of the policy on immigration, including the current 60-day hold on green card application, comes with caveats. Trump has made it clear that doctors and nurses from other countries were welcome. Though there has been concern over the H1-B visas of which

Starting with falling crude oil prices, the economic crisis in Gulf nations have made them wary of migrants, including Indians.



THE TRANSFORMERS

As economic nationalism takes over, a new world order seems imminent. What shape will this upheaval take?

Alam Srinivas and Lola Nayar

THERE is now a sinking, morbid and sordid realisation that there are no immediate hopes for national economies across the world. Each one—the powerful US, fragile European countries and would-be superpowers like China and India—will suffer the worst economic disaster in almost a century. Here are the depressing, tsunami-like predictions for 2020:

- ▶ The US economy will shrink by negative 6-14 per cent, the worst contraction witnessed in at least eight decades
- ▶ China's growth will be zero in the best-possible case, the lowest since the mid-1970s
- ▶ European Union as a whole will witness a growth rate of

negative eight per cent; Germany, the UK and France will be the worst hit

- ▶ India too can enter negative territory; the last time this happened was a negative 5.2 per cent growth in 1979-80

Policy makers, businesses and consumers across the world are under the dark curse of extreme rational despair. There is a hopelessness about the near future—gloom and doom. Obviously, irrational fears kick into action as they reimagine a 'new economic world order'. Everyone agrees that things will never be the same again; economies and businesses will undergo major transformations. The only doubt: will the new trends lead to deglobalisation, more globalisation or reglobalisation?

The quick answer: the coming decade—the goring Twenties—will be a combustible mix accelerating past

trends and introducing new ones, which will change the economic equation between nations, regions and continents. The new century's wave of economic nationalism, aided by protectionism, will rise and result in Cold War 2.0 or at least, Cold War 1.5. The attempts to reorganise the existing global chains and enthusiastically adopt technology will catapult us into an era of Industry 5.0 rather than Industry 4.0.

Think Local, Act Local: Rise Of Economic Nationalism

National economic recoveries, i.e., nationalistic interests, will be paramount. Policy makers will insist that goods be

Leaders, like Modi, will aim to protect industries, hike demand of goods made locally.

But nations will woo foreign money, and use xenophobia to do so.

made in their respective countries, aim to protect local entrepreneurs, insist on localisation of goods to reduce imports and focus on attracting foreign investment. Nagesh Kumar, Director, South and South-West Asia Office, United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), feels the pandemic will enhance the retreat of globalisation.

Campaigns like America First, Brexit and Make in India will reach fever pitch and spread to other countries. Governments will ensure that local goods are consumed by their citizens. Kumar says, "Rising protectionist tendencies and global trade wars will reconfigure economic geography or patterns of globalisation." D.K. Srivastava, chief policy advisor, EY India, agrees, "The models of global trade will change over the medium term, i.e., the next three years." A



Recovery Route?

IN a take-off from Prime Minister Narendra Modi's new 'self-reliance' mantra to "become vocal for local products and make them global", finance minister **Nirmala Sitharaman** unveiled an expansive 'Stimulus Package—Part I'. It provides a wider window for MSMEs' bailouts and funding of infrastructure projects. It also aims to give additional social security to farmers and workers and put more money in the hands of middle-class consumers.

"The (Rs 20 lakh crore) package is bold and comprises 10 per cent of the GDP, which makes it the fifth-largest announced by any nation. This is the opportunity for India to emerge as the second factory to the world, a dependable manufacturer of quality products and an important part of global supply chains," claims Rajiv Nath of the Association of Indian Manufacturers of Medical Devices. Sharad Saraf, president, Federation of Indian Export Organisations, feels that the automatic collateral-free loans of Rs 3 lakh crore to MSMEs will help 4.5 million units.

K.E. Raghunath, an industrialist, expressed happiness about the economic nationalism zeal and the endeavour to "be Indian and buy Indian". However, he believes that part I of the package isn't enough to deliver the results, given the enormity of the challenges. These include the basic survival of MSMEs (they can take loans only if they survive the ongoing onslaught) and workers (they can buy or take advantage of tax cuts, only if they earn any salaries or wages). Hence, both the supply—boost in production—and demand—hike in consumption—are unlikely to be impacted much due to the overall depressed sentiments.

Anil Bhardwaj, secretary general, Federation of Indian Micro and Small & Medium Enterprises, says that the package "may not prove effective as the government's support for PF contribution was restricted to companies with less than 100 workers and workers with wages lower than Rs 15,000 per month". And whatever the FM may say, banks are still reluctant to lend to MSMEs. Bhardwaj claims that 90 per cent of such units could not access the COVID-19 emergency loans because of banks' reluctance.

All eyes, therefore, are on 'Stimulus Package—Part II' or maybe even Part III.

—Lola Nayyar

period of supercharged nationalism will ensue.

Phrases like indigenous production and import substitution, which were popular during the Cold War in planned and socialist economies, will become the flavour of the near future. Listen to how Pankaj M. Munjal, the CMD of the \$1.2-billion Hero Motors, describes his future course: "Till last year, we imported 10 per cent of our components and finished products for the Indian, UK and German markets. This will come down to three per cent in the next three years and reduce our annual import bill by Rs 900 crore."

Obviously, such moves will increase costs as businesses shift to larger onshore models rather than outsourced ones because the latter were largely driven by savings and economies of scale. To dent this, nations will simultaneously woo foreign investment despite the growing nationalism. In fact, economic xenophobia will become the means to do so in a perverted and inverse globalisation. As was the case with Make in India—and now Make in Thailand and Make in Vietnam—nations will want MNCs to invest capital and introduce technology in faraway destinations.

In the past, globalisation was measured by the expansion of MNCs in other countries. With their clout and influence, MNCs acted like mini-governments. Today, globalisation is seen from the lens of the recipients of foreign investments. The receivers of foreign inflows are at the centre of things, the nuclei around which capital revolves. The power of FDI destinations will grow in the near future, as MNCs try to combat the twin pressures of protectionism and localisation.

Decoupling Effect: Disruptive Distribution

Clearly, nations will continue to depend on imports for a long time; everything cannot be made locally. One cannot simply reverse globalisation, which is now a matter of reality, not choice. Ravi Sehgal, chairman, Engineering Export Promotion Council of India, says that if the UK

Nations will have multiple global suppliers instead of just China.

They will continue to depend on imports, as one cannot reverse globalisation.

wants to reduce its dependence on imported goods from 90 per cent to 50 per cent, it will take a minimum of three to four years of concerted efforts. And it will be grossly expensive. A few years ago, Apple found that its initiative to make one product solely in the US flopped because of the lack of world-class screws in America.

However, COVID-19 proved the fragility of global supply



chains, which, in some cases, were monopolised by countries like China. Nations realised that a medical or any other crisis can break down these global channels and, hence, there is a need for alternate ones. This overdependence on a single distribution chain for supply of components, finished goods and services and sensitive products will undergo a sea change. Henceforth, many governments will insist on at least a second, even a third and fourth, supplier.

Ramesh Arunachalam, a strategy adviser to several nations, explains, "Supply chains were disrupted globally because of the virus. However, having suffered because of the shortages (during the lockdowns), most countries don't wish to be in the same situation again. Hereafter, there will be no preferred location of suppliers and vendors." Different nations can adopt different tactics to diversify and minimise the risks. The options will range from complete "reshoring" to multiple supply chains.

Academician Shannon K. O'Neil thinks that smarter nations and businesses will strive to make the global distribution links "redundant" rather than abandon them. Such an approach implies, more vendors, more inventories, more back-up options and strategic stockpiles of critical reserves like oil, medical equipment and minerals. Such redundancies will prove to be extremely expensive, but they will also "increase reliability and resilience, benefiting countries, companies, and consumers alike".

Some nations, like Thailand, Vietnam and India, which can present themselves as alternative FDI destinations compared to China, will benefit from the decoupling effect and short-term disruptions in distribution. They can turn into the new global vendors. Contrary to expectations, China may not suffer much. According to some studies, "Chinese economy is less dependent on exports as an engine of growth". Its exports, as a percentage of annual GDP, slipped to 19.5 per cent in 2018, compared to 32.6 per cent a decade ago.

Big Bullies, Maybe Half-Giants: Cold War 2.0 Or 1.5

There are two theories as to what will happen to the global superpower (the US) and aspiring ones (China and Russia) in the post-COVID-19 world. Former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd wrote in a recent article that "China and the United States are both likely to emerge from this crisis significantly diminished". They will look like giant-size pygmies or half-giants. There will be no Pax Americana, Pax Sinica or Pax Muscovo. Richard Haass, President, Council on Foreign Relations, USA, predicts a "world in even greater disarray". International anarchy will reign.

Others disagree. In the new confrontation over geopolitics, diplomacy and economics, China, which had lost the plot in early 2020, has bounced back with a winning blueprint. Kurt M. Campbell and Rush Doshi wrote that Beijing moved "quickly and adeptly" to take advantage of the US's mistakes. The "sheer chutzpah of China's move is hard to overstate". In a new world of ever-weakening economies, many more may end up depending on China despite the moves to decouple from it.

A few commentators say the US economy was written off several times in the past and the doomsayers were wrong. In 2010, most predicted that the US wouldn't recover from the

2008 financial crisis. As writer Fareed Zakaria said, the problem lay more with the "rise of the rest (of the world)". Contrary to expectations, points out writer Ruchir Sharma, "the United States traversed a full decade (2010s) without suffering a single recession" for the first time in the past 150 years.

Irrespective of whether these powers remain or maintain their global weights, they may act like "big bullies" who leave no stone unturned to discredit their enemies. The battle lines were drawn a few years ago; they will become more permanent. Welcome to a new era—Cold War 2.0, or at least 1.5. Trade, investments and national economic policies will be managed by governments and not dictated by markets.

Industry 5.0: Structural Reforms And Labour Lessons

One thing is clear. COVID-19 possibly signifies an end to the age of industrial revolution, which was largely driven by mechanisation, factories and services driven by fuels like coal, oil and renewables. The coming decade will be dominated by automation, robotics, AI, 3D printing and smart techniques that will aid economic nationalism, protectionism and localisation. Technology will help reduce costs and make it worthwhile for nations to locally make more components and finished products.

For example, the textiles sector may revive in Europe as automation takes away the cost advantage of lower wages enjoyed by developing nations like Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. One-time investments in technology will be justified by stable local supplies at competitive costs. If this happens, there will be a paradigm shift or realignment in

The world will be in disarray; there will be no Pax Americana, Pax Sinica, or Pax Muscovo.

The US has shown its ability to bounce back. China may emerge stronger from the crisis.

global manufacturing. Already, manufacturing is on the rise in the US and Germany and others like Japan and South Korea find themselves back in the race.

Another thing is obvious: in the near term, the contours of offices and the organisation of employees will undergo dramatic changes. This is clearly the last stages of a period of regular 9-5 jobs. Post-crisis, nations will seek opportunities to reform and change labour as well as laws that govern it. Some, like India, will hope to please businesses at the expense of labour. Recently several states increased the work hours in factories and made it easier to sack workers and more difficult to form trade unions.

Others, like China, hope to provide more freedom to its workers. At present, millions of Chinese labourers travel huge distances every day from rural peripheries to their places of work in, or nearer to, cities. Beijing wishes to allow them to live in cities. It will be a huge change in mindset for a dictatorship that believed in strict controls over labour. Land reforms in the near future may also lead to migration to urban areas.


For many leaders in developing countries, especially India and China, this is an opportune time to push through relevant structural reforms. While they will give an edge to their economies over the next few years, they will bolster the purchasing power of their respective middle classes. The process began a few years ago. Last year, China reduced and rejigged its taxes to put more money in the hands of consumers to boost local demand. Other countries like the US and India did the same in the recent past.

This marks the end of the 'Age of Industrial Revolution', and ushers in Industry 5.0.

This may lead to labour reforms that benefit workers in China.



Such moves are crucial because they will allow nations to reduce dependence on exports and foreign markets, curtail imports or foreign suppliers and enhance economic nationalism through local consumption of domestic goods and services. In the recent past, several export-oriented economies discovered that they need an internal focus. In fact, in the run-up to the next five-year plan to be unveiled in 2021, there is a huge debate in China regarding focusing even more on internal demand at the expense of exports.

These transformations will enable nations to leapfrog from Industry 3.0 to Industry 5.0 and bypass the intermediate stage. But, as one can imagine, it will not result in standalone, independent economic entities. There will be certain dependencies, but of varying and differing natures. Nations will be more independent, at least in crucial areas. Certain redundancies will creep in, specific inefficiencies and crisis-driven risks will vanish. In the new reworked world, economic nationalism will join hands with globalisation. The hyperlocal will aggressively surf over past glocal waves. 

Seize The Opportunity

A self-dependent India and emphasis on the local can help shape a new world order



PRIME

Minister Modi's call for an *Atma Nirbhar Bharat* (self-dependent India) is not

claptrap. It is a call for a comprehensive civilisational self-renewal. It articulates India's engagement with the world at a time when the contours and narrative of globalisation are being sharply debated and examined. When public intellectuals speak of an unfortunate return to a fortress existence, when many speak of isolationism and falling back upon oneself, the PM speaks of being self-reliant but not self-centred and a future of "togetherness and resilience". He talks about delineating India's trajectory in shaping a post-COVID-19 world order.

The PM has also emphasised the need for a new globalisation. This globalisation, he has argued, needs to be human-centred. This stands in clear contradistinction to the narrative of globalisation that has evolved over the past few decades—a globalisation which is primarily focused on homogeneity, is at times hegemonic and has manifested in some, a keenness towards exploitation and imposing uniformity. PM Modi is perhaps among the few, or the only world leader, who while immersed in handling the corona challenge, has also kept articulating fundamental thoughts and ideas on a post-corona world and the role India would play in shaping it.

His *Atma Nirbhar Bharat* vision, his call for being "vocal on the local" are part of that unbroken chain of thoughts. He firmly feels that India's moment of shaping a new world order post the pandemic has come. Indeed, the post-corona world calls for a new order. As thinkers and experts have indicated ad nauseam, never has the world seen such a reversal, such upheaval and overturning of most of our established notions and beliefs since the Spanish

Flu pandemic a hundred years ago, or since World War II about eight decades ago. The dominant structure and narrative of the current wave of globalisation is under intense scrutiny and Modi's call for a renewed look at globalisation came early into the pandemic, when most others were trying to fathom the extent of its impact on international dealings.

In a write-up towards the end of April and in his interactions with young professionals on the next major ideas that will shape the post-COVID-19 world, the PM had indicated how India, a youthful nation with the zeal for innovation, can alter and restructure the terms and framework of globalisation. He had written about India emerging as a crucial supply-chain




Modi has called for a new kind of globalisation that is human-centric and avoids homogeneity and hegemony.

hub: "India, with the right blend of the physical and the virtual, can emerge as the global nerve centre of complex modern multinational supply chains in the post-COVID-19 world." He had spoken of the need to "seize the opportunity". His call for being vocal on the local, thus, has given the first impetus towards seizing that opportunity. The emphasis on the "local" also rekindles our call to action whenever a struggle for our destiny has been in the offing. It is a call that has always galvanised our collective imagination, it is a call that has always remained intrinsic to the psyche of a free India. Despite facing decades of ridicule and misinterpretation, that sense has survived and has seen India emerge as one of the leading start-up and innovation hubs globally. This call was also a defining dimension throughout our struggle for freedom.

PM Modi envisages a programme for a self-dependent India. In fact, most of our epochal thinkers who articulated a free India also spoke of her role in the

world. They spoke of being nationalist and internationalist and negated a rootless cosmopolitanism, a rootless universalism, while also decrying compartmentalised self-centredness. They staunchly advocated the need for reviving and strengthening our cultural and industrial capacities to turn India into a centre of global transactions—for ideas as well as goods and services.

The narrative of the 21st century being the Asian century is taking shape. In fashioning the Asian century, India has begun to play a pivotal, defining and civilisational role. When the PM says, "India's culture considers the world as one family and progress in India is part of, and also contributes to, progress in the whole world" and "the world trusts that India has a lot to contribute towards the development of entire humanity", he is reiterating our civilisational aspirations articulated over ages by some of the leading shapers of our collective destiny. 

(Views are personal)



WORLD TOUR



IRAN Friendly fire involving two Iranian naval vessels in the Gulf of Oman killed 19 sailors and injured 18 others. In January, an Iranian air defence unit had fired a surface-to-air missile, bringing down a Ukrainian plane, killing all aboard. But the latest incident, part of a naval exercise, raises questions about the Iranian navy's professionalism.



JAPAN The infection rate/death toll aren't high in global terms, but Japanese leaders received the worst public rating for their response to the coronavirus pandemic, a survey of 23 nations found. A separate poll found 57 per cent of Japanese were dissatisfied with the government and 84.4 per cent feel insecure amidst a stalled economy.



MEXICO Moises Escamilla May, 45, a notorious Mexican gang leader, died in prison after contacting coronavirus. He was leader of a group within the feared criminal cartel Los Zetas and was serving a 37-year sentence for organised crime, including his role in the decapitation of 12 people in Yucatan.



FOREIGN HAND

GETTY IMAGES

THE coronavirus lockdown that forced much of the world to stay indoors has sparked off a global debate: whether it is a civic duty to report violators of lockdown rules or does it amount to spying on neighbours? More importantly, what determines the difference? Most people around the world have obeyed orders to stay home, though there are some who haven't. What should the obeyers do about the rule-breakers? Should they report them as part of their civic duty or should they simply mind their own business?

Many nations and cities have passed emergency laws to make infringement of lockdown rules a crime punishable by fines or jail. Hotlines have also been promoted by some to gather intelligence.

According to the BBC, in Australia's Victoria state, friends who gathered to play video games were reported to the police and guests at an "illegal" dinner party were fined. And as infections escalated across New South Wales—while crowds flocked to the beaches—it led the state's premier Gladys Bereiklian to urge people to report lockdown breakers. More than 500 calls were made to the police in the week that followed.

In Singapore, where the law does not prize personal freedom over collective responsibility, an official app to report things like cracked footpaths has been updated to receive alerts of people out and about. So many people filed reports—700 in two days—that the government urged the public to tell them things they actually witnessed. Thousands have also engaged in online shaming forums. The largest Singaporean 'Covidiot' group on Facebook has over 26,000 members. It's littered with grainy pictures of alleged breaches.

Yet, is it unusual to report on others? The strong Western liberal tradition have mostly made people to look down on those who 'snitch'. But in many European nations' histories, particularly during the rise of fascism and McCarthyism in the US, people were encouraged by governments to spy on friends and neighbours.

Is "dobbing in", as it is called in Australia, the right thing to do? Even if it's a small percentage of people who fail to socially distance, that could well undermine everyone else's hard work, argue experts. Thus, it can be extremely galling if people feel that others aren't keeping their side of the bargain. Whatever be the reason, spying on others still make large numbers of people uncomfortable. [D](#)

Future of Flexible Workspaces: With Adversity comes opportunity

The largely unknown nature of the corona virus has caused much speculation and uncertainty along all industrial avenues. Amidst the chaos, companies face significant challenge as they attempt to prepare the workplace of the future. While the times are as worrisome as they could be, business leaders have a unique opportunity to shape how employees do the work in the future without compromising on their safety as flexible workspace providers formulate new techniques to offer a more conducive and adaptive ecosystem to cope with disruptive elements.



Ankit Jain,
Co-founder



Sensitivity towards surfaces

The agile workspace providers such as Skootr are working towards identifying and developing a touch-less system in areas of high activity and interaction such as reception, meeting rooms, cafeteria, and lobby. When it comes to aesthetics, designers are looking at alternatives to source such fabric & surface materials for the interiors which can be treated with cleanable solutions, without ruining its integrity, to avoid the possibility of any pathological contamination.



Well-sanitized common areas

Regular cleaning and sterilizing of common areas, improved footfall management equipped with screening protocols along with the prerequisite of isolation zones within offices will become an essential part of every workspace. Asset managers of properties that include mutually shared services such as cafes, retail and agile spaces will need to improve their existing hygiene policies to safeguard tenants and employees from any health-related risks in future.

Throughout all economic and social avenues, including the real estate sector, factors such as reduced demand and delayed business decisions are creating significant impediments to business operations. However, there emanates an encouraging glimmer of hope that what appears to be an enormous hurdle to businesses is in fact an opportunity to grow, learn and evolve. At Skootr, we are ever committed to business excellence and ready to take up these challenges head-on with a positive resolution. And, with this dedication and perseverance, we see the office sector will recover ultimately.

Inclination towards wellness-oriented designs

Occupiers will place a stronger emphasis on meeting international standards of building specifications as they strengthen their commitment to employee health and wellness. Grade A properties with sustainability, safety and wellness features, particularly those related to indoor air quality, ventilation systems, water drainage systems and other indoor environmental features, will draw greater claim in the future.

De-densification of workspaces

The new pivotal point in the segment of workspace design is social distancing. Industry standards are likely to improve wherein the unit space acquired by individuals may go up considerably. Hence, the workspace designs will embody comfortable density of people to maintain appropriate distance and cleanliness.

The War Machines

India embraces newer tech to stem the spread of COVID-19, but the longstanding stereotype of its system running on 'jugaad' is being tested

Jeevan Prakash Sharma

IN mankind's war against a touch-sensitive nanoscopic virus, the soldiers wear scrubs and the war machines dispense hand sanitisers, sterilise hospitals and public spaces, report people breaking stay-at-home orders, or tell if you have come in contact with an infected person. Savvy. But do we have machines and technology to tame an advancing army of mutating, multiplying rogues—like Raktabija the asura who had a clone from each drop of his blood that fell on the ground? Not yet. We are not used to such wars—since that Stone Age giant learnt to strap a sharp flint onto his spear, we trained our brain to build tools to massacre our own species. We never created a missile to slay itty bitty bugs that have killed more humans than all the wars combined. Maybe we will find a revolutionary cure eventually. Until then, we are at the mercy of our evolutionary immune system and the sneaky police drones hovering above our rooftops or by our balconies, checking if we are socially distanced adequately. Don't be startled if you hear a whirr of propellers and a siren blast. Woop woop, woooooohhhh! They got you (out and about without a mask).

Yet, as history points out, humans adapt and adopt new tools as the war progresses. Who thought an unmanned flying object—Garuda, a drone—would disinfect the alleys of ancient Banaras, where purification of the soul presides over life, death and paan spits. Garuda's first assignment was spraying disinfectants on a coronavirus hotspot in Madanpura, a heavily populated locality. It removed any need to deploy a civic worker for the job and expose him to infection. Similar janitor drones—which we saw with mouths agape on widely shared WhatsApp videos from China in the early days of the pandemic—are on duty in most major





↑ **Personal protection**—a cop stands guard in Delhi; a woman goes through a sanitising kiosk before entering office; a UV-ray machine to sterilise public spaces

cities and towns in India. The eagle Guruda, god Vishnu's steed, is finding flight deep south too, minus the 'a'. Kochi startup AI Aerial Dynamics has created the unmanned 'Garud' that can monitor body temperature, supply essentials and mist-spray disinfectants.

In Mumbai's Dharavi, another COVID-19 red zone, firefighters use the advanced aerial mist-blowing machine Protector 600 to sanitise the area. In Telangana, engineering and technology solutions company Cyient has given the cops drones kitted out with surveillance cameras to monitor congested areas, thermal imaging payloads and sky speakers for public announcements. "The geothermal camera surveys an area and provides accurate details about the number of people inside a building or on a road. If 200 people are in a building, the

camera reads the body temperature of each one of them from a distance and alerts authorities in case of deviations," says Ankit Kumar, founder of Alternate Global, who is working with several states on drone surveillance.

Drones are old hag—not quite the novelty that it was when the 2009 movie *3 Idiots* featured a quadcopter designed by two IIT Bombay students. These have been around for quite some time. The BSF uses one called Netra. Our pre-wedding videos aren't complete without 'sky' shots from unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV). But flight restrictions keep private drones away from cityscapes for issues ranging from 'sensitive installations' to people's privacy. The Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) allows only drones made by

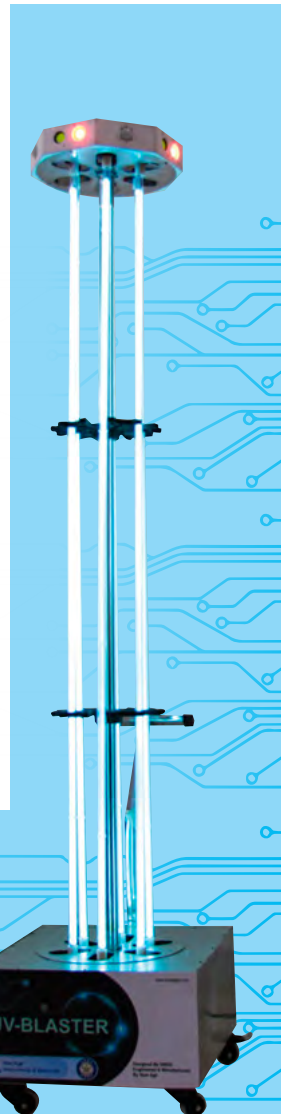
Indian companies to fly and its approval is mandatory before each flight. There are about 15 companies founded by Indians that manufacture drones and the country has 19,000 owners of UAVs. The number could be much higher, but many owners don't register their machines with the DGCA, which provides each drone

Drones are old hag, not quite the novelty like the quadcopter in 3 Idiots of 2003.

- IIT Guwahati has built drones to disinfect large areas; drones mounted with infrared camera to thermal screen groups without human intervention; drones with PA systems

- IIT Ropar has developed a trunk-shaped device fitted with ultraviolet germicidal irradiation technology, which can be placed at doorsteps to sanitise items brought from outside, including grocery and cash. It can cost less than Rs 500.

- IIT Bombay has developed a "digital stethoscope" that can listen to heartbeats from a distance and record them, minimising the risk of healthcare professionals contracting the novel coronavirus from patients.



a unique identification number. The civil aviation ministry has launched a GARUD (Government Authorisation for Relief Using Drones) portal to fast-track conditional exemptions for drones operated by government entities for pandemic-related work.

As governments around the world consider how to monitor new coronavirus outbreaks while reopening their societies, many are starting to bet on smartphone apps to help stanch the pandemic. But their decisions on which technologies to use—and how far those allow authorities to peer into private lives—are highlighting some uncomfortable trade-offs between protecting privacy and public health. Smartphone apps could speed up the process of tracking by collecting data about your movements and alerting you if you've spent time near a confirmed coronavirus carrier. But people are less likely to download a voluntary app if it is intrusive—data collected by governments can also be abused by governments—or their private-sector partners.

India has voluntary government-designed apps that make information directly available to public health authorities. Like the Centre's Aarogya Setu, a contact tracing app that can alert people when they have crossed paths with an infected person. The app has recorded more than a million downloads since its launch. But such containment efforts raise privacy and civil liberties concerns. Congress leader Rahul Gandhi has already alleged that Aarogya Setu can be used to snoop on citizens, a charge the government denied. President Trump fears that a joint initiative by Google and Apple to develop a smartphone "contact tracing" tool would infringe people's freedom and privacy. But developers suggest these apps rely on encrypted "peer to peer" signals sent from phone to phone; these aren't stored in government databases and are designed to conceal individual identities.

Most coronavirus-tracking apps rely on Bluetooth, a decades-old short-range wireless technology, to locate other phones nearby that are running the same app. The Bluetooth apps keep a temporary record of the signals they encounter. If one person using the app is later confirmed to have COVID-19, public health authorities can use that stored

- IIT Roorkee and Kanpur have developed low-cost portable ventilators.
- An engineering student at Punjab's Lovely Professional University (LPU) has developed a device named 'kawach' (shield) which vibrates and glows in case someone breaches the user's safe space of one metre.
- The Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) has developed portable backpacks for sterilizing public places. The system is capable of disinfecting up to 300 square metres. There is a higher capacity kit mounted on a trolley capable of disinfecting up to 3,000 square metres.
- The Ordnance Factory Board (OFB) has developed **two-bed tents** for quarantining coronavirus patients in any terrain.



- Udit Kakar, a 20-year-old youngster from Delhi, is making face shields through 3D printers for the 'frontline warriors' fighting coronavirus.

Anti-COVID apps have a limited reach because only 45 per cent cellphones in India are smart.

data to identify and notify other people who may have been exposed. Delhi has the 'Assess Koro Na' app for door-to-door survey in containment zones. In Punjab, it's the COVA app that alerts people when they come in close proximity of an infected person. The IITs and the Indian Institute of Science (IISc), Bangalore, have developed apps like GoCoronaGo and Sampark-o-Meter for contact tracing. These apps record a digital trail of the strangers an individual encountered. But they are of no use if one comes in contact with an asymptomatic person who hasn't been tested. The only way to find infected people showing no signs of the disease is to ramp up testing. A tough ask for a country of 1.3 billion people, and an entirely different story.

Such apps are just one part of the grid. The smartphone—Amitabh Bachchan called it "the invention of the times", although "the wheel has been dubbed as the greatest invention of all times"—has been a saviour for several sectors. Online classes for students, medical consultancy...the list carries on. But the biggest limitation: many people, particularly in vulnerable populations, don't carry smartphones. Only about 45 per cent cellphones in the country are smart. Connectivity is poor and only 40 per cent of cellphone users have access to the internet. Experts suggest information from apps will work best if amalgamated with data from an extensive network of face-recognition cameras (FRC) at public places to support the surveillance system. "The FRC providers are working on converging thermal camera and FRC software to get facial recognition-based flu detection solution," says Bikas Jha, the country head of Real Networks, a US-based company. Indian firm Vehant Technologies has developed FebriEye, a thermal screening system with additional analytics like face mask and social distance monitoring. It generates an alarm in case of any deviations. The camera is likely to be useful at entrances to events, airports, metro stations, manufacturing plants, buildings, hotels, commercial complexes, shopping malls, and gated societies. Such solutions can replace biometric attendance devices in offices. "Touch-based biometric systems will slowly phase out because of the risk of infections," Jha says. Our cities alr-

● Budhavarapu Sneha, a girl in Telangana, has come up with a device that cautions the user against habits like handshake, touching the face. Wearable like a wristwatch, the device beeps whenever the person involuntarily reaches out for a handshake or touches the face. It will cost Rs 350 apiece.

● Sarthak Jain, 16, from Modern Public School, Shalimar Bagh, New Delhi, has designed an automated touchless doorbell with ultrasonic sensors that detects a person or object within 30 to 50 cm and sets off the buzzer. Doorbells are a medium of transferring virus.

● Researchers at Lovely Professional University, Punjab, have developed a racket that emits ultraviolet light to disinfect almost every surface—grocery, e-commerce packets, keys, notes, vehicles—by waving the device over them. It is covered with a metallic sheet on one side to shield the user from harmful UV rays.

Fitted with a sensor, it shuts off automatically if detects human intervention.

● The National Institute of Technology Karnataka, Surathkal, has turned an old refrigerator into a 'disinfection chamber'. The makers say 99.9 per cent of microorganisms present in items kept inside it are killed.



eady have such techs assisting law-enforcers. Like the CCTV-powered automated number plate recognition system (ANRS), which got a man arrested in Rajkot. It detected he was out in his car 21 times during the lockdown. But can a CCTV camera enforce social distancing inside retail outlets, larger open markets? Can it sense the body temperature of a shopper? Yes. An AI software in the system would heat-map the area, calculate the distance between shoppers/workers and ring out alarms.

All these are preventive mechanisms. The real battles are raging in the hospitals, where more and more health workers are getting infected. This is where a self-sterilising robot—like in the movies—comes handy. Ah, those adorable droids from the *Star Wars*—C-3PO, BB8 and R2-DT! Robots have been deployed at Government Stanley Medical College and Hospital, Chennai, to serve food and medicines to COVID-19 patients. Mahatma Gandhi Memorial Government Hospital has enlisted Zafi and Zafi Medic, products of Tiruchi-based Propeller Technologies, to deliver food and medicines to patients in isolation. Kochi's Asimov Robotics has its

KARMI-Bot, an autonomous robot that has an added feature of being able to disinfect the premises using ultra-violet radiation. Sawai Man Singh Government Hospital, Jaipur, has the locally-manufactured humanoid

'Sona 2.5', while Delhi firm PerSapien has come up with Minus Corona UV Bot, which disinfects hospitals using ultra-violet light. AIIMS Delhi has tied up with an Indian company for advanced AI-powered robots—Milagrow iMap 9 and Humanoid ELF—at its advanced COVID-19 ward to promote physical distancing between health workers and infected patients. The Humanoid ELF enables doctors to monitor and interact with patients remotely. Bored patients in isolation wards can also interact with their relatives from time to time through this robot.

Robots have been used in several verticals—to dispense hand sanitiser, carry prepared meals, disinfect streets. These much-loved robots exist mostly to assist rather than replace humans—and like us, they are prone to errors. So, if you bump into the affable Zafi and the hand sanitiser drops, be nice to place it back on her tray. And give way to Zafi Medic when it is pacing down the hallway cradling a plateful of ward supplies. ☑

↑
Robot army—they are minimising human-to-human contact in hospitals, offices...





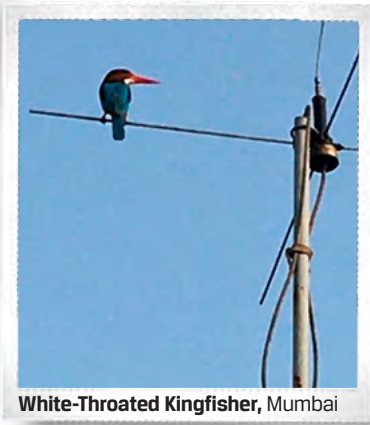
Brahminy Starling, Delhi



Yellow-Footed Green Pigeon, Delhi



House Sparrow (male), Bangalore



White-Throated Kingfisher, Mumbai

Baptism by Bulbul

How and why the most average bird is more meaningful than our rat-race routine



Red-Whiskered Bulbul, Delhi

Lachmi Deb Roy

MRS B has always been a busy bee from breakfast to bedtime—kids’ school, their coursework, husband’s tiffin, sabjiwala, kaamwali, yoga, mom-in-law’s sugar check and medicines, phone-a-friend about niece’s wedding, nephew’s newborn, Facebook, Netflix dramas. Life was caught up in a monotonous whirr of chores and errands. No breaks. She never complained. *C’est la vie*, she would say. Well, until someone in China had a foul bat soup and didn’t take Mummyji’s after-dinner churan—the cure-all in the Delhi household Mrs B commandeers. Her busyness slowed down, like her husband’s business, since that skipped churan hustled the human race indoors. In this quarantined world, she has a little guest from a parallel realm that resides next to us; a sanctuary Mrs B hardly ever gave a sideways glance before. Every morning and late afternoon he drops by, without fail. He doesn’t need a travel pass, for he is a blithesome bulbul. After sundown, the guardian owl makes his nightly run, often bivouacing on her balcony. Mrs B never was a bird person. The caws and coos couldn’t be bothered when the washing

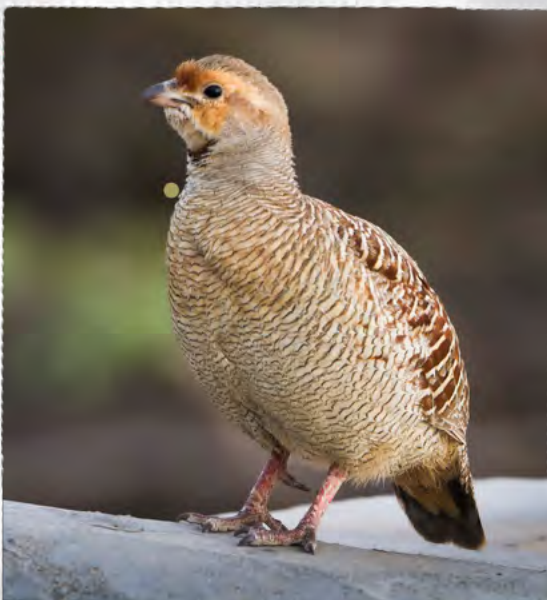
PHOTOGRAPHS BY: P.J. SAIKIA, N. CHANDRA, B. AURORA, V. DEWAN, G. DENIESE, A. BHARATHY, M.B. KUMARASWAMY, A. BANERJEE, KANISHK VATS

machine's ding and the pressure cooker's whistle consumed her waking hours. But the clock is kind to her now and she can engage with Nature, which she thought didn't exist in her concrete, gated society. She loves to entertain bulbul with chicku morsels. And be entertained herself. What about owly? His hoots and 360-degree neck turns are no longer overlooked.

Bathed in a dull sepia light from the sky, he is quite a dapper if you take the time to look at him up close. He is a red-whiskered bulbul. A common passerine bird, the species is a fixture in cities too. But the key to discovering their hidden delights: slow down, and look around. With free time made available by the pandemic-induced prophylactic measures, people like Mrs B are now discovering the *great outdoors* from their balconies. In fact, her new-found interest has made Mrs B a bird lover—soaking up species names and plumage patterns from the web and trying to memorise the details. And the family's new pastime: Identify the Bird. They are neo-converts, taking small steps into the birding com-



Indian Peafowl, Delhi



Grey Francolin, Jodhpur



Indian Silverbill (Munia), Jodhpur



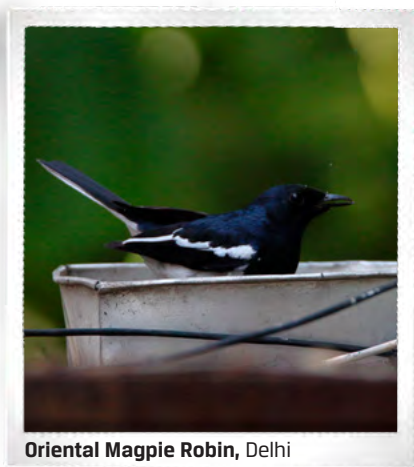
Green Bee-eater, Gurgaon

munity. A good sign because birds are the marker of the environment. The pollution we create, the trees we destroy. The lockdown has cleaned the air, quieted the roads, and birdsong can be heard again. The deserted cities may have emboldened the birds—they are anyway curious by nature—to venture into our yards and verandahs. But there is a good chance they will go into hiding again once our *ordinary* life reopens, resumes. Will Mrs B miss them? Of course, she says. Then? Well, she is not a pro who can spot a bird inside foliage with an eye closed, like one-eyed jack sniffing out the rum in the deep of a dark galley. But she won't forget what Bulbul the Visitor taught her in a little over 100 days. Care for a world we have condemned to self-isolation long ago.

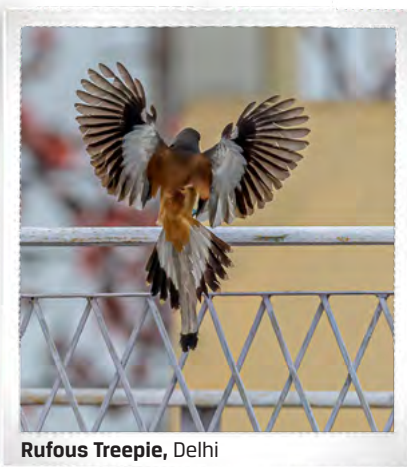
What about the experienced birders who often identify species on jizz alone? “My friends are spotting rare



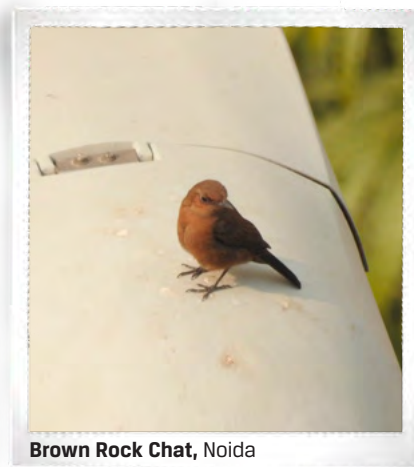
An Angry Bird requiem for caged humans



Oriental Magpie Robin, Delhi



Rufous Treepie, Delhi



Brown Rock Chat, Noida



Asian Paradise Flycatcher, Bangalore



Green Bee-eaters courting, Bangalore

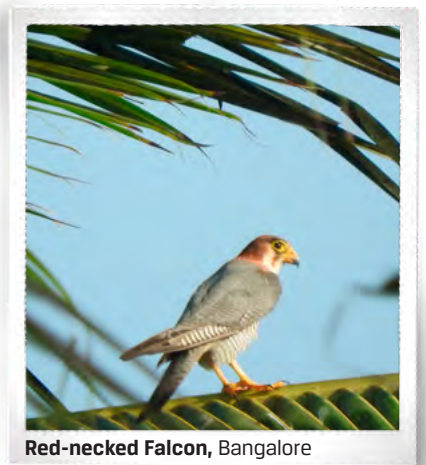
species in their backyards. The lockdown has given us ample time to wait and watch...from balconies, roofs and gardens,” says Nitin Chandra in Delhi. A fellow birdwatcher in Bangalore, Gerard Deniese, never expected so many birds around his home. “I saw a male Asian Paradise Flycatcher near my home. Can you beat that?” He rattles out an impressive lockdown log: sunbirds, tailor birds and the Oriental Magpie Robin. Bhavneet Aurora from Delhi shares similar excitement. “It was quiet initially...only pigeons and crows. Then the mynahs, sunbirds, robins began to sing. I spotted the Coppersmith Barbet, Rose-Ringed Parakeet, Asian Koel, Shikra and a Kestrel.” Last heard, Mrs B had an entire flock of visitors a while ago—the Green Bee-eaters. And yes, once the travel ban is lifted, she plans a trip to Pangot and Sigrī—no destination is more alluring than these two for bird lovers. A birdie told her. 📷



Common Tailor Bird, Delhi



Parakeets and Starling, Delhi



Red-necked Falcon, Bangalore

'Is a polluted, dirty and sick planet the legacy we want?'

National Award-winning actress Raveena Tandon is known for championing various causes. She speaks to Giridhar Jha about her social media campaign to stop assaults against healthcare workers fighting coronavirus. Excerpts:

What prompted you to launch a campaign in support of doctors?

→ I I don't think it needed much prompting after what we read and saw in the media. In the war against COVID-19, doctors and nurses are our foot soldiers. And yet, look at the way they are being treated—they are beaten up, stones are being hurled at them. I saw pictures of a bruised, bleeding doctor the other day. It is shocking and sad to see that we have stooped so low. We need to spread awareness about how important they are.

Your campaign also advocates for checks on fake news.

→ These incidents often happen because of misinformation. Some kind of brainwashing is making people take such drastic, misguided steps. Under normal circumstances, if someone is coming to save you and your family, why would you attack that very person? People from all walks of life need to take responsibility—this is not a celebrity-only campaign. If you see something like this, stop it.

You have been vocal against the opening of alcohol and paan-gutka shops during the lockdown.

→ People talk about the revenue boost to the economy through liquor sales, but think of what families will go through. Most daily-wage earners have no income. Think of the families where alcoholism is already an issue. Men will splurge all their savings on booze. There has been a shocking increase in domestic violence in this period. Imagine, women are coming out to complain about domestic violence despite the lockdown. And then, there must be many unreported cases. People are anyway frustrated under the present circumstances, so women who try to stop men from drinking probably get beaten up. We are trying to inculcate hygiene by telling people not to spit in public. The minute we open paan and gutkha shops, it will start happening all over again. Coronavirus



spreads through droplets. I don't see these things as so essential right now. I could be wrong, but that is how I feel.

You are known for speaking out on various issues. Are you not afraid of trolls?

→ I do get trolled a lot, but then, if people like us don't raise our voices, there would be no difference between a failed state and ours. I think the minute you become a mother, you start worrying about the world and caring about everything. What kind of planet are we handing over to the generations to come? In 40-50 years, we will be dead and gone, but what are we leaving behind for our children? Is this the legacy we want—a polluted, dirty and sick planet?

You are now known as an activist-actress, a far cry from your earlier glamorous image? Was this transition difficult?

→ Not really. I made that transition in cinema intentionally by working in *Shool*. After doing several fun movies, I wanted to challenge myself as an actor to know what I could and couldn't do. I wanted to break out of the mould and push myself. I worked in *Daman*, one of the few films addressing domestic violence and marital rape.

It completely changed the scenario. Today, a film like *Thappad* (2020) is being made, which is so creditable.

You have grown-up daughters, but that did not dissuade one of your admirers from proposing to you for your next birth. How does it feel to be so loved?

→ (Laughs) I am grateful to God for all that he has given to me. As far as my girls are

concerned, I became a legal guardian


(by adopting them) when I was only 21. I

changed my image as an actress with *Shool*, but as a human being I have always been what I am. It was something I was brought up with.

Do you have plans to return to the screen anytime soon?

→ I have not signed any movie at the moment, but if something with a strong social message comes my way, I might do it. I believe that cinema is the best way to reach out to people if you want to convey a message.

What are you doing during the lockdown?

→ The lockdown has given time to families to bond. Everyone was so busy earlier, but now people are rediscovering each other. That has been the silver lining—we are spending time with our loved ones. 

A Mole Embedded In Tradition

Four young Muslim rebels raise a thick cloud of apostasy. Yet their much-maligned attempts to 'fit in' run into the impenetrable wall of their identity. This is a timely state of the nation novel.

Shireen Quadri

ZAHID-e-tang-nazar ne mujhe kafir jaana/aur kafir ye samajhta hai Musalman hoon main (the narrow-minded devout considers me an infidel/ and the infidel sees me as a Muslim) reads an oft-quoted Urdu couplet. In Sabin Iqbal's debut novel, *The Cliffhangers*, which speaks to our broken times rife with religious division, four friends are faced with a similar situation. Usman, Thaha, Jahangir and Moosa, four young Muslim boys while growing up in a sleepy coastal town of Varkala in Kerala—where the two dominant communities are Hindus and Muslims—decide to throw off the yoke of their religious identity and shun its restrictive practices.

The four pride themselves on being Muslim by identity and *kafirs* by deeds — they flout every rule, from eating pork, consuming liquor, and indulging in illicit sex. The teenage narrator, Moosa, lives with his parents and two sister-in-laws; his two brothers work in West Asia, as did his father once.

The 'cliffhangers' is a self-appropriated epithet for Moosa and his three friends, who spend most of their days at the cliff—school dropouts with no career aspirations, they have little family responsibilities. They loaf idly,

VARKALA SERVES AS A MICROCOSM OF THE 'NEW INDIA' WHICH HAS NORMALISED LYNCHINGS OF MUSLIMS AND IS STEADILY MARGINALISING THEM. IQBAL HAS A CLEAR GAZE ON OUR DARK AND DYSTOPIAN REALITY.

and hover expectedly around foreign travellers in a bid to learn English, hoping that they, too, could go to the Gulf. Of course, being fluent in English would mean better prospects for them.

Moosa, in his unflinching first-person narration—which sparkles with honesty and humour—takes us inside the free-spirited world that he forms with his friends and their relationship with the world outside, a world corroded by communal hatred. He also delicately unravels the goings-on in his own orthodox family, and that of the other three boys—the undertow of sexual desire and deprivation, and the underpinnings of incest. Here, the most unseemly and degrading debauchery—and adultery—thrives beneath the calm surface of tradition. Moosa, for instance, loses his virginity to his sister-in-law, who escapes to his room night after night.

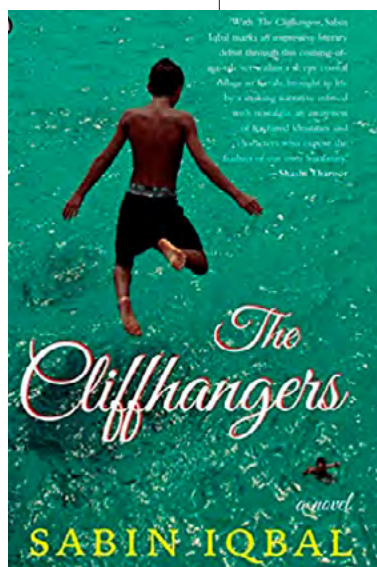
For the four boys, discarding the clothes they can be identified with and slipping into trainers, sweatpants or tracksuits is clearly not enough. They also have to “befriend” members of the Hindu community, like Vivekannan, an aspiring IAS who quits his training to fight against the corrupt system, and Balannan, who belongs to the right-wing group, Hindu Rashtra Sangh (HRS). At home, the boys are frowned upon by their families; the clergy thinks that they have gone astray and looks down upon them. Outside their four walls, their identities keep bringing them on the radar of the HRS, the police and the politicians. Whenever a crime happens in the town, the first suspects on the radar of the police are the ‘cliffhangers’. So, when a foreigner, Susan, is raped on new year's eve, SI Dewan, the police in-charge, arrests the four boys, despite the fact that he doesn't have any evidence against them, ominously reminding them that their “identity” is their “enemy”.

Like their own religion, the boys are hell bent on defying diktats that divide. At some point, Moosa says: “Our feet are rooted in the sands on the beach, and our hearts are anchored to the waters of the sea. We were born here, and we will die here.... This is my land, this is my country. No one can come between us. Neither saffron nor green can come in our way.”

Varkala serves as a microcosm of the ‘new India’ which has normalised lynchings of Muslims under the suspicion of carrying or consuming beef, and their gradual and steady marginalisation. Iqbal has a clear, unwavering gaze on the dark and dystopian realities of our times, the contours of which he has skilfully delineated in *Cliffhangers* —a novel which, at once, looks both within and outside, examining the flaws of a community as well as a nation.

No matter how far the ‘cliffhangers’ withdraw from their religion, reveling in the freedom that such a state brings, the burden of their identity follows them, hanging like an albatross around their necks. They must grapple with it all their lives, coming to terms with the fact that while secularism and heterogeneity are ideal, religious segregation is a reality. Towards the end, Moosa notes — with sadness, regret, and helplessness—how Muslims could, in no way, undo their identity. “We have to live with the indelible mark of the lost foreskin,” he observes. ■

Sabin Iqbal
THE CLIFFHANGERS
| Aleph Book Company |
172 pages |
Rs 499





Hey, Cool Shades

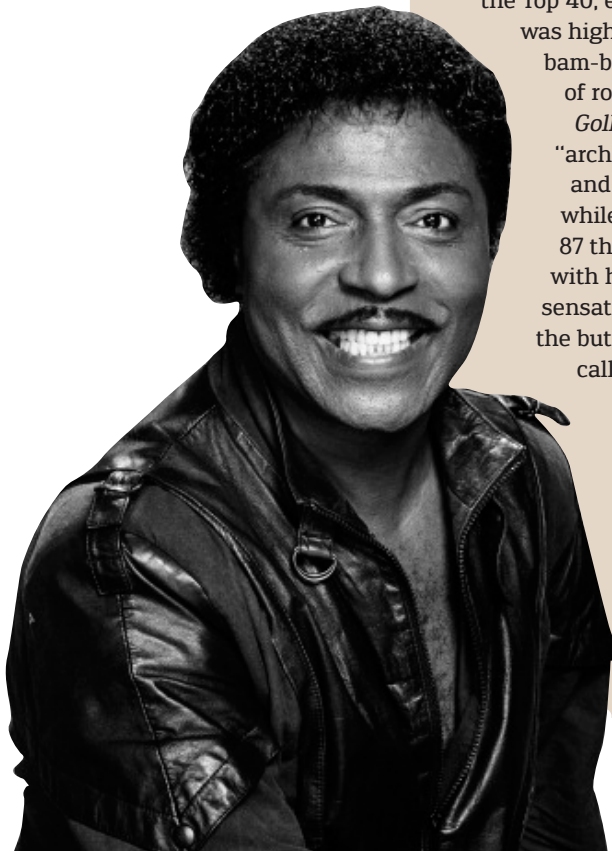
The shutdown has weighed light on cricketers around the world—no 100-tonne expectations slowing their steps, no lugging kits around, no soul-wearying schedule of the IPL. Some teach their kids the rudiments of batsmanship; some give their dogs necessary catch practice. Dhoni, an outdoorsy man, has repaired to his Ranchi farmhouse, where we see him take a leisurely run with daughter Ziva, who is clearly giving her all in a sprint. The highlight: she trundles off the grassy lawn, protesting tiredness, as MS calls her back in vain. Our Cap'n Cool gets his comeuppance.

retro

ticket

The Big Little

It was 1956 when his classic *Tutti Frutti* landed like a hand grenade in the Top 40, exploding from radios and off turntables across the US. It was highlighted by a memorable call: 'Wop-bop-a-loo-bop-a-lop-bam-boom'. A string of hits followed, providing the foundation of rock music: *Lucille*, *Keep A Knockin*, *Long Tall Sally*, *Good Golly Miss Molly*. That's Little Richard, the self-proclaimed "architect of rock 'n roll" whose piercing wail, pounding piano and towering pompadour irrevocably altered popular music while introducing black R&B to white America. He died aged 87 this month. Richard's hyperkinetic piano playing, coupled with his howling vocals and hairdo, made him an implausible sensation—a gay, Black man celebrated across America during the buttoned-down Eisenhower era. He brought what was once called "race music" into the mainstream. He sold more than 30 million records worldwide, and his influence on other musicians was equally staggering. The Beatles' Paul McCartney imitated Richard's signature yelps; ex-bandmate John Lennon covered his *Rip It Up* and *Ready Teddy* on the 1975 *Rock and Roll* album. And Bruce Springsteen has still been performing *Miss Molly* live.



GETTY IMAGES



All That Glitters...

Protracted exposure to loved ones has various effects on people, as we're tirelessly reporting each week: a plunge into social work, frenetic workouts, narcissistic photoshoots, prized time with loved ones and now, the good old discord. Kim Kardashian, whose dress, drenched in honey and sparkling with rhinestones, we had so justifiably excoriated, is suffering a 'rough patch' in her relationship with husband-rapper Kanye West. Locked up in LA with their four children, they now live in opposite ends of the house. Casus belli? Domestic responsibilities, including taking care of the kids. Go figure. What about the full-time nannies?

Sing Then, Rockabye

You'll agree that as the economy totters, unemployment rises to 25 per cent and airwaves are full of the anguished cries of the hungry and the abandoned hurtling towards a new low, the least our privileged stars can do is provide chorus to a ditty that peddles that worn-thin homily: 'this too shall pass'. *Guzar Jayega* is composed by Jatin Sharma, with Amitabh Bachchan, as pictured here, voicing the solemn narration. As many as 60 celebrities sang along, from Raveena to Sunny Leone, from Babul Supriyo to Yuvraj Singh and Leander Paes: "be strong...be safe... love...." We applaud in earnest.



GETTY IMAGES

MUMBAI Diary



Isheeta Ganguly
is a Tagore fusion
singer, writer and
director

Groundhog Day

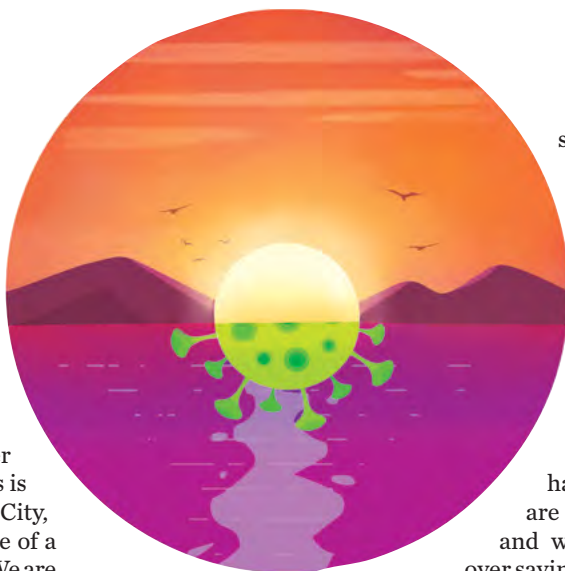
The sequel of *Contagion* is unfolding all over the globe. The eighth week of the lockdown in Mumbai is not really Day 56, I tell myself; it's just the same day all over again. The 'incidence rate', a term that has leapt from epidemiology courses to the media and everyday discourse, shows a shocking 600-plus new cases in Mumbai each day. There are over 10,000 active cases. Of course, this is a dream compared to New York City, where I moved from. The first line of a famous Tagore song reminds us, "We are all emperors in the kingdom of the emperor...or how else could we dance to His wishes?" With the novel coronavirus' machinations, we can only do a babel dance to 'His' wishes.

Zombies In Queue

As I make my way to the supermarket war zone, the water near Haji Ali glistens more brightly than ever—like wet diamonds. This novel, less polluted Mumbai has a silence, uncertainty and pain that reminds me of the air the month after 9/11 in New York—a smell of burnt oil and lost dreams. After what feels like a cinematic escape from prison, which I re-enact every week, I reach the police-patrolled supermarket parking lot. There are squares marked six feet apart, each circumscribing masked zombies waiting to enter a morgue. The once-upon-a-time Pavlovian cacophony of Ed Sheeran's saccharine numbers, chattering Pilates moms and retired Sensex men trading notes over mocha cappuccinos has been drowned out by the silence. When will it be normal? Never. The realities of our ghost cities have all merged, puncturing our delusions and coveted circles, creating a silent retreat for birds.

The Cloak's Piercing

As I enter the emergency room-like zone, my short grocery list suddenly feels long and confusing. At the produce



section, the carrots and beetroot look soggy. As if they have emerged from a war zone, beaten, bruised and pummelled. But then, Raju appears, gloved and masked. He has seen me hunting for the vegetables and quickly brings over a fresh lot. I am relieved to see him amid the unrecognisable. I recall my last meeting with him. Before the apocalypse engulfed our lives, a friend and I were sitting exactly here having coffee. The chairs and tables are now missing. Raju, in his twenties and well-groomed, had gingerly walked over saying he had overheard I was working on a film. He is an actor and wondered if I had any leads.

I was impressed with his forthright manner and told him I would keep him in mind. Raju handed me his card. As he trailed off with our cups, my friend raised her eyebrows. I was surprised by her reaction and said that I appreciated his spark and thought he was a 'seeker'. I admired seekers as my journey to Mumbai has been one of a reverse migrant from New York. I had appreciated Raju's drive to seize the moment, but dismissed it afterwards.

Today, however, things are different. A wicked witch from the East and then the West has pierced the urban cloak of apathy. I could be next—the thought was humbling. At the check-out counter, Raju's smile was unflinching. He looked as sunny as he did a month ago—his calm an oasis amid sloppy, raided shelves and panic buyers. I cautiously ask about his family. He says they are labourers who returned to Bihar without any income or savings. "The lockdown needs to end now. People will die hungry," he says softly.

When This Is Over...

I think of Raju's hunger, his dreams that I callously dismissed two weeks ago. His is a patch on an endless quilt of lost dreams where hunger pangs, now greater than ever, smother the chance to hone talent. Besides, despite his charm and presence, Raju would never be seen as "fitting" the part. He will be typecast—a driver, butler or at best, a clerk. The truth of burnt oil and lost dreams. My thoughts suddenly shift. At Columbia, we studied how pandemics rebounded in a worse second wave. Would we be able to shoot the film by late fall? If so, with actors wearing masks? Perhaps not. The light at the end of the tunnel suddenly seems dim. I stop the shopping cart and turn back to Raju. "When this is over..." I pause. He nods knowingly, his eyes smiling above his mask. I am grateful.

As I leave the air-conditioned cold storage, my eyes meet the blinding sun. I gaze up to see the sunlight creeping through branches. It is a promise. A promise that beyond these burnt bodies and lost dreams, nature will give us another chance. She will give us a chance to be better for the planet and the humans who survived. I exit the parking lot and check my purse. Raju's card is still there.