



SACHIN TENDULKAR LOCKDOWN DIARY

SPECIAL DIGITAL ISSUE

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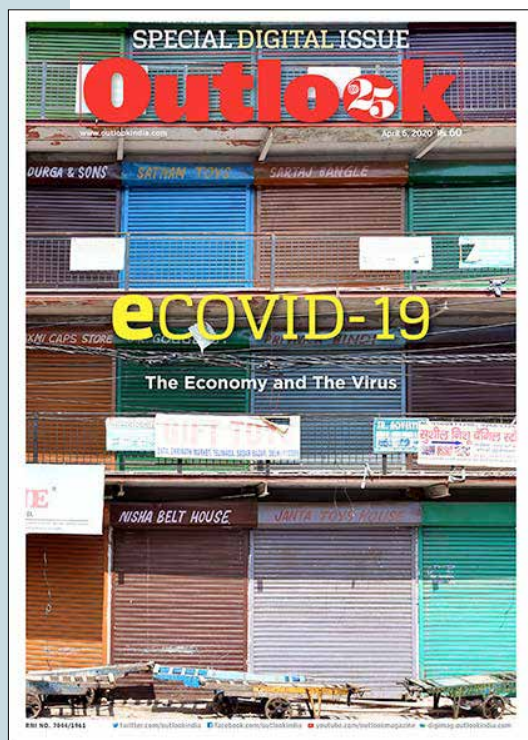
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6/4/2020



We Shall Overcome?

LUCKNOW

Deepak Kohli: This refers to your cover story *The Economy and the Virus* (April 6). Our governance model provides for decision-making at the Union level, but the burden of policy execution falls upon states, as healthcare, sanitation, agriculture and public utilities are state subjects. Thus, fiscal federalism, decentralised governance and flexibility to states to meet their needs should be part of the fight against the virus, including coping with the lockdown and managing the economy's recovery. The Centre must support state governments to ensure that farmers receive a fair price and are able to move their products, especially perishables, to markets. We must realise that the much-neglected panchayat and local officials are key nodes in keeping track of possible cases and the creation of quarantining infrastructure. The success of the lockdown strategy is premised on an unprecedentedly vigorous building up of health infrastructure to fight the pandemic. The

commitment by the Centre to infuse an extra Rs 15,000 crore in public healthcare is a step in the right direction.

MUMBAI

Gundu K. Maniam: The pandemic is taking its toll on livelihoods in the informal sector. Staying back in such circumstances and bearing the expenses for rent and food is not a viable option for many. Migrants feel the pinch and they are waiting for an escape route to their native place. But it is not so easy with a lockdown in all states. Besides, alerts have been out for possible large-scale return of migrant workers to their native places—one such warning, for example, was recorded in West Bengal's Murshidabad district about 'returnees' from Kerala.

KANYAKUMARI

G. David Milton:

Coronavirus is a single-strand, positive-RNA virus. It has crown-like spikes protruding from its surface resembling the sun's corona. The spikes affect the way a virus binds to the host cell and infects it. Once inside the host, the virus conjoins with ACE2 receptors, where it creates spikes to interact with the receptor and goes on to use the cell as 'factory' for reproduction and propagation. The replication and shedding of the virus in cases where the immune system is unable to prevail over the viral load result in severe acute respiratory syndrome and deprivation of oxygen. While lockdowns help in containment of the spread of the virus, testing, identifying, isolating, tracking and tracing

contacts are crucial to 'extinguishing' the pandemic. Till scientists succeed in developing vaccines and drugs to save us from the scourge (for which they are burning the midnight oil), we are left with little option but to continue to take precautionary measures.

MUSCAT

Ramachandran Nair:

In the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak, any initiative to fight the disease is a vibrant step forward. Sharing vital information through reliable sources is one such initiative.



At this time, it is important that all political parties come under one umbrella in this fight towards saving humankind. It is the time for action, not criticism. The best 'medicine', however, to counter the threat is awareness, remaining calm and staying away from crowds. While governments across the world are taking initiatives to curb the pandemic, it is the responsibility of every individual to be aware of their social commitment. It is not the time for outings; instead, stay indoors to reduce chances of exposure.



Red Bull

ALMORA

Anil K. Joshi: The cover story on Kanhaiya (*Kunwar Kamunist*, March 23) couldn't have come at a better time. I am fed up seeing politicians and celebrities on the cover day in and day out; Kanhaiya felt like a whiff of fresh air. One may or not agree with his anarchic approach or whimsical ways, but the lad has the confidence and courage to speak his mind. He has a good grasp of the country's political scenario and his public declamations, even if at times bordering on the comical, do make plenty of sense. His popularity may not win him elections, but we do need the likes of him to keep frontline parties and leaders on their toes. May his tribe increase.

VARANASI

Jaideep Mitra: Kejriwal granting permission to prosecute Kanhaiya only reinforces the dictum, 'in politics, there are no permanent friends or foes'. The Delhi CM is coming of age as a politician and Kanhaiya is no longer useful to those who sided with him or a threat to his opponents. Kejriwal distancing himself from Kanhaiya after his victory was a strategic move to strike a balance between left- and right-wing ideologies. Moreover, he is becoming more friendly with the Centre and dropping his earlier confrontational stance. As for Kanhaiya, it is just the beginning of a long, excruciating journey. How far he succeeds in establishing himself as a prominent leader and providing a new outlook to politics would be interesting to see in the years to come.

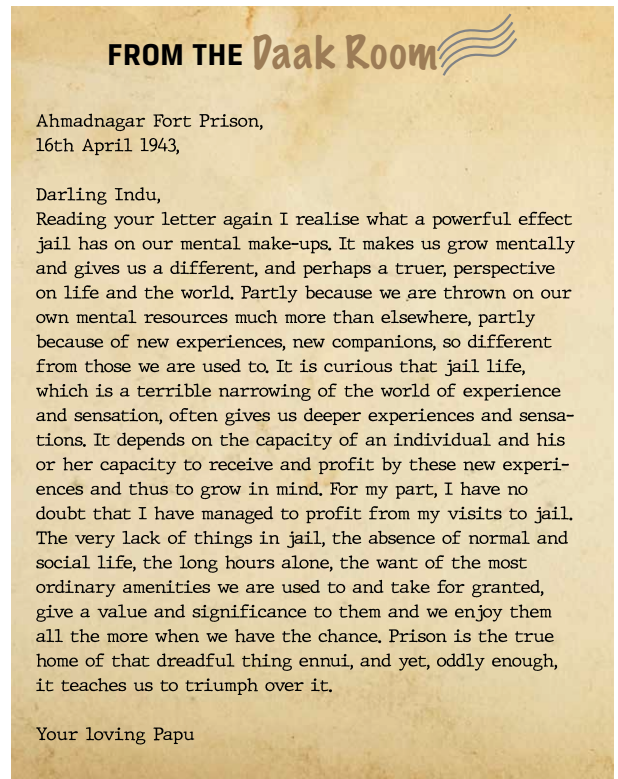
NAVI MUMBAI

C.K. Subramaniam: This refers to *Royal Shift Ruffles The Middle Kingdom* (March 23). Scindia's departure has dealt the grand old party a big blow. Congress is totally cut off from the people and appears to be interested only in waging Twitter wars. Unless citizens close ranks and find alternative ways to assert their rights, the tentacles of authoritarianism are bound to tighten. Congress has to regain its past prestige if it wants to be in the running in future elections. If not, regional parties will become the principal Opposition.

CHENNAI

K.R. Narasimhan: Dynastic succession has

been Congress's obsession since Independence. It is not surprising, therefore, that a young, ambitious functionary like Jyotiraditya Scindia felt neglected. The scion of the Gwalior royal family who worked hard to install a Congress government in Madhya Pradesh felt suffocated when the post of chief minister or state party president eluded



➤ **Profit From Jail** Excerpts from a letter Nehru wrote to daughter Indira from prison



him. And the last straw was when Priyanka Gandhi, a dynast, was chosen over him for Rajya Sabha. BJP is a party where a dynastic tag is not required to occupy top posts like party president or prime minister. It is certainly time for the Congress to sit up and take notice. Not for nothing had the world's first sociologist Ibn Khaldun said that dynasties rise, beget king-

doms and they decay like all created things.

NEW DELHI

Sangeeta Kampani: This refers to *The Sleep Is Showing, Your Honour* (March 30). The alacrity with which Justice Gogoi was rewarded with a Rajya Sabha nomination shows that all is not well with our judiciary. Only sometime back, he had rooted for a fiercely independent judiciary, but in his acceptance of this offer, he has ironically silenced his own voice. His slip is akin to the king in *Henry V*, of whom Shakespeare says: "I think the King is but a man/ His ceremonies laid by, in his nakedness, he is but a man!" Well, now the slip and sleep both show.



The SBI has warned borrowers that deferment of EMIs offered under the RBI's lockdown relief package could put an additional cost on them. During the moratorium period, interest shall continue to accrue on the outstanding portion of the term loan.



All class 1-8 students of CBSE will be promoted to the next level. Pending class 10 and 12 exams will be conducted only in 29 subjects that are crucial for promotion and admission to higher educational institutions in view of the coronavirus outbreak.



Wimbledon has been cancelled for the first time since the Second World War due to the coronavirus pandemic. The 134th Championships will be staged from June 28 to July 11, 2021.

Finally, The Old Fall Guy

The Nizamuddin 'hot spot' allows trolls to target Muslims for spreading the virus

Puneet Nicholas Yadav

As the lethal veil of the COVID-19 pandemic casts its shadow across India, communal hatred, too, is eagerly entwining itself to the threat. 'Corona Jihad'—screamed hundreds of Twitter users soon after reports emerged that a countrywide search had been launched for over 6,000 Muslims, including many foreigners, who had attended a Tablighi Jamaat congregation in New Delhi's Nizamuddin Markaz in mid-March.

The search was initiated after it was revealed that five corona-positive patients who died in Telangana had attended the Jamaat event between March 11 (the day WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic) and 13. Later, reports suggest, nearly 100 participants—some within Delhi and others tracked down in different states—have tested positive and over 5,000 people across 20 states and Union territories are now under quarantine. Delhi Police have also registered an FIR against Jamaat preacher Maulana Saad.

In a rush to paint the Jamaat as the villain, notable omissions were made. The Markaz, in a media statement, underscores how participants had gathered nearly a fortnight before the 21-day lockdown. The suspension of train and flight services prevented many from leaving the vicinity and the police offered little help to decongest the area, it claims. The Markaz is now being asked to explain how it allowed people stranded within Nizamuddin to stay in violation of social distancing guidelines, as well as why it




JITENDER GUPTA

A person stuck in Delhi's Nizamuddin Markaz for days is evacuated

allowed people to leave the venue. Activist Sohail Hashmi, a critic of Jamaat's religious activities, says the bigotry has little to do with the Jamaat and is more about "projecting Muslims as the cause of the pandemic in India". "The Nizamuddin police station is a stone's throw away from the Markaz, what were the police and administration doing when the crowd was gathering... The government's crisis mismanagement was getting exposed, with rising cases, the migrant situation and the economic fallout; it found a convenient punching bag in the Muslims as soon as people who attended the event tested positive," he says.

The Jamaat says it suspended its events after March 13. Meanwhile, religious sites across India—Siddhivinayak temple in Mumbai, Shirdi Sai Baba temple, Varanasi's Kashi Vishwanath temple—continued to welcome devotees till a few days later. Reports say 400 pilgrims are still stranded in Vaishno Devi. Furthermore, Parliament remained in session for over a week after the Jamaat event, and amid massive celebrations by BJP workers in Bhopal on March 20 and 21, Shivraj Singh Chouhan returned as CM of MP after the BJP toppled the Congress government. Yet, the taint of spreading virus attaches itself to Muslims.

Says former MP and Nizamuddin resident Shahid Siddiqui, "Communal virus is thriving in India; they turn everything, every issue into something to do with Islam and Muslims." 

→ A cop wears a corona-themed helmet to spread awareness about the pandemic



SNAPSHOT




← **BJP's** West Bengal president Dilip Ghosh distributes food in Calcutta

Ekol Vidyalays—schools where a single teacher gives lessons on moral science to 50 students—in many of these areas for quite some time and that makes their task to find workers easier.

However, in Darjeeling, where the BJP has been winning Lok Sabha elections since 2009, there is not much activity from party. In the Darjeeling hills, the Gorkha Territorial Administration authorities has been taking care of supplying ration to the people; a local NGO, Darjeeling Enfielders, is delivering emergency medicines to those in need at discounted rates.

In south Bengal too, the BJP's activities are visible. BJP activists have distributed dry ration to the poor in the Calcutta neighbourhood of Salt Lake's AE block. The party's state vice president Jayprakash Majumdar says they have brought six metric tonne of rice and pulses from Bardhaman and that would be distributed among the needy in Bhangar and Rajarhat, adjacent to Salt Lake. Rantidev Sengupta, who is in charge of all media publications under RSS in the state, says party-affiliated doctors are conducting awareness programmes—holding meetings and explaining how to take correct precautionary steps to evade the coronavirus. They are paying special attention to senior citizens and trying to provide dry ration.

According to Rantidev, their work is effective mostly in Birbhum, Bardhaman, Murshidabad, North and South 24 Parganas in south Bengal. There are allegations that the Parivar is catering selectively to Hindus and avoiding the Muslims. Doubtful, though. Malda, Murshidabad, Birbhum and North 24 Parganas have significant numbers of Muslims, and the BJP is aware of this vote-base. But for the Parivar, consolidating its support base among Hindus and tribals is high on its list of priorities. In the long run, this could defeat its attempt to expand its mass appeal in the state. 

Vote Bank Soup Kitchen

Rajat Roy in Calcutta

W. BENGAL

On a Sunday late in March, the West Bengal unit of the BJP received a message from the party's high command that each karyakarta—party worker—in the state should adopt five families and look after them during the nationwide lockdown to stop the COVID-19 pandemic. On the same day, around 150 karyakartas came forward to offer their services in Malda district alone. Khagen Murmu, a former CPI(M) legislator and farmer leader, currently a BJP parliamentarian for Malda (North), says the numbers will increase in the coming days. Initially, his team tried to serve cooked food and medicine to the needy. But after consultation with the top brass of the district administration, they decided to stick to dry ration only. But, even before the lockdown began, in areas like Bamangola, Pakuahat, Kendpukur, Gajol and Habibpur (all under Malda-North), BJP workers had started distributing cooked food.

For the BJP, this social service is part of the package that the party is offering to voters of Bengal, which goes to the

polls next year; it's no secret that the party is desperate to add Bengal to its tally of states. And North Bengal is a BJP stronghold, where it won all seven Lok Sabha seats in 2019. The party's win in Malda (North) was facilitated by the massive leads it managed in some of the areas in the constituency. It had also snatched the Habibpur assembly seat from the CPI(M) in the bypolls. Keeping in tune with their overall supremacy established in Lok Sabha elections in North Bengal, the BJP and its Sangh Parivar allies are paying attention to their new-found political support base. According to Tarun Pandit, one of the RSS secretaries in North Bengal, the Parivar has divided six districts of North Bengal into 11 administrative units where they have deployed 296 swayamsevaks to cater to the need of more than 1,400 beneficiaries. The Sangh has been running

For the BJP, this service is part of the package the party is offering to voters of Bengal, which goes to the polls next year.

MANIPUR

Rolling Stone... Stopped

IN the fickle world of Indian politics, Thounaojam Shyamkumar Singh didn't do anything out of the ordinary. In 2017, just after winning the assembly elections from Andro constituency in Manipur, Shyamkumar had defected from the Congress to the BJP, and helped the saffron party form its first government in this northeastern state. A few days ago, the honeymoon ended when assembly speaker Y. Khemchand Singh disqualified Shyamkumar, the state's forest and environment minister, as a member of the House with immediate effect till the expiry of the assembly's current term on March 28, 2022. The speaker's order came days after the Supreme Court invoked the Constitution's Article 142 to disqualify Shyamkumar as an MLA.

Shyamkumar's defection had set off high drama in 2017 when the BJP raced to form the government despite winning just 21 seats compared to Congress's 28. The BJP also found support from four MLAs of the National People's Party and the sole Lok Janshakti Party legislator, besides independents. In the 60-member house, the BJP proved its majority with 32 MLAs.

But the Congress didn't take the betrayal lightly with as many as 15 party MLAs filing



↑ **Disqualified** Congress-turned-BJP legislator T.S. Singh of Manipur

petitions seeking Shyamkumar's disqualification, arguing that he had violated the 10th Schedule of the Constitution. The 10th Schedule lays down the process by which legislators may be disqualified for defection by the Speaker on a petition by any other member of the House. As the petitioners were not happy with the inordinate delay in the disposal of the case, they moved the Manipur high court and the Supreme Court.

Though the BJP government in Manipur is unlikely to face any numbers issue, the latest development could have a political fallout, since several MLAs of the BJP and its allies have been demanding reshuffle of the council of ministers.

Shyamkumar, meanwhile, says he is ready to face the voters again. □

Not All Heroes Wear Capes

Sudhir Deharia sits on a ledge outside his home, sipping tea. His family interacts with him from the gate. It looks like a rather odd photo until you spot his surgical cap—Deharia is Bhopal district's chief medical and health officer. This scene was from March 30, when he met his family after a gap of five days, working non-stop in the battle against COVID-19. After finishing the tea, he returned to the hospital! There were no raucous pots and pans in store for Deharia, but the MP chief minister tweeted glowing praise for him.

Like Deharia, Digvijay Sharma also heeded the call of duty in exemplary fashion. The 22-year-old constable was on leave until March 23 to appear for exams at Etawah. But not only did the exams get postponed due to the shutdown, he could also not find transport to return to his police station, Rajgarh. Regardless, he set out and walked for nearly 20 hours during the 450-km journey.

brevis



Artist and architect **Satish Gujral** has died aged 94. He was the younger brother of former PM I.K. Gujral.



Former Union minister and Samajwadi Party founding member **Beni Prasad Verma** died. He was 79.



Rajyogini Dadi Janki, the chief of Brahma Kumaris, has died in Mt Abu. She was 104.



New York City-based **India Abroad**, an Indian-American weekly newspaper with a leagcy of 50 years, has shut down its print edition



Soap opera star **John Callahan** of *All My Children* fame has died at 66.

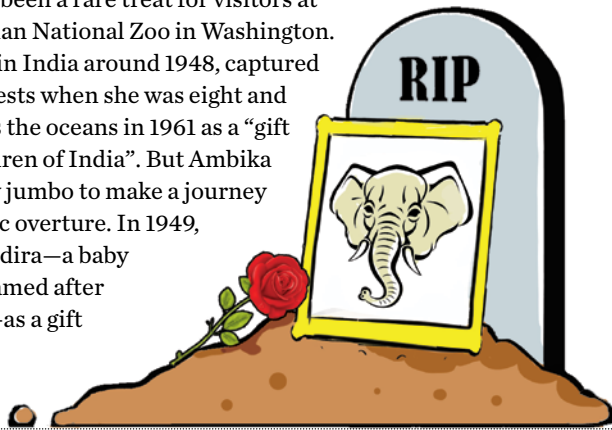


Spanish Princess **Maria Teresa** of Bourbon-Parma has become the first royal to die from coronavirus complications. She was 86.

MixedShots

PRESENT PAST

EVERYBODY loved her, it was hard to let her go, but when 72-year-old Ambika's osteoarthritis got so bad that she became practically untreatable, they had to put her to sleep. For 59 years, Ambika, an Asian elephant, had been a rare treat for visitors at the Smithsonian National Zoo in Washington. She was born in India around 1948, captured in Coorg's forests when she was eight and sent off across the oceans in 1961 as a "gift from the children of India". But Ambika is not the only jumbo to make a journey as a diplomatic overture. In 1949, Nehru sent Indira—a baby pachyderm named after his daughter—as a gift to Japan. [Q](#)



ALCOHOLICS' OWN COUNTRY?

IN Kerala, the lockdown has killed more people than the coronavirus—about seven alcohol addicts reportedly died by suicide after the government shut liquor shops. In Meghalaya, the government realised the importance of alcoholic succour in these tough times. So it has allowed home delivery of liquor, albeit only with a medical prescription. The DGCA, taking note of the "extraordinary" circumstances, has suspended alcohol breathalyser tests for all aviation personnel as it could potentially spread COVID-19. The railways has done the same for its freight crew. Time to pop a bottle? We think not—those with a "known history of alcoholism" will not be allowed to skip the test. Interestingly, at the beginning of the outbreak, there were rumours that the 'bottle' could kill corona, inspiring many to drown the virus in a stiff tippie. [Q](#)

MISSING YOU, MRS GANDHI

“TUMHARA haath, nahin hamare saath/ sabse badi bhoool, tumko kiya kabool (Your hand is not with us, our biggest fault was choosing you)” reads a ‘missing’ poster in Rae Bareilly. The person it’s looking for? Sonia Gandhi, the MP for the constituency. The poster demanded why the Congress president was not aiding the people of Rae Bareilly during the lockdown despite being one of the richest MPs. It was anonymous and did not even carry the name of the printer as mandated by law. For the record, Sonia Gandhi has pledged her MPLAD funds to combat coronavirus. [Q](#)

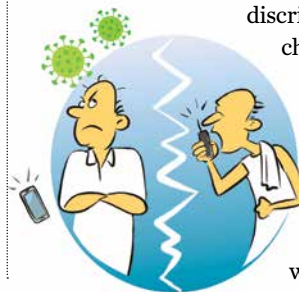


(COCO)NUT JOB

IS there something fishy about the shortage of rations in Goa? Former Panaji MLA Sidharth Kuncalienker thinks so. He accused Uday Madkaikar, his party colleague and Panaji mayor, of diverting rations meant for home delivery during the lockdown to a store run by his brother and urged the chief minister to institute a probe. But Madkaikar is a tough nut to crack. He asked Kuncalienker to prove his contention by taking a ‘coconut oath’—swearing with the right hand on a coconut in front of a deity. Now, can Kuncalienker have his coconut and eat it too? [Q](#)

CAN YOU ADDRESS THIS ISSUE?

WHAT'S in a name? Plenty for people in Korauna, Uttar Pradesh. With an appellation that sounds like the dreadful virus, its residents are a harried lot. Not only does it lead to an uncomfortable situation when the police asks where they are from, they have also had to face discrimination. Phone calls can be as challenging. “When we tell people on the phone where we are from, they think it is a prank and cut our call,” says a resident. Maybe they could consult the residents of Gadha, Pooh, Cumbum, or Chutia—other places in India stuck with unfortunate homonyms. [Q](#)





Going Goals Yuwa team members exult during a Donosti Cup match in Spain; below, Franz Gastler

PHOTOGRAPHS: YUWA



Losing By An Own Goal

To hound out the Gastlers, who use football and education to empower girls in remotest Jharkhand, is a crying shame

Soumitra Bose

AS the threat from coronavirus stalks the world, making the fight against it a truly global war, it has spawned malodorous, manmade offshoots—taboos and discrimination, all underpinned by suspicion and unreason.

A young American couple who were using football as a tool for social transformation in a remote village in

Jharkhand was suddenly set upon by an unexpected 'enemy': a section of locals, crazed by COVID-19 fears, targeted them as 'carriers' of the deadly virus. Franz Gastler and Rose Thomson Gastler and their baby girl, gripped by fear, have taken refuge at a friend's house in Ranchi and are waiting for the first flight to the US.

Gastler, who has been working as a teacher in the tribal hinterlands of India since 2007, founded the NGO Yuwa in 2009. In 2012, he was joined

by Rose Thomson and in 2015, the duo established the Yuwa School, a unique institution that uses soccer to empower young girls who lead terribly marginalised lives in their vilages.

The founders of Yuwa, which directly influences the lives of 520 girls and 60 boys in the age group of six to 20, are now staring at an uncertain future. Towards the end of March, the couple and their kid escaped a possible attack from a village mob that wanted them out of Ormanjhi. Fortunately, given the goodwill Gastler has won over the years, some girls, all day-scholars at Yuwa school, passed on the 'inside information' of an impending attack.

"The SSP of Ranchi was extremely helpful and the local police escorted us

from the village to a friend's place in Ranchi. We've been threatened before but this time there was so much panic that we felt it could turn bad fast. Especially with our daughter now, we were really scared," said Gastler, who returned to Ranchi from a trip to the US on January 9, much before the COVID-19 cases were detected in

India and America.

Two years after Franz and Rose married in 2017, Yuwa's work was acknowledged by the Laureus Sports For Good Foundation. The NGO put Ormanjhi, an obscure village about 20 kilometres from Ranchi, on the international map, when it was awarded the Laureus Sports For Good Award in Monaco in 2019. Thirty-eight-year-old Gastler and Rose, 30, who now have a seven-month-old daughter Liona, went up on stage along with four girl 'coaches' to receive the award from former Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger and five-time Olympic swimming champion from the US, Missy Franklin. Yuwa was selected from among 160 projects by the Laureus academy that has sports and

"Football has made us strong; we can beat boys in studies too," says Chhanda.



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Olympic legends Edwin Moses, Mark Spitz, Nadia Comaneci and Monica Seles among others as members.

According to UNICEF data, over half of Indian child brides live in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. UP is home to the largest population of child brides—36 million. Jharkhand, carved out of Bihar in November 2000, has seven million, but with a significantly higher female vulnerability ratio. Bihar has 22 million.

The Yuwa programme stepped into this quagmire of backwardness, superstition and grinding poverty. In a state with some of the highest rates of female illiteracy, child marriage and human trafficking, Yuwa has made a telling impact by using football to reduce grinding poverty, endemic domestic violence and an acute lack of opportunity. Where six of 10 girls drop out of school, Yuwa offers lessons taught by highly qualified teachers, empowering students to decide their own futures.

In a clear indicator of confidence, self-worth and changing perceptions of ambition, Chhanda, a 17-year-old from Hutup village, who is preparing for her pre-Board examination (under the National Institute of Open Schooling) said she was happy to answer questions in English when approached by this reporter. “Football has made us strong. Now the boys can’t tease us because we can give it back to them very easily, both in a match or studies,” she laughs.

Set in a context where males and females seldom leave their villages, let alone their state, over 30 Yuwa girls have spoken at universities, TED events and conferences, and travelled across India and abroad. And, critically, in a society where 60 per cent of girls are married off as children, no Yuwa girl has been coerced into child marriage, says a study. Laudable as these achievements are, they also invoke the ire of conservative, reactionary apologists of ‘tradition’, something that’s certainly at the root of the Gastners’ recent ordeal.

Yuwa relies on a simple strategy to extend its reach. It estimates that each youth who participates in a Yuwa team interacts closely with at least nine people (immediate family members, neighbours, classmates) who are not a



↑ **Rose, Franz** and four Yuwa ‘coaches’ pose with the Laureus Sport For Good Award in Monaco

part of Yuwa. Thus, effectively, there are over 5,200 indirect beneficiaries. Using their own lives as examples, girls in Yuwa inspire many others to reconsider and challenge the old boundaries earmarked for girls and women.

A senior official of the Jharkhand government says: “After 6 pm, villages in Jharkhand are taken over by drunken men who treat women shabbily. Sexual violence is common. The government can’t do anything about it. Given the work Yuwa has done in a difficult territory, Franz has found little recognition than he actually deserves.”

In August 2013, Jharkhand CM Hemant Soren announced cash awards for under-14 girl footballers from Yuwa who shone during a three-week tour of Spain. The girls came third among 10 teams in the Gasteiz Cup, and reached the quarterfinals, from among 36 teams, in the Donosti Cup, Spain’s biggest football tournament. Soren also promised to build a stadium within six months at Dhanumojha village, close to where the

girls practised. More importantly, his government initiated action against the Hutup panchayat sewak Deepak Sahu for misbehaving with the girls when they approached him for birth certificates needed to apply for passports.

“We have been branded human traffickers. Given the number of times our girls have travelled abroad and returned home with accolades, we would perhaps be the dumbest traffickers in the world. There is a lot of jealousy and some men bear grudges because the girls are doing well and putting food on the table,” Gastler says.

“We couldn’t have been virus carriers. We had two other teachers from the US who had left two weeks ago. Given the incidents before, we had a decently good risk-tolerance limit, but given the pandemic, we will not be able to handle mob violence,” says Gastler, who is waiting to get back to Minnesota in a special flight arranged by the US for its citizens.

UNICEF statistics reveal that compared to the past decade, progress needs to be four times faster to eliminate child marriage by 2030. Yuwa has played its small part in correcting this social evil. The Gastlers are keen to return to Ormanjhi as soon as the dust settles down over this shameful episode. For now, they are worried about the Yuwa girls whose safety is at risk if the virus pays a visit to Ormanjhi. □

“Some men bear grudges as the girls earn well,” says Gastler about a possible attack.

Slow Down. It's Time.

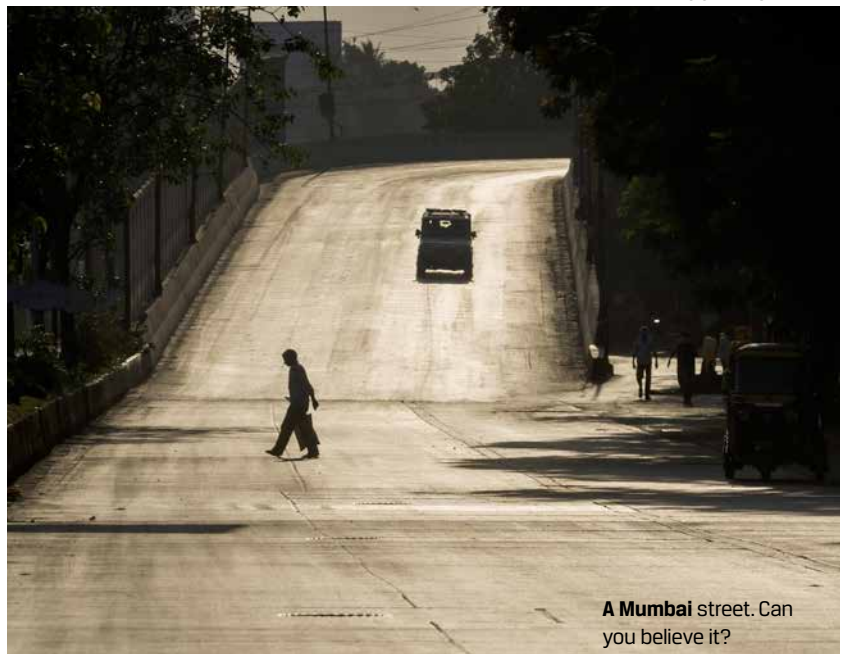
It's not the end of the story. This is an early warning that we need serious course correction for the future.



IT is a mild spring day, unseasonably rainy, and time is standing still. The ceiling fans are timidly waking up from winter. And we ourselves are housebound, craning our ears for the sound of the other shoe if and when it drops. I have been imagining this scenario for ages, this time-outside-of-time, with all of us hunkered down at home “for our own good”, the great turnaround moment when our species, racing faster and faster towards a stop light, suddenly jams on the brakes. The day we call a halt to the madness, and give the planet a break.

The signs of endgame were there, for those who knew how to read them, with teenage activists cropping up all over the world to show us, if we were too blinkered or unconcerned to believe the climate scientists. We had ample warning that we had to slow down and switch to a new way of living that did not destroy the planet while it made a few unspeakably rich. But we were on a roll, in a deadly game of ‘chicken’, aiming our headlights straight at the oncoming car and flooring the accelerator. The other guy would give up first, we thought, and we would win.

The only thing that could bring the needed flip was a microbe, something that brought a dreaded disease in the blink of an eye. Because, left to ourselves, humans suffer from inertia, which stops us from getting up and doing what plainly needs to be done. And when we wait too long, Nature comes out to bat during overtime, and she sorts us out quickly and ruthlessly, without too much concern for who is who, though it is usually the poor who get the raw end of the deal. But who knew, this time around? All of a sudden the big-time consumers, the frequent flyers, were the ones in the crosshairs. This new virus had started



APOORVA SALKADE

A Mumbai street. Can you believe it?

When we wait too long, Nature comes out to bat during overtime and sorts us out ruthlessly.

in the industrial hub of the global system, and spread out first to the places in daily contact with Wuhan. David Quammen, in his book *Spillover: Animal Infections and the Next Human Pandemic*, published in 2012, saw it coming. He was certain we would soon have to deal with a virus, and that it would most probably come from a bat whose habitat we had invaded.

But the virus itself has been all but eclipsed by the panic that has come with it. China and now Italy and Iran have

been badly hit, with huge numbers of deaths reported, and that has sent people worldwide into retreat. An instant result has been that the polluted skies over China have cleared as no amount of human will could get them to do up to now, almost as if climate change were temporarily put on hold. Designer and forecaster Li Edelkoort has called this period a “quarantine of consumption”, which she thinks will lead to “a global recession of a magnitude that has not been experienced before”, which will allow humanity to “reset” its values. Maybe. But what we see right now is two sides with sharply different agenda faced off: the big players, armed and monied, who see a chance to dig themselves in even deeper, and the little people—unarmed, unorganised—who want a better world.

As I write this, the other shoe is yet to drop. We are weeks into the pandemic, but India has not seen the descent into disaster that the Chinese, Italians and Iranians have been living through. Our hospitals are not reporting the surge in patients that is being predicted each day with an almost ghoulis excitement. Maybe we will be lucky and it will give us a miss. But until we know this for sure, we will be bracing for a tsunami that is taking its time in coming, one that might even have changed its mind.

For all we know, we might have been living with this virus for a long time already. India has never been out of touch with China, Italy or any of the other virus hot spots in Europe. Many of us had to take to our beds in January and February because of a ghastly 10-day ‘flu’, the worst of our lives, which sent some of our old relatives to hospital ICUs with pneumonia, and looked too close to the Wuhan virus for comfort. Have many of us had this disease already, but as it didn’t announce itself, we thought it was just another bug, though a particularly nasty one? Every day, in ‘normal’ times, 25,000 people out of India’s population of 1.3 billion die—and more than 1,000 people (4,00,000 in 2018) die of tuberculosis, for which we do have a cure, but have not eradicated because it only afflicts the poor. A thousand Indians, mostly children, die every day of other respiratory ailments, and 500 die of malaria. But almost all of us will recover from viruses as bad as COVID-19, and live to chalk up the experience as a major milestone in our lives.

So why the unprecedented panic? Why the scenes of police with lathis frog-marching hapless migrant workers, making them hop like schoolchildren being punished for breaking bounds? Of men, women and children having to walk on the highways to get back to their villages, because the government is only concerned about providing transport for Indians stranded abroad? On the news one night was the heartbreaking sight of a whole neighbourhood looking into the camera and pleading for food. And the next day, in chilling contrast, came news of an MLA asking



A man sleeps in front of his closed shop, Calcutta

The poorest will feel the pain, while the engine of growth gets spruced up and readied to roll again.

police to ‘shoot at sight’ anyone found violating the curfew, and promising them a cash reward if they at least break these people’s legs.

The roads near my home were almost empty that morning. A few cars, very few cycles and scooters, almost no one on foot. Inside the IIT Delhi campus, safe from prowling vigilantes, there was no one walking around, no one sitting in their gardens, no one on their balconies. At a pivotal moment when we could have been thinking of how to change

course, call a halt to the mindless growth as a way of life and transition easily to mindful de-growth, we are frozen, more cut off from each other than ever before. The break in momentum that could have allowed a rethink, a springtime of new ideas, a chance to start over, may all come to nothing. The world will be back in business as before, the same old thinking, heading for the same dead end. De-growth there will be, because the global economy has taken a hit. But the pain will be felt by the poorest, whose jobs might have gone away for good, while the engine of growth gets spruced up, and readied to roll again.

This crisis is not the end of the story. It is just an early warning that we need some serious course correction for the future. Because, as the world gets more connected and further from ground state, pandemics are becoming more frequent, and diseases like Ebola, which were once seen only in villages close to the African rainforest, are taking on a new level of menace when they find themselves in cities. It may be too much to expect us to learn this overnight, but we are now in a brave new world, where there are going to be surprises. So we need to spend these days at home getting a feel for these new times. Then we will be able to come up with models built not around endless growth, but a recognition that we are now fully grown, and that what we need to do is slow down and make it last. □

(Views are personal.)

PTI



Videoheads PM Narendra Modi takes part in the unique G20 summit on March 26 from Delhi

Pranay Sharma

A full-blown crisis can bring out the best or the worst out of individuals as well as nations. Often, existing fissures in society can rise to the surface; or they may be papered over for collective action to douse the raging wildfire that threatens to incinerate all. COVID-19 is proving to be a great leveler of inequities, forcing rich members of the G20 to unite to meet this unprecedented challenge in a globalised world.

Originating in China's Wuhan, the virus has so far spared none. It has galloped across the world map, engulfing countries at a speed that has left them overwhelmed, with health-care systems stretched to limits. The lockdowns and sealing of borders, restricting movement of goods and people, has disrupted supply chains and traffic to an extent that has affected the global economy and trade as never before. At last count, the global infection toll had risen to 800,000, forcing US President Donald Trump to acknowledge that the coronavirus pandemic could well leave nearly 200,000 people dead in his country. The situation elsewhere has been as grave.

The realisation that this alarming situation could worsen forced G20 members—comprising the world's leading economies—to confer on March 26 on how best to deal with this unprecedented challenge.

Trump called it a "great meeting." He

Give 'em Twenty!

G20 leaders vow to fight the coronavirus pandemic unitedly

added, "The leaders gathered virtually around the world to discuss the whole problem that right now 151 nations have got."

The G20 had faced crisis in the past too—most recently in 2008, during the worldwide economic meltdown sparked by the US sub-prime property crash that spread to most economies. Through strong stimulus measures, efforts were made to put the world economy back on track.

Last week's gathering of G20 leaders was unprecedented in scale and scope—the first time a summit of world leaders was virtual, held through video-conferencing. Much of this unique


Modi's idea of a virtual SAARC meeting led to the unique G20 conference.

idea had come from India, after PM Narendra Modi brought leaders of SAARC countries together for a conference through video-calls to discuss the spreading pandemic in South Asia. The method was readily picked up by Saudi Arabia, the current chair of the G20, leading to the "G20 extraordinary virtual leaders' summit".

Chinese President Xi Jinping offered China's help and experience in containing the virus and called for "cutting tariffs, removing barriers" to facilitate "the unfettered flow of trade". He suggested that G20 "promptly set up communication mechanisms and institutional arrangements for anti-epidemic macro policy coordination".

PM Modi, sources said, stressed on looking at globalisation with a human face. He stressed "multilateralism and globalisation" should not just be looked through the prism of economic issues, but also through humanitarian lens to effectively address future pandemics. He also called for strengthening and expanding the mandate of WHO. Indeed, there is growing view that if WHO had recommended a trade and travel ban to China—something already done within China to isolate Wuhan and prevent the virus from spreading—the pandemic would perhaps have been better contained.

At the end of the G20 virtual summit, members agreed to inject a whopping \$5 trillion into the global economy to keep it from tipping into recession—many countries have declared huge financial stimulus packages to stabilise banks and lending institutions. To ensure that the human factor remained central, it was agreed that migrant workers in each others' countries as well as the poor in developing nations should have access to medicine, food and shelter. To this end, finance and health ministers of G20 countries are to hold a similar virtual meeting later this month to ensure better coordination.

The collective effort of the world has to deal with the pandemic as it gallops through its full course—the biggest challenge it has faced since WW II over 70 years ago. There is reason to hope, for we emerged victorious out of that struggle. 

In a political career spanning over 40 years, Kamal Nath faced, arguably, his most challenging battle this March when he was forced to resign as Madhya Pradesh chief minister just 15 months after assuming office. The defeat of 73-year-old Nath, orchestrated by Jyotiraditya Scindia has also come as a shock to the Congress at a time when it is fighting to stay relevant in Indian politics. Nath spoke to Puneet Nicholas Yadav about what went wrong but maintained that the loss of his government is only a temporary setback.

The Congress won a hard-earned victory in December 2018 against the BJP, which had ruled Madhya Pradesh for 15 consecutive years. Your government collapsed in 15 months. What went wrong? From the time I assumed office, the BJP began plotting to topple our government. The BJP could never come to terms with having lost the assembly polls.

Of the 15 months that I was chief minister, over two months were wasted because of the model code of conduct for the Lok Sabha polls. Effectively, my government could function only for a little over 12 months. In these 12 months, we managed to fulfill or initiate the process to fulfill 400 of our manifesto promises, starting with the loan waiver for farmers. I also launched a war against the mafia that was thriving under the BJP's rule. We ensured uninterrupted power supply across the state. I gave a model of governance that was different from the BJP's—our model was based on accountability, was oriented towards the people and towards delivery. The BJP



GETTY IMAGES

'Setback in MP a stumble, not a fall'

and the mafia that thrived under the party couldn't digest this. And yes, I also did not calculate that some of our MLAs would fall for the lure of money.

So was your confidence in your MLAs misplaced? Did you place too much trust in them and on Jyotiraditya Scindia?

Politics has to be based on trust. If a leader can't trust his team, who will he trust? Perhaps, I placed too much confidence in them but I still believe that the MLAs who betrayed us were under tremendous pressure and this was not just the pressure of money.

As for Scindia, all I wish to

say is that I know there were other reasons for his switch to the BJP than the ones he has spoken about. He says he joined the BJP because my government did not fulfill its promises. I have videos of him publicly congratulating my government for fulfilling our election promises. There are photographs of him, tweets he has posted saying cheques for the second installment of the loan waiver scheme are being given to the farmers. The fact is that Scindia had made up his mind to leave (the Congress) and is now cooking up excuses to justify his action.

There were reports through your 15-month stint about you and Digvijaya Singh plotting to sideline Scindia; reports that he was upset at not being made the state Congress chief and being denied a Rajya Sabha berth? Was that the flashpoint?

These are lies and fabrications. I do not think he wanted to become the state Congress president. He even told the Congress president (Sonia Gandhi) this and instead wanted his nominee to be given the job. She asked him to suggest a name but he never did.

To be honest, after Scindia lost the (Lok Sabha) election, he turned into a different person. I shared an excellent rapport with Scindia. I tried to work things out. In fact, I met him on February 29 (nine days before he resigned from the Congress) and it was a very cordial meeting; we had dinner together. What really made him desert the Congress is a question he should answer honestly; why is it being posed to me?

Going by your experience of the past 15 months, would you say you began with a handicap as chief minister because you had never been



Victor and vanquished

Kamal Nath with his successor Shivraj Singh Chouhan (left)

PTI

directly involved in state-level politics?

At the national level, as a minister you are in charge of your ministry or at the party level you are responsible for whatever specific task you are given; essentially you are macro-managing things. As chief minister, it is all about micro management. Often a chief minister must act as a minister of all departments. Having said that, I do not think I began with a handicap because I had vast administrative experience.

In MP, the bureaucracy had got used to working in a certain way for 15 years of BJP's rule wherein it was the bureaucrat who would tell the CM what he should do. In my government, I told bureaucrats what they must do. It took a short while but the bureaucracy eventually came around.

But the Congress MLAs who quit, including six who were ministers in your cabinet, claim that the bureaucracy

'What really made Jyotiraditya Scindia leave the Congress is a question he should answer honestly, not me.'

never listened to them. The ministers allege that even you refused to listen to them. These people have to make some excuses to justify their betrayal. They can't say they went to the BJP because of the allurements of money. These ministers who have gone with Scindia were all given important portfolios. One of the most important campaigns launched by my government to fight against the food adulteration mafia was under one of these ministers (Tulsi Silavat).

In his press conference after you resigned, Shivraj Singh Chouhan blamed Digvijaya Singh for the problems in your government but remained silent on you. Digvijaya Singh had no role to play in my government. **The BJP may have formed a government now but it has 105 MLAs currently, which means it doesn't have a majority. There are bypolls for 25 seats that have to be held within six months. Do you see a period of prolonged political instability in MP?**


Obviously. These MLAs who have resigned have attacked the BJP all through their political lives and the BJP has attacked them. Now these MLAs have to go back to their constituencies and explain their actions and the BJP has to go to its workers and tell them why these new entrants are taking the place of the veterans. It will be an

untenable situation. Just search (online) what Scindia used to say about Shivraj or what Shivraj said about Scindia till a month ago. The BJP has swallowed a bitter pill only for the short-term gain of toppling my government. These people have turned politics and governance into a joke and it is the public that is suffering.

Are you saying that the BJP with Scindia and his loyalists will collapse under its own contradictions? This is exactly what the BJP used to say about your government till a month ago.

There were no contradictions so far as my government was concerned. The BJP wanted to topple my government from Day One. I proved my majority thrice and they got desperate. Finally, they got hold of Scindia and with whatever allurements they offered, I don't want to comment on those, they succeeded in making him defect along with 22 MLAs. I don't know what Scindia promised them besides toppling my government but let the BJP now deal with the problems it has raised for itself. Why should I be bothered?

What will be Kamal Nath's role in MP politics now?

Well, I am here in Bhopal. I have no plans of moving back to Delhi. This was a stumble, not a fall. The Congress will come back; mark my words. 

New Enemy, Old Tactics

The lockdown has changed life everywhere. But in Kashmir, stay-at-home is the continuum of a familiar clampdown.

Naseer Ganai in Srinagar

AS PM Narendra Modi announced a 21-day stay-at-home order for the country to tackle COVID-19, security forces in Jammu and Kashmir scrambled to enforce the lockdown. In this, the police and security forces in the region had an advantage over other places as they did not have to be moved to different locations. Since August 5, 2019, the forces have been on the ground across the Kashmir Valley and there has been no pause in the security drill. For example, at the Panthchowk-Parimpora bypass road, the Central Reserve

Police Force (CRPF) personnel have been manning security arrangements every day since last August. This means nothing had to be changed for the COVID-19 lockdown.

Like all highways in Jammu and Kashmir, here too the army's road-opening party checks the road and oversees convoy movement. The only addition is that the police are back at the checkpoints set up last year across Kashmir to ensure compliance with the lockdown. So far, more than two dozen people have tested positive for COVID-19 and most of them have a recent history of travelling outside the region. Health officials say strict implementation of the current lockdown can save

Kashmir from catastrophe as hundreds of people have come here from affected countries. Most of them had gone on pilgrimages to Iran and Saudi Arabia. A large number of students have also returned from China, Bangladesh and Europe. Police in the Valley have charged a number of persons, including an imam of a mosque for violating the restriction orders. Mosques have been asked to remain shut.

"We are the first line in this war against coronavirus," says a senior officer based in south Kashmir. "We meet people and talk to them. In fact, people call us to inform about those who have returned from abroad and should be quarantined. We track people and hand them over to the health authorities. We have no masks, gloves or personnel protection gear."

The police are also accused of beating people or using abusive language while issuing warnings on loudspeakers. "There are strict directions to motivate people not to violate the restrictions, instead of using the baton on them. But people don't listen," says the officer. "Motivating them at the checkpoints is like trying to cure COVID-19



Lockdown of a different kind

Lal Chowk in Srinagar

PHOTOGRAPH: UMER ASIF





The Shikara boy

Alone along the Dal Lake, under the shadow of a virus that has no cure

PTI

with prayers and not medication.”

As bankers, health workers, vegetable vendors and others providing essential services are allowed to be out in this lockdown, the police say it is difficult to impose curfew-like restrictions to stop the movement of people. “It is difficult to engage people and motivate them to stay at home. As soon as the police go soft, people engage in unnecessary movement and shopkeepers initiate business activity,” says a senior officer based in Srinagar.

“In earlier lockdowns and curfews, we learnt with experience to look out for warning signs that can mostly be identified,” says another senior officer. “We knew everything. We had intelligence inputs and knew how to control things. We knew the movement of people who were approaching. Now there is this unheard-of thing with none of the identifiers we are used to. We don’t know whether a person we are trying to convince to move off the road is symptomatic or asymptomatic. This is a tough situation.”

Acknowledging that the police don’t have masks as these are more important for health workers, the officer cites reports that doctors are refusing to treat patients in the absence of personnel protection gear. “A policeman on the ground also has a high stress level. They feel insecure on seeing people trying to roam around or come close and argue. You must understand his position,” the officer adds.

The police also fear that as security forces are busy trying to flatten the COVID-19 curve, militants might step up their activities. On March 28, sus-

pected militants shot dead a civilian at his home in Kulgam district of south Kashmir. “His killing went completely unnoticed. Such cases increase the stress level of a policeman on the ground,” says an officer.

Earlier, Kashmir’s Grand Mufti Nasirul Islam asked the security forces to “go back to the barracks” for preventing the spread of coronavirus in the Valley. “It is high time for the seven lakh security personnel to go back to their barracks for the biggest cause of humanity,” he says. “It has been seen that security forces personnel are involved in travel from their respective places to Srinagar in large numbers every day. This travel can be the biggest carrier of coronavirus and should be avoided forthwith.”

The army allays such fears, saying it has reduced convoy movement and implemented strict guidelines. “We have extended the leaves of personnel who were already on leave, and cancelled the leaves of those who are here. We strictly adhere to the quarantine rules of the World Health Organization,” says an army official.

The Jammu and Kashmir Police have issued a 19-point list of instructions. Police personnel have also been asked

to come to work only on alternate weeks. Officers have been asked to instal thermal scanners at entrances to their offices, wherever feasible, while placing hand sanitisers has been made mandatory. Also, the officers must discourage the entry of visitors for routine issues. They have been asked to hold meetings through video conferencing, avoid unnecessary official travel, ensure availability of hand sanitisers, soaps and running water in all police institutions and distribute protective gear among policemen, especially those who are engaged directly in COVID-19 duty. Police personnel who have travelled abroad and returned by or after February 15 have to be kept in compulsory quarantine for 14 days.

Many believe the approach of the police and security forces to the pandemic is akin to counter-insurgency methods, not realising that handling a highly contagious disease is different from dealing with protests. They argue that the police should change its tactics and take civil officials along while maintaining law and order. According to eyewitnesses, the police set on fire a fruit cart in Hawal area of Srinagar’s old city on Friday and warned grocery shops against opening and selling goods. “The police shouldn’t be vilified for one cop’s action,” says senior officer Feroz Yehya, adding that the police have an internal mechanism to deal with cases of indiscipline and that cognisance should be taken of such cases. Another senior officer tweeted, “Don’t come on roads and fight with security forces on duty.”

Locals say the forces are using anti-militancy tactics to contain a contagion.

Doppelganger Emergency

Why are the police bestialising us? Why are humans made to crawl, duck-walk, frog-march? The symbolism is stark.



A fear of the elevator button, of the ATM keyboard, of flat, gleaming surfaces...sneaking new forms of dread grip us today. Maybe they will linger and become part of our bouquet of bodily reflexes, long after the corona pandemic blows over. Will we fear that man next to us on the Metro? Animals? Currency notes? Will our enduring bequest be a supermart tray full of irrational new tics, pangs and OCDs? We will have to live long enough to find out.

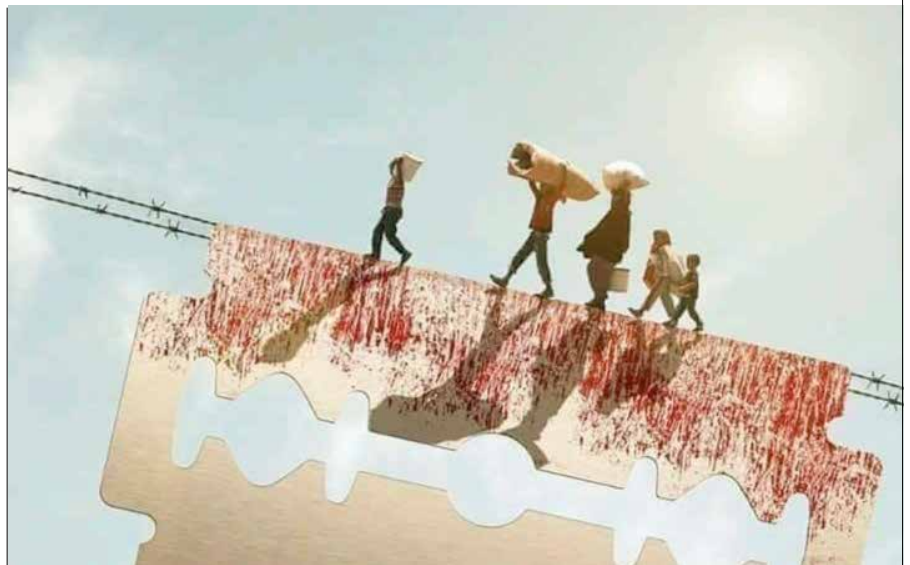
But there's one ancient figure of fear among them, one that has always been with us, a dull, thick presentiment of pain that is newly sharper. A transparent, polycarbonate, soulless piece of fear that comes swishing through the spring air like a whip.

It's the fear of the policeman.

It's not easy to comprehend and master a battle with unseen things. But to get there, India first needs enough time and mental space away from things it can see. It's a long list—from the casually cruel, to the abnormal, to the truly depressing. Like the hundreds of thousands of Indians who have to get home before they can stay at home. Like the 90-year-old lady my colleague saw walking on empty tarmac back to her village in Rajasthan's Sawai Madhopur, 400 km away.

The sight of migrant labour walking back to distant villages already produced a historic sense of pathos. "In which other country are people walking home? The last such images I remember was during the Partition," wrote author and sanyasini Atmaprajnananda.

Peggy Mohan, author and linguist of part-Indian Trinidadian descent, recalled an even earlier forced exodus from history, from the 19th century—a



Police brutality reflects this new age of sadism, where we are being reduced to animal status, to our bare life.

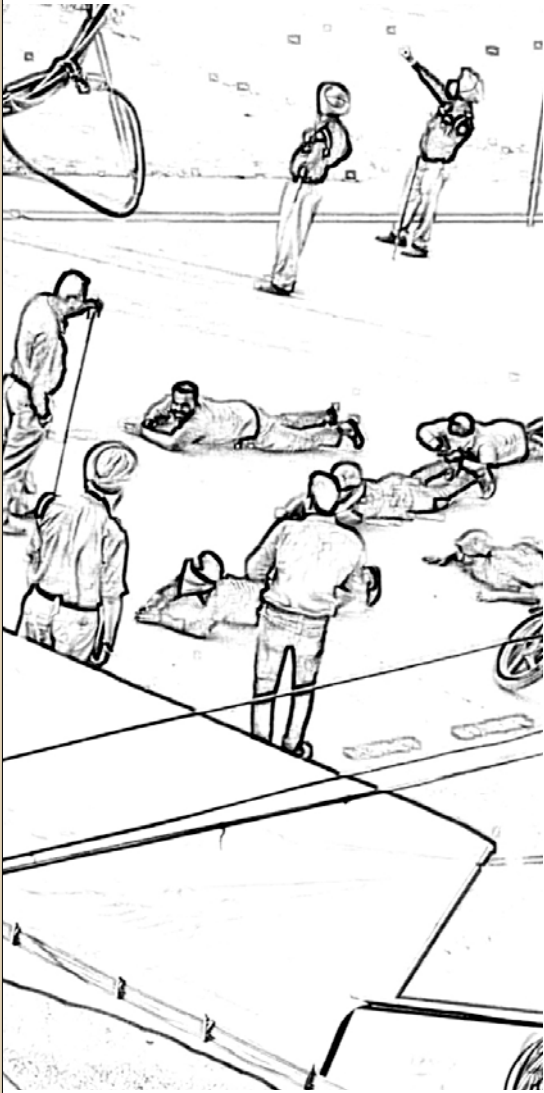
near-biblical scene where India's barefoot villagers reached across the globe. "I'm reminded of the Indian migrant labour walking along the Hooghly to the depots to wait for the ships to go to the Caribbean. It was called Jeeta Janaza, the Funeral Cortège of the Living," she says. "My ancestors looked like her...."

But even among such millenarian visions, there were a few that truly stood out as the harbinger of a new age of sadism.

Those images of bestialisation. Humans trying to get back to the security and familiarity of faraway homes in strange and uncertain times, with no other means to do it except on their feet, were being brought to their knees. Baton-waving policemen were making them crawl, or duck-walk, or frog-march. The symbolism was unmistakable. "You are being reduced to animal status, to your bare life."

It happened in Badaun, UP, in Punjab, in Rajasthan. The videos of them violating and dehumanising the common people of India, whom they are meant to protect and serve, sliced through all except the most callused conscience. (Plenty of those exceptions: AltNews founder Pratik Sinha noted on Twitter that an appeal for policemen to behave humanely had elicited too many jeering comments that they were actually being too humane.)

There were numerous other sightings of sadism: vegetable carts being overturned in a country where people die of starvation, where another food crisis may yet loom; people being thrashed so plentifully and matter-



of-factly that it seemed like a new mode of greeting for an age where the human touch has been banned.

So what is wrong with our police? What brings on this sudden tidal wave of sadism, of a deeply psychic aggression?

We will be finding answers long into our foggy future. But one thing is certain and can be felt on the skin, as it were. The physical evacuation of our streets has produced a strange kind of vacuum. A kind of voiding of citizenship and its rights. As our police brings the baton cracking down on skin and bone to empty out our public spaces, and we get corralled to our homes, it parallels incarceration in specific, bodily ways. It is an imitation, an intimation of prison.

If the anti-CAA movement of winter saw citizens expand their right to speak, this moment is one of mass contraction of those rights. Even if it comes about not through an executive fiat directly related to those rights, that's the temporary effect it has.

Because it comes about by way of a health emergency, people perhaps do not realise how profoundly political this moment is. That vacuum on the streets connotes, in ways, the evacuation of the public sphere, a temporary suspension of our rights as autonomous, thinking subjects and throws us back to our purely biological existence: 'bare life'.

And into that void flows only one thing: the State and its absolute writ. And that of the police, the advance guard of the State. Which finds its powers, never modest at the best of times, almost totally unfettered by the 'needs' brought on by a health crisis.

If anyone has had trouble grasping the fancy-sounding concept of biopolitics, this moment should ease that. "The power to make decisions of life and death have always been there—it just continues to find ever-new avenues," says Ravinder Kaur, author of the forthcoming *Brand New Nation: Capitalist Dreams and Nationalist Designs in Twenty-First-Century India*.

In sundry functional terms, we are practically already in an Emergency. Why? Because the power to make even the most ordinary decisions has been stripped from millions and millions of citizens, and those have been

sucked up by the State: it presently enjoys a massive accumulation of authority. A facial recognition device would be hard put to distinguish between the two faces.

Remember, it is still only an imitation, a Doppelgänger Emergency. Not by any stretch the real thing—it only resembles it. The government still responds, if belatedly, to public concerns. The media is active, so is that vast sphere of public speaking, the social media (even if there were, not coincidentally, apprehensions about a clampdown in that sphere

We are in an Emergency; the State has sucked up our power to make even the most ordinary decisions.

initially). And governments have asked the police to pipe down—they too have gone slow on beating people every other second as if it were an Oxford comma in their sentences. In Andhra Pradesh, one cop who starred in one such video was suspended. But the purpose has been served. An air of almost-Emergency pervades our public sphere.

It is no coincidence the word floated around tremulously. Subramanian Swamy cautioned against a 'financial emergency', and actor Rishi Kapoor, who has aged rather gracefully to become a bumbling agent provocateur of reactionaryism, did not fail to confuse the concepts altogether, taking the side of the police to boot. "Dear fellow Indians. We must and have to declare EMERGENCY. Look at what's happening all over the country!... People are beating policemen..."

Yes, that did happen too. "Karma," wrote someone on Twitter, to a video of a man turning back on a poor policeman, who found himself suddenly overwhelmed as the usual clause of asymmetry—of people not lifting a finger on the police—cracked under the strain of this new abnormality.

There were honourable exceptions. Arvind Kumar, the SHO of Defence Colony in Delhi, has arranged for 300 food bags to feed 350 families of stranded daily wage-earners in Indira Camp, just behind his thana. Vijay Gupta, Station Officer at Sadar Bazaar, Meerut, has turned his own house into a community kitchen, at his own cost. There were a few other videos,

of cops feeding and sanitising the needy, even singing songs. But the exceptions, just like the police officer who sang songs to a group of anti-CAA protestors in Karnataka, alas only proved the rule.

And the thumb rules of the new law—an undeclared police state—had already been writ. Even as we arrived at this all-pervasive ‘state of exception’ via COVID-19, where the normality of civil exchanges has been suspended, the run-up to it had given us many eruptions of mini-states of exception: militia-like behaviour at Jamia Millia Islamia and Aligarh Muslim University, and then finally as killings and violence convulsed Northeast Delhi. Remember, it was just a month ago.

The irony is that the ordinary constable is drawn from the same pool of rururban peasantry that he governs with a near-class hatred. Yes, the Hindu-Muslim divide is drawn starkly in the police vs people divide: an additional source of exacerbation. But the effects are visible even beyond it. What produces this emotional distance between the cop and the people? A kind of alienation that makes them feel they belong to the ‘other’ side, that of power?

It’s partly something endemic to the policeman’s psychology: it’s a bleak life, constantly exposed to the dark side of human affairs, not to speak of danger. He is, in a real sense, also a psychological victim of a brutalising, dehumanising life. But invested with raw physical power, and a sanctioned monopoly of violence, he fills out his powerlessness, his inability to change anything, with empty violence. That gives us the gap between Ganpat, the policeman of Shantaram’s 1939 film *Manoos/Aadmi*, who rescues and treats a sex worker humanely, and Anant Welankar, a dynamo of seething violence in the shape of Om Puri in Govind Nihalani’s *Ardh Satya* (1983), who is in an epic battle with his own anger.


The second source of that alienation is structural. Indian policing, as we all know, has its roots in colonial policing, and 70 years into our Republichood, our policing laws still derive from the mid-19th century needs of British gendarmerie. The prototype here was the Irish constabulary shaped by 1822,



There’s a wide gap between Ganpat of *Aadmi* and the cop who is a victim of a brutalising and dehumanising life.

whose “original role” itself was that of “an imposer of force upon people”. The Irish model, which mixed law-and-order duties with semi-military tactics against a people meant to be politically subjugated, is what was enforced in India.

This nominal membership of the ruling colonial class is what produces the sense in the policeman of the people somehow being on the “other” side, an “enemy”. They still behave like that. As far back as the 1860s, a British historian listed mounting grievances against police high-handedness as being one of the causes of the 1857 rebellion. The police, he wrote, were “a scourge to the people” and “their oppressions and exactions form one of the chief grounds of dissatisfaction with our government”. Sounds familiar?

Our generation has witnessed some real and some pseudo-millenarian moments—some of you may be old enough to remember the sense of doom of the Skylab days, many more would remember Y2K. What we have today is a real, gigantic cross-section of how we are structurally—a giant ‘slice of life’ is under our microscopes, if only we care to see. And it would be an absolute waste if we don’t use this moment to study it, diagnose it, and think deeply and creatively about our fundamentals. Among them, the need to make a people-centric approach an elementary part of police training, its sole objective. So that we get a police service, not a police force. Indeed, that lesson could profitably flow upwards to all wings of the State. That objective—the need to decolonialise ourselves—is our real emergency. Then we can get back to dealing with elevator phobias. 



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COVER
COVID-19
STORY

Alam Srinivas,
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HIGHWAY TO HUNGER

The foodpipes are clogged. A famine hides in the countryside and stalks the cities.

IT'S a mess of epic proportions and complex nature—a maze of contradictions. The COVID-19 lockdown—national, and even global in its sheer sweep—has brought a screaming shortage of essentials across the country. At the same time, paradoxically, India has more than enough food to feed her citizens. In the darkest of ironies, the buffer stock of food grain—i.e. the stock in storage—is *three times* the mandatory requirement. On top of that, there are indications of a bumper crop this season. So the food is there. But herein comes the real knot in the puzzle. How does one get the tiger, the goat and the bundle of grass across the river? It's a logistical dead-end that governments, both at the Centre and the states, are staring at. They seem simply unable to move the food to where it is required—everyone's plates.

PRABHJOT GILL



Ghazipur Mandi, Delhi
 Only one in seven major mandis is open in India

JITENDER GUPTA

It's like blood circulation stopping suddenly in an already suffering body. Truckers are unable to operate freely. They cannot find workers to off-load food items, nor do they have the goods to carry for the return journey. Not to speak of being harassed at inter- and intra-state checkposts. The upshot: farmers are unable to sell their produce. And central warehouses have become islands of isolation. Only one in seven major mandis, or wholesale markets, is open across India—so retail supplies in towns, cities, even villages, stand drastically disrupted. It's not a production calamity, but a distribution nightmare on a national scale.

The signs of an ominous food crisis in rural areas are already there. Most rural households—barring the land-owning ones—across six or seven Indian states that *Outlook* spoke to fear that they may run out of food in a few days, given the number of family members returning home from cities. Retail outlets are unable to refurbish their dwindling inventories. Given the creeping onset of what could be a dispersed famine, experts fear that India may soon find itself in the midst of food riots and civil crisis if circulation is not eased. Economist Jean Dreze, who has worked extensively on starvation, fears rural India will be in a lot of pain with the reverse flow of migrants unless emergency measures are taken (see interview, “*Bihar will take the worst hit*”). The Centre and state governments are confident as of now, and say they will manage and resolve the distribution bottlenecks in a few days. A lot of Indians will be hoping that the proof of the pudding will come—in the eating.

The real extent of the emergency, even if of a disaggregated nature, will be known soon. There will also be economic consequences to contend with. In rural areas, the good news is that the crop-



pers, or those whose produce is ready, are unlikely to go hungry. But the full force of the downstream repercussions will be on them—for the next 2-3 years, or more. Since they will be unable to sell their crops, or even opt for distress selling, their incomes will dwindle this season. That means they will be unable to repay their current debts, and will need to borrow even more for the next season.

In effect, farmers will get even more entangled in a debt whirlpool. Result? Suicides, extreme poverty and subsistence living—or, if they are fortunate, loan waivers at least for those within the formal system. There are many marginal farmers outside that. Also, armies of migrant workers—those who return home to earn money during the cutting season, who find themselves high and dry. They will depend heavily on welfare schemes, like MGNREGS, which need to be escalated immediately. Else, we may be staring at extreme rural distress.

Urban areas have another phalanx of ghosts haunting them. Already strained by bankruptcies and more possible failures

in the organised sector, they may soon see companies slashing costs (read: layoffs). Salaries may be cut too. Middle-class consumption will consequently come down drastically. As for the unorganised sector, the spectre of an uncertain future looms even sharper—and longer. One variable here: will migrant labourers even come back from the villages? Or will uncertainty keep them back? It will be bleak at home, and back in the city too.

Already, in January 2020, the World Bank lowered India's growth rate to 5 per cent. This could slip further by another 1-2 per cent due to the current crisis, or perhaps more if it explodes in our

India may find itself in the midst of food riots if circulation is not eased.

faces over the next couple of weeks. Sectors like tourism, aviation, hospitality, agriculture and huge swathes of manufacturing will be paralysed, or just limp along. Also, one needs to factor in the web of global factors. The UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs recently projected up to 1 per cent shrinkage in the global economy this year because of the pandemic—and even worse if economic activities continue to be restricted for an extended period without sufficient fiscal responses. If the US drifts into a recession, as is expected, countries like India and China, an integral part of global supply chains, can't escape being impacted.

Things, as they say, are likely to get even worse before they show any signs of improvement. Indians will need to tighten their belts in several ways—socially, emotionally, economically. This is an unprecedented crisis. No generation, except for sections in some states during Partition, have seen anything like this before—not during the Emergency, not during the wars, not during past civil crises. This nation has never been locked down. It's time not only for a pitched battle against COVID-19, but for the larger war that will stretch ahead of it. And all of us need to join it.

ON March 10, the start of the rabi harvest season, India was sitting on huge food grain stocks—estimated at 77.72 million tonnes, over three times the statutory norms. So the country should not rightfully witness any food riots...unless the authorities mess up the distribution and supplies. Ground reports from several states indicate that, despite government measures to ensure a smooth harvest and sale by farmers, persistent police high-handedness during efforts to enforce the COVID-19 lockdown is causing disruptions.

The ongoing harvest of wheat, paddy, pulses, oil seeds and maize, besides fruits and vegetables, all hold the promise of a bumper crop—barring in some areas where untimely rains, fungal infestation affecting vegetables and lack of transportation has wrought some damage, impacting the income of scores of farmers and supplies to the market. Agro-economist Prof Abhijit Sen is optimistic because of the sheer abundance and dismisses fears of any food crisis. "Given that the harvest is just coming in and the produce will be stored somewhere, there is time enough to actually sort out things. There is, of course, a lot of unthinking stuff going on, but finally some order should prevail," he says, while acknowledging the specific challenges of the present.

India's total food grain production, as per the Second Advance Estimates for 2019-20, is pegged at a record 291.95 million tonnes, which is 6.74 million tonnes more than the previous crop year. Wheat production during 2019-20 is estimated to be a record 106.21 million tonnes, around 2.61 million tonnes more than in 2018-19. That's why the Food Corporation of India is hopeful of procuring 35 million tonnes of grains this year, against 34.13 million tonnes last year. But the situation, admits Sen, "is more complicated than post-demonetisation. Then the real economy was tanking because of a liquidity problem. Here the real economy



SANDIPAN CHATTERJEE

Barabazar, Calcutta

Prices of farm produce have gone up by 15% since the lockdown

is tanking because people can't go out. That's impacting all the input-output relationships."

Hurdles in the supply chain, meanwhile, could aggravate the

food situation in some parts of the country pretty soon. Rural farm households across most states generally keep food for themselves before going out and selling it—or grow separately for their consumption. So they will be spared hunger. But some states like Kerala, Goa and those in the Northeast are already witnessing shortages of essential commodities. Being a consumer state with 80 per cent of its food requirement coming from outside, Kerala finance minister T.M. Thomas Isaac is justifiably tense. "We have provided everybody 10 kg of rice through ration shops, and started community kitchens. But this is a new situation: we feel an absolute shortage may emerge," he says. Kerala's welfarism—including the packets of dal and chapati it has started providing to migrant industrial workers—depends on supplies.

Many states have enhanced PDS limits, with some also including pulses to meet the population's protein needs. Sen is, however, not sure whether the promised ration is reaching the poor. "PDS operations vary from state to state, as always. It is also too early to say whether direct fund transfers have helped the beneficiaries."

Dr Panjab Singh, president, National Academy of Agricultural Sciences, is among the optimists. He feels there should be no problem with food availability either in the cities, where supply chains are being activated with the help of online portals and big retail outlets, or in rural areas. What he calls for is a sharp focus on rural areas so as to cater to the large number of migrant labourers who have relocated there due to lack of income sources in locked-down cities. "We need to restock distribution centres for that," he states.

Farmers may get more entangled in a debt whirlpool and subsistence living.

But S.P. Singh of the Indian Foundation of Transport, Research and Training says the logistics is completely crippled (and so is the business it needs to be viable). Truckers who have reached their destinations are unable to find labour to offload their consignments. And those who have managed that don't have cargo to take back.

Sudhir Panwar, former member of the Uttar Pradesh Planning Commission, also points out multiple problems farmers are facing, mostly due to harassment at police check-posts. "Police are persisting in not allowing movement of vegetables despite central and state government orders. They are either demanding money or harassing out of fear," he says. The multiplicity of orders is creating confusion, he adds. Agriculture being a state subject, many states have issued different orders: that has led to police emerging as the executing authority. Results: logjams in the flow of labour and agriculture produce. Otherwise, he points out, it's not unusual to see migrants returning home to help with farm work during the harvest and sowing of "Jaid crops" from March 20-April 20. "This is known as the 'rewarding season' where instead of cash, workers are paid in wheat, which helps them stock up for the family needs," he adds. A depletion there means hunger for the landless.

A senior food ministry official says on condition of anonymity, "Even though truck movement is happening and improving, difficulties are being faced at state borders. These are among concerns that were recently flagged at the meeting with food and civil supplies secretaries." Many state governments have asked the Centre to intervene and are themselves approaching neighbouring states to bail them out. Border points are the bottleneck.

OTHER gremlins too attack a vulnerable system, and need to be tackled. "We have a special 24x7 helpline for complaints regarding black marketing, distribution and wholesaler problems," Bihar chief secretary Deepak Kumar tells *Outlook*. "After the first two days of huge complaints, now the helplines are not buzzing that much." He makes light of the fear of food riots, stating that special arrangements have been made for rural areas. Panchayats are undertaking food delivery at homes, and mukhias and sarpanches are ensuring these supplies, he says. But judge that against Dreze's grim cautionary note, that some of Bihar's communities lead a "hand-to-mouth existence even at the best of times".

Many farmer producer organisations (FPOs) are also striving to find solutions with the help of local authorities and the horticulture board by getting passes issued for supply of vegetables and fruits to nearby villages and towns. In Haryana, out of 400 FPOs, about half have been roped in to ensure sup-

plies—and 118 of them are providing retail services within the state. Unlike profiteers, FPOs help protect farmers' interests, while also reaching out to consumers. So damage to the present vegetable crop is being reduced considerably.

Deepak Khatkar, an FPO representative in Haryana, is confident that registered FPOs could soon help smoothen the supply chain across India. Some, like Ravi Sajjanar in Bagalkot district in Karnataka, are using direct links with consumers and wholesalers to ensure smooth supplies in cities like Bangalore. All this while addressing the COVID-19 concerns:

PTI


Sajjanar says they are providing protective gear to their workers. Panwar, however, says replicating that is not possible on a large scale given the scarcity of gloves, masks and sanitisers.

The fear factor is such that, despite government orders, most mandis had not started operations until early this week, leaving farmers in a fix. The clogged arteries mean that, inevitably, prices have witnessed a 10-15 per cent rise for many farm products, including vegetables, says Sudarshan Suryawanshi, CEO of Indian Society of Agribusiness Professionals. But he's happy that most state governments are now taking proactive measures to restore the supply chain.

But right now, it's still like a cardiac arrest. M.J. Khan, chairman of Indian Chamber of Food and Agriculture, says only 1,000 out of India's 7,000 mandis were operational till March 30. And village haats, which provide a ready source of income for farmers, have been non-functional since the lockdown. That has led to many small farmers dumping their first vegetable harvest.

Kedar Sirohi, a farm leader in Madhya Pradesh, fears that with harvest gathering pace, farmers in need of money may make a beeline for the mandis to offload their produce, despite the health advisory against gathering of too many people. It is not uncommon during peak harvest, stretching over 10

days from April first week, to find 5,000 to 8,000 farmers flocking to mandis at any time to sell their produce. "Will that not defeat the purpose of the lockdown?" asks Sirohi, urging the government to improve the e-payment system and provide incentives to farmers willing to hold on to their produce for a few more days and not crowd the mandis. The government procurement window could be widened to facilitate this, he adds.

And the present paralysis will also have an ongoing effect at another level. Sowing is expected to begin soon, and farm experts warn that production hurdles could hit supplies of seeds and fertilisers, and raise farmers' input costs. So, in the absence of timely action, we will be reaping a grim harvest in the next season also as summer, and that other annual spectre, the much-awaited monsoon, stalk our countryside. Hunting in pairs with a virus. 



Production hurdles could hit supplies of farm inputs, affecting the next harvest.

Siddharth Premkumar
 in Thiruvananthapuram

“THE only germs I have ever worried about were the ones that blighted my crop,” says Johnson in Edathua. The past week—and the peculiar dynamics of the lockdown—has then been a “learning experience”, he notes, for the roughly 50,000 farmers of Kuttanad, Alleppey, where the ‘puncha’ (rabi) harvest is underway. Unseasonal rain is a major concern at this time of the year. This season though, it is “corona” that has cast a dark cloud on Kerala’s ‘rice bowl’.

A shortage of combine harvesters and their operators—both of which mainly come from Tamil Nadu—threatened to undercut procurement even as the state guaranteed 15 kg rice for each of its 87.14 lakh ration card holders (35 kg for BPL holders). With further disbursement of free rations beginning April 1, the state leadership has enacted special health protocols for load workers, truck drivers and harvester operators. According to P.A. Thomas, a paddy farmer from Muttar, this includes close police observation and measures to ensure hygiene besides daily phone calls from the panchayat and the influential farmers’ collectives.

“There are also strict work hours and restrictions on the number of people working at one time to allow for as much social distancing as possible. The police are watching carefully, so I can’t be present for as long as I would like. Even providing soap and water to the workers for sanitation is monitored,” says Thomas, who would have preferred to be more hands-on at this crucial time. “But our health comes first,” he adds.

Among the COVID-19 protocols instituted are restricting the harvesting period, the provision of food and accommodation to workers in keeping with public health diktats, issuing special passes to ferry fuel for machines and seamless transport of harvested grain to mills. In addition, local bodies have been permitted to turn schools and halls into makeshift godowns if the need arises. As a stop-loss measure, workforce attrition has been tackled by bringing in labour from



V.V. BIJU

Salve on a Splintered Chain

Coronavirus could have blighted harvests, but state intervention has helped

other districts.

With the administration bringing the the district under Section 144, Kuttanad’s six agronomic zones have seen uneven, albeit generally steady, harvesting. In upper Kuttanad, where both Edathua and Muttar fall, the second crop season (the first, *irippu*, typically begins in April-May and ends in September) begins in October-November, whereas in Kainakary gram panchayat (in lower Kuttanad), the puncha crop is harvested in February and March. Despite the early COVID-19 scare after the country’s second case was reported in the district in January, the traditionally staggered cultivation pattern on the community’s paddy fields was uninterrupted, says C.K. Samuel, a farmer from Kainakary who

Workforce attrition has been tackled by bringing labour from other districts.



Lifeblood of Kerala—the fields and farms

wrapped up his harvest in early March.

According to the Kerala State Civil Supplies Corporation (Supplyco), which monitors everything from seed allotment to farmer registration and grain procurement, some 57 million kg of rice has been obtained from the roughly 27,500 hectares set aside for paddy in Alleppey. Kuttanad is the largest in both production and farmland area. The other major rice-growing districts include Palakkad and Thrissur, both of which face uncertainty.

Whereas hard bargaining by rice mill owners is usually the biggest headache, the coronavirus panic set in and caused harvester owners in neighbouring states to suspend loaning their machines. Nor did out-of-state workers feel safe enough to return to Kerala’s fields. It took the formation of a high-level crisis management cell that included various ministers to ensure both the harvest and procurement began on a war-footing. As the lockdown began, clarification from the chief minister’s office was needed to highlight paddy procurement as an essential activity.

“Without such intervention, the result would have been very different. The government’s efforts to source workers were crucial,” says Johnson, who is reasonably confident of a good yield. “After the floods and other crises, we have learned to always expect and prepare for the worst while hoping for the best. We have to think about our families and their health, but at the same time, our farms are our lifeblood.”

ONLY HAZMAT NIZAMUDDIN?

One super-spreader speaks of wider policy lapses—now being (hopefully) fixed as government cranks into action

Bhavna Vij-Aurora

A sense of nation-wide emergency, across all aspects of life, now pervades governance. Coordination is maximum, and conflict minimum, across Centre and states—indeed, across the political sphere. Everyone realises how crucial this period is. The expression ‘Lakshman rekha’, a recent appearance in the lexicon of words associated with the fight against COVID-19, reflects that. A day after Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the 21-day lockdown on March 24, Doordarshan began a rerun of Ramanand Sagar’s TV serial *Ramayan*, and soon someone realised this metaphor from the epic resonated particularly well in these unusual circumstances. What was this new proscription—stay at home, going out would invite danger—if not a modern form of Lakshman rekha?

Reality, of course, soon defied the epical metaphor. Thousands upon thousands of Indians had no option but to observe it in the breach. Having left their villages for a hardscrabble life in the glittering cities—where they worked on highways, built condominiums for others, served tea, cleaned, and did hundreds of other jobs—they never had the safety net implied by a Lakshman rekha. The national lockdown left them without work, money and food, or even buses or trains to go home. So they packed their meagre belongings and started on a determined long walk, on highways they had themselves built. If anything, it resembled another image from the epic—that of a collective *vanwas*.

The government had clearly not seen it coming. Much like it did not foresee several other things. Take the fortnight-long Tablighi Jamaat event in Delhi, which became a ‘hotspot’ unto itself. No religious congregation had yet been banned (the event was from March 1-15)—crowds still thronged Vaishno Devi, Keoladevi in Rajasthan and Shani Shingnapur in Maharashtra. Even on March 20, thousands gathered in ‘literate’ Kerala’s capital Thiruvananthapuram for an ‘arattu’ procession at a local temple. Even without a ban, each one of them spoke of the criminal insularity of congregation leaders. Corona fears were widely known by then, and each was a likely super-spreader event.

The fears proved acutely true with the Tabligh event, where the organisers really should have known better—their footfalls are typically global, and their February event in Malaysia had already been designated the “largest viral vector in Southeast Asia” by *New York Times* as early as March 3. As it transpired, some 1,900 people had to be evacuated on March 31 from their Nizamuddin HQ and sent into quarantine, weeks after they arrived from Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Saudi Arabia et al. Over 100 of them have been confirmed as coronavirus positive. Many had travelled across India, almost



TRIBHUVAN TIWARI

certainly infecting others, and who are now being traced. The Nizamuddin colony has been sealed. March 31 also saw the biggest spike in cases—237 in 24 hours.

But if the Tabligh was myopic, so also other religious congregations; was it not part of a larger myopia at the level of government? Policy has to be fed by sharp information-gathering. Both were sloppy. The fact that the Tabligh event went on for a fortnight is now being seen at least as an ‘intelligence failure’ (if not an administrative one). So is the exodus of migrant labour—which produced intense concentrations of humans, the very opposite of the effect intended by the PM. Another potentially spreading web not foreseen. So far, so flat-footed.

What now? A mess had been created, it had to be cleaned up. An urgency previously missing was now in evidence—some of it desperate. The government scrambled to stop the exodus, closing all district and state borders. Before that,

heart-wrenching scenes were witnessed at Delhi’s Anand Vihar bus terminal as migrants jostled to get a seat on buses arranged by the Delhi and UP governments (the chain of authority not very clear), and also at the Bihar border where they were all kept locked up in a facility—for a disease best prevented by maintaining physical distance. Some semblance of order was finally restored after states set up shelters for migrants, whose homeward march was halted. In a shocking revelation, the Centre told the Supreme Court that the exodus had to be stopped as almost one-third of the returning migrants

The government had clearly not seen it coming. Much like it did not foresee several other things.

could be infected. The apex court, in turn, said large-scale migration out of “fear and panic” was a bigger threat than the pandemic itself. Not that the latter isn’t. In a status report filed on March 31, home secretary Ajay Kumar Bhalla told the SC: “So far rural India has remained safe from this infection. If migrant labourers are allowed to...reach their home village(s), there is a serious and imminent potential of the infection penetrating rural India also.” That would make it “unmanageable to contain,” he wrote, “dangerous for the migrant workers” and “also for rural India”. The Centre was working in close coordination with the states to ensure food, shelter and medical facilities to the migrant workers, he added. “Around 6,66,291 persons have been provided shelter; 22,88,279 persons have been provided food,” the status report said. The system had cranked into action, if belatedly.

THE policy drift that defined much of March was now being analysed at large. Among other things, Union home minister Amit Shah had been keeping a noticeably low profile all through. MHA officials say he has been holding regular review meetings at his Krishna Menon Marg residence. But that’s one aspect. Overall, says former cabinet secretary K.M. Chandrasekhar, the situation should never have come to this pass. “The PM had no choice other than the national lockdown to ‘flatten the curve’. But it should have been handled in a better way,” he tells *Outlook*. According to him, Modi could have signalled an imminent lockdown when he addressed the nation for the first time on March 20. His March 22 ‘janata curfew’ also created contrary effects on the streets, and lockdown day finally set off a panic shopping frenzy too, after word came at 8 pm. “The states should have been taken into confidence...such situations are best left to the states to prepare for and handle,” Chandrasekhar says. “And the Centre should have announced the Garib Kalyan Yojana immediately after the March 20 speech and given funds to the states, along with guidelines. It seems to have got enmeshed in the deliberations of a multi-layered committee.” The former cabinet secretary was severe in his indictment: “The impact on the economy and the people, particularly the poor, was catastrophic.” He’s deeply concerned about the possible fallout of a prolonged lockdown—it will be a terrible blow to the economy, worsening the effects of two years of lethargy, he says. “During the 2008-09 recession, there was the Planning Commission. Now there’s no mechanism in place to pull the economy out of the



What was this new proscription, stay at home, if not a modern form of Lakshman rekha?

morass. Decisions taken impulsively, much like demonetisation, do more harm than good,” he says.

Former finance minister P. Chidambaram was quick to spot a chance for some artillery shelling too. Yes, India’s budgets are already overstressed. But still, the ex-FM feels, a confidence-boosting financial assistance plan (FAP) should have been announced prior to, or along with, the imposition of the lockdown. Taking to Twitter, he said: “The FM’s FAP was so miserly and inadequate, it actually prompted many to go back to their villages. I urge the government to announce a bold FAP II today or tomorrow.”

Anyway, the focus now is to use the lockdown period to strengthen healthcare facilities and prepare for a very likely spike in numbers. A member of the Joint Monitoring Group (JMG), headed by the Director General of Health Services, says community monitoring is being done extensively. He says the Centre has increased testing capacity on a war footing—from a single lab in Pune in January to 118 now across India. “We now have the capacity to test 15,000 samples a day. In addition, we have coordinated with 47 private laboratory chains with over 20,000 collection centres,” he tells *Outlook*. However, he concedes that extensive testing, what WHO recommends, is still not part of the protocol. “We are still following a more conservative approach,” the JMG member rues, agreeing that testing needs to be more. “Much more. We are not even close to what needs to be done. India is doing just about 17-18 tests per million. South Korea did 5,000 per million and flattened the curve much faster,” he adds.

Former home secretary G.K. Pillai also makes a strong case for large-scale testing. A retired Kerala cadre IAS of-



ficer, he recommends the Kerala model of tracking and testing people. He says low testing can suddenly spring a huge spike in cases. “As of now, things seem under control but I think a peak can be expected in mid-April. If that happens with increased casualties, there will be panic. I hope we don’t reach that situation,” says Pillai, another figure who evokes a sense of bureaucratic experience missing now.

FORMER home secretary Vinod Duggal is more optimistic and sees “light at the end of the tunnel by mid-April”. Duggal, who has also served in the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) as pointsperson for relief efforts after the 2013 Uttarakhand floods, admits to the challenges. Given its constraints of time and budget, he says, the government has done well. “When the problem is of this magnitude, there are bound to be challenges,” he says.

The government knows that now. A Union minister—coordinating efforts with 10 districts in a north Indian state—admits the task is herculean. “We are still at the foothills and have to climb the Everest,” he says, not wanting to be identified. He is one of several ministers given charge of 10 districts. They coordinate closely with district magistrates and district collectors and submit a daily report to the PMO.

The PM is monitoring things, and interacting with all key nodes on a daily basis: governors, CMs and health ministers. He has also been active on the

↑ **A fistful of biscuits** is all he got to palliate hunger—food scarcity haunts every migrant worker rendered jobless by the shutdown

inspirational side, reaching out to doctors, nurses, health and sanitation workers. That’s appropriate, given the gravity of things. India is on the brink of Stage 3: community transmission. “By the time you write about it, we may have entered the stage. That is why preparations are on a war footing,” the minister says.

India, collectively, has so far managed to identify 1.35 lakh isolation beds for potential COVID-19 patients. Rail wagons are also being converted into isolation beds—initially, 80,000 beds in 5,000 coaches. The plan is to modify 20,000 coaches to get additional capacity of 3.2 lakh beds. “If the need arises,” stresses the minister. “All efforts are to ensure it does not arise.”

A member of one of the 11 empowered groups handling the crisis also admits to the challenges. Funds are being provided to states for “augmenting quarantine facilities, upgrading hospital infrastructure” and procuring PPE sets—hazmat suits, N95 masks et al—to secure doctors and nurses, he says. Coordination among the 11 groups, however, is proving messy, he accepts—even if all report to the PM’s principal secretary P.K. Mishra. The more you listen, the more it sounds like a war out there. A sprawling, unpredictable mess, with moments of lucidity. □

The more
you listen,
the more it
sounds like a
war out
there.



In rural West Bengal, people returning from elsewhere were quarantined on trees

PTI

NATIVES RETURN IN THE TIME OF CORONA

The pandemic has almost reached rural India with the lockdown-spurred reverse migration. Villagers and local authorities are rigging up fences—but how long can they hold off?

Jeevan Prakash Sharma
and Ajay Sukumaran

TWO images stood out in stark contrast in the early days of a nationwide coronavirus lockdown. Deserted city streets, and their polar opposite—long columns of an exodus snaking out of these urban agglomerations into the countryside. Thousands of migrant labourers left adrift because everything has shut down are retreating to their roots—by any desperate means they can, some on goods lorries, others on foot. Large parts of rural India, to where they are heading, had so far remained at arm's length from COVID-19. But these are also places where healthcare is far from optimal. How will they cope now?

The concerns were already visible—overzealous district authorities in

Bareilly hosed down returning folk with bleach; from a remote village in West Bengal's Purulia came the unusual story of seven villagers just back from Chennai quarantining themselves on banyan trees so as to protect their families living in huts, and themselves from elephants.

Though migrants are on the move in several places, states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Jharkhand are gearing up for larger numbers heading back. District magistrates, village heads, chief medical officers and public servants whom *Outlook* contacted spoke of several methods they are deploying to segregate migrants from the village folk—the Centre has given out strict instructions to home-quarantine those headed home, for 14 days. However, it's easier said than done, many admit.

"Social watch is an effective solution," says Harsh Mangla, deputy commis-

sioner of Garwah in Jharkhand, whose district has not reported any positive case yet. Block and village heads have been told to keep an eye out for people coming from outside and ensure that they get a medical check-up done. "We have circulated helpline numbers. We received calls about many outsiders who were reluctant to undergo medical tests. We sent our team and got it done," Mangla says, adding that villagers are being regularly reminded to maintain social distancing among themselves. "Rural folks are so sensitised that it is very difficult for any outsider to sneak into a village. We have received calls from villagers who anonymously provided information about their close relatives who have arrived from outside. Nobody wants to put their life at risk," he says.

Elsewhere, like in Paippad in Kerala, the story was about stanching the flow.

The town has for long been a hub of migrants from West Bengal, Assam and Odisha. On March 29, a few hundred workers gathered in the streets demanding transport to go home. Fake messages about trains being arranged by the government had added to their confusion, says the state government, which has set up over 5,000 camps for migrant workers. In neighbouring Karnataka, officials in Belgaum this week stopped workers heading to Rajasthan and took them to government hostels. According to the Union home ministry, nearly 6.75 lakh migrant workers have been housed in 21,000 relief camps across states.

SITAMARHI, a district in Bihar that shares its border with Nepal, has received over 4,000 migrants in the past two weeks. “Most of these labourers are coming from Delhi and they started leaving for their villages from March 15 onwards,” says Parimal, district information and public relations officer. “We have started putting home quarantine stamps on their hands as many others have run away from self-isolation elsewhere in the country.” Abhilasha Kumari Sharma, the district magistrate, says about 242 government and private schools have been converted into quarantine homes to isolate whoever has fever or other symptoms of flu.

“Around 20 of the 75 villages in my block have received over 1,000 migrants in the past fortnight. Like in other districts, we too have converted marriage halls, community centres and schools into quarantine wards,” says Arun Singh, head of the Nawabganj block in Uttar Pradesh’s Unnao district. The good thing, he reckons, is that the villagers have become so suspicious that “even if a person completes 14 days of home quarantine, he will always be under watch for days to come”.

Some village heads say they are keeping away from nearby villages too. “We have stopped all contact with our neighbouring villages. We are doing with whatever food we have stored,” says Vidur Mohan, village head of Sathary in UP’s Muzaffarnagar district.

Thermal screening, naturally, is the first line of defence, but officials are wary of people popping paracetamol tablets, which bring down body temper-



ature, to escape notice. “We have neither the manpower nor the resources needed to take samples of all those who have come from outside,” says a district chief medical officer who doesn’t wish to be named. Another medical officer says, “Precaution is the only cure. All the district heads and health officers are aware of this grave reality.”

There are chances that there may be positive cases among people returning to their villages, said Lav Agarwal, joint secretary, Union health ministry, at a briefing on March 31. “That’s why we are advising everybody to stay where they are.” The ministry says it is working with the states to make sure that basic health services continue. “As part of our strategy to manage COVID-19, we have been taking up extensive training across the country to ensure that our healthcare staff is aware of what precautions are to be taken when it comes to COVID-19 management.”

The Karnataka health department has decided to recruit 810 ad hoc medical staff. They will be deployed at 18

A hospital in the interiors of UP prepares for a virus that has baffled the world’s best

hospitals to help ease the staff crunch.

While 71 per cent of India’s population is predominantly rural, only 34 per cent of doctors and 33 per cent of nurses out of the total available pool in the country serve in rural areas, states a report published last year by the Indian Institute of Public Health, Gurgaon. The country is estimated to have between 30,000 and 50,000 ventilators, but these are mostly in the big cities.

Many districts have sealed their borders with barricades, and deployed police personnel and medical officers to carry out check-ups on the spot. With seven positive COVID-19 cases—the highest in Bihar—Munger district is on high alert. “One person infected the other six. We have been trying to identify his chain of contacts, who could also be suspects,” says Rajesh Meena, the district magistrate. “The villagers themselves are not letting anyone enter without medical check-up.”

In UP’s Pilibhit, a mother and son who returned from Mumbai on March 18 were found to be positive. Officials say the district has received around 4,000 migrant labourers over the past week. “Those from affected areas have been asked to stay at home, quarantined. For those who are symptomatic with high fever, we take their samples and send it to Lucknow for diagnosis,” says Vibhav Srivastava, the district magistrate. Can India’s rickety and stressed rural health care cope with a pandemic that has overwhelmed the world’s best? We can only try. **D**

Several methods are being deployed to segregate the returning migrants from the village folk.



PTI

SLOW DRIVE IN FAST TEST LANE

India has one of the lowest testing rates in the world. Will new, locally made kits change its programme?

Jeevan Prakash Sharma and
Ajay Sukumaran

A Bangalore-based executive will complete his 14-day home quarantine this week. He is in a dilemma, though. Ever since he returned from an overseas business trip, he has been cooped up in a room in his home, peeking at his family only through a window. The solitary spell has been quite an experience. Initially, he grappled with anxiety as news of the novel coronavirus exploded. Days later, there was a visit from local health authorities, who stamped a quarantine

seal on his hand—an event that piqued neighbours' curiosity. From time to time, he got an IVR call: "If you have no symptoms, press 1. If you have cough, fever or breathing difficulty, press 2." He has not gone beyond 1. Yet, knowing that people can be asymptomatic and still be infected with the virus leaves him with a nagging question as the quarantine comes to an end—is it safe to meet his family again? "The only way to know is by testing," he says.

Facilities have indeed been ramped up and more people are being tested now—nearly 18,000 tests were conducted last week across the country, which was double the cumulative figure until

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Late start The US was slow in its testing, but ramped up the exercise when cases spiralled

March 22. In all, over 47,000 people had been tested by midweek (April 1). But the approach, however, is still calibrated. The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) recommends only symptomatic people in quarantine, health workers and the contacts of laboratory-confirmed positive cases be tested. Besides this, hospitalised patients with severe respiratory illnesses are being tested as a COVID-19 surveillance measure. Overall, testing figures are still low compared to other countries and the available capacity—the utilisation rate stood at 38 per cent by midweek.

Both the health ministry and ICMR point out that isolation—if people adhere to the lockdown scrupulously—will be crucial in limiting the outbreak. Experts reckon that testing will regardless have to be ramped up to know whether the lockdown has succeeded. "Everything moves on evidence.

Simultaneously we have to monitor what the microbe is doing,” T. Jacob John, retired professor of clinical virology, Christian Medical College, Vellore, tells *Outlook*. The evidence, he says, will come from testing. “Epidemiology intelligence will tell you what you should be prepared for. In other words, you will be two steps ahead of the virus. Are we not moving two steps behind the virus now?”

Of late, there are indications that antibody tests could be deployed—both Karnataka and Kerala have said they are making efforts to source these tests, which could be used to screen quarantined people. An antibody test is a quick blood test that can tell if a person was infected. But it’s not a diagnostic tool like the polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test that can detect the presence of the virus in a nose or throat swab. Nor does a negative result rule out COVID-19 infection, so there’s a limitation to antibody tests.

IT’S more a pre-screening tool, explains Dr V. Ravi, head of neurovirology at NIMHANS, Bangalore. “It’s fast, much cheaper and you don’t need expertise in doing it. You can’t take swabs from thousands of people who are quarantined. You can screen their blood rapidly and if it is positive, you can take a swab immediately,” he says. Antibody tests haven’t been widely used for respiratory viruses, but since SARS Cov-2 is a new virus, people believe it will have some role in detecting exposure at this stage. “Antibody testing will tell you who was infected or what proportion of people were infected. At any given time, you do an antibody survey and then you extrapolate,” says John.

As of April 1, around 126 government-run labs were functional and 51 private labs given the go-ahead for diagnostic PCR tests. With these tests, virologists look for a certain sequence that defines the virus by amplifying the nucleic acids that are in the virus. Many private labs have started work and their large networks, it is expected, will help further the reach of testing. “So far, sample collection has been done from homes of patients. We are now isolating a few dedicated centers for sample collection,” says Metropolis Healthcare Ltd, which began testing in Mumbai and is awaiting approval for operations



MINAL DAKHAVE BHOSALE

IF ‘TWINS’ be the word, this mom is a supermom. Virologist Minal Dakhve Bhosale overcame the restricted mobility from advanced pregnancy to deliver India’s first coronavirus testing kit as well as a bonny little girl, just a day before the equipment was handed to the authorities. She and her team of 10 at Mylab Discovery in Pune delivered the kit in six weeks. “It was like giving birth to two babies,” she said. The kit—at Rs 1,200 each is a quarter of the Rs 4,500 the government spends on testing—reduces the time taken for a result from eight hours to 2.5 hours.

in Delhi, Chennai, Rajkot and Bangalore.


The home collection method is similar to what was being done for H1N1 swine flu—phlebotomists collect nasopharyngeal and oropharyngeal swabs. But since they are outfitted in protective gear, it would likely require public education and awareness—a private lab reported that a few of their clients were apprehensive that the pick-up would attract attention. Testing requires a pre-

scription from a government-certified physician—the patient proforma records symptoms, history of travel, contact with high-risk patients among other details.

Indiscriminate testing too has its own problems, explains one medical professional. “Remember, when a test is indiscriminately done, there could be false positive results and false negative results too.” The trace, test and treat/quarantine strategy is a trusted public health approach, he says.

Governments are trying to ramp up capacities. At the end of March, Kerala had 1.63 lakh people under surveillance, 7,485 samples had been tested and 215 positive cases were under treatment. The state government says COVID-19 care centres have been set up in all districts for people who were not residents of the state, like tourists, but had been advised home isolation. In Bangalore, fever clinics have been set up for people with travel history who develop COVID-19 symptoms.

“The government has asked all of us to get prepared, but did not give an indication of how large the testing requirement may be,” says Vijay Chandru of Strand Life Sciences, whose lab in Gurgaon expects to start testing soon. The lab, once set up, will have a capacity of 500-1,000 tests per day, he says. The government has recommended a cap on cost at Rs 4,500—this includes Rs 1,500 as a screening test for suspect cases and an additional Rs 3,000 for the confirmation test.

Currently, the probes for PCR tests are mostly imported. But there is some good news on that front—Pune-based Mylab, the first Indian company to get approval for a testing kit, says that it can manufacture up to 1 lakh tests a week, with kits costing one-fourth of the procurement costs of the imported tests. Mylab says its PCR kit screens and detects the infection within two-and-a-half hours as compared to an average of eight hours currently. “The kit has a unified screening-confirmation outcome, which means you don’t have to conduct two separate tests and thus, you save on time,” a company spokesperson says. Researchers have been working on other approaches—an IIT Delhi-designed probe-free method for PCR tests is among those being evaluated currently. 

The trace,
test and treat/
quarantine
strategy is
a trusted
public health
approach.



THE NOWHERE PEOPLE

JITENDER GUPTA



An out-of-work migrant worker ponders his future after the lockdown.

Experts warn that reverse migration will have a debilitating effect on the rural sector

Preetha Nair

FOR over a week, Sadat Ansari has been confined to a dingy 10x10 foot room in Khirki extension in South Delhi, a rented accommodation he shares with seven more people. He stares at the sprawling shopping centres across the street, constantly reminded of the glaring social distance between him and the urban crowd. Ansari, a daily wage earner was rendered jobless on March 25 when Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced a nationwide lockdown to stop the spread of a silent killer—the new coronavirus.

Hunkered down at his tenement, the 36-year-old who came to Delhi from Bihar's Madhubani district 20 years ago wanted to join the thousands of migrant workers who had hoped to rush back to their villages, despite the lockdown. What held him back? Ansari left his village because it has little to offer. No jobs, no money. Abject poverty. The stitch hasn't changed all these years. Besides, the Bihar government has no plan in place for them. "I don't even own a small plot of land. What will I eat there? Though the Bihar government has announced free ration, we will get it only next month. Do they want us to die?" he asks. But his roommate, Mohammed Usman, thinks it's

"better to die on the roads than die of hunger in this city".

As governments—at the Centre and states—grappled to tackle a humanitarian and potential health crisis due to the reverse migration of workers from urban centres to villages, experts warn that the exodus could lead to massive economic devastation in the rural sector. Dr K.P. Kannan of the Thiruvananthapuram-based Centre for Development Studies predicts that the rural sector will face economic as well as social distress in the coming days as the returning migrants are not going to be welcomed in their native places.

"These people will be seen as liability now. There will be fear of health, unemployment, conflict, and competition for available food among other pressing issues. Our national output is wiped out for the next few months and the recovery will take time," says Kannan. Lack of investment in agriculture and public health will have a debilitating impact on rural economy, he warns. For economist Jean Drez, the

biggest worry at the moment is the state of Bihar, which will see the return of a large population of migrant workers. "Being a caste- and class-ridden society with huge numbers of landless labourers, the fallout will be huge for the state", he says.

However, it's Uttar Pradesh which sends out the largest number of migrants, according to India Migration Now, a Mumbai-based non-profit organisation. While UP accounts for an estimated 33 per cent of migrant labourers in India, Bihar takes the second place with 15 per cent, followed by 6 per cent from Rajasthan. Delhi tops the list of top destination states, followed by Maharashtra, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat.

Drez says the central government should chip in with emergency measures as most of the announcements in the relief package will take shape only after the lockdown. "The migrants want to go back because they don't feel secure here. They know that they will end up in jail or they will go hungry here. If the government wants them to stay put, give facilities and treat them with dignity," he says. The government needs to pump in money for this informal sector, which contributes 50 per cent of the nation's products, say experts. As most of them work in areas such as construction, textiles, rickshaw driving, domestic work and other such services, it's also a well-known fact that they are the work horse or major drivers for/of the economy.

AS the number of internal migrants recorded an upward trend over the past four decades, 2011 census data says India now has approximately 60-70 million migrant workers. "In 2011, a quarter of India's urban population was enumerated as being migrants," wrote author Chinmay Tumble in his book *India Moving: A History of Migration*, to denote the key role played by migrants.

However, with remittances from migrants drying up now, the rural sector will face unprecedented crisis, says Jayati Ghosh, professor of economics at

JNU. Remittances by migrant workers are estimated at Rs 1.5 lakh crore, according to the Economic Survey 2016-17.

Ghosh says effective intervention by the Centre in tandem with state governments is a prerequisite at this point. "Though we don't know how many have managed to get back, the remittances have stopped altogether. This is compounded by the fact that all the regulations are being interpreted and implemented shoddily," she alleges. Apart from ensuring cash assistance and food to villagers, the government



P T I

UP accounts for estimated 33% of migrant workers in India. Bihar is second with about 15%.

should enhance supply of seeds, pesticides, fertilisers and essential inputs for the farmers, as agriculture forms a major part of rural income, she says.

The surplus workforce is going to be a major worry, experts add. About 80 per cent of India's workforce is employed in the informal sector, says the 2015-16 Employment-Unemployment Survey. With the breadwinners of the family becoming dependents, it will add to the burden of the family, says Ritu Dewan, vice president, Indian Society of Labour Economics (ISLE). "There's already surplus workforce and now there's more. There is additional bur-

den of net producers now becoming consumers. People will start selling their assets and land to survive. The marginal farmers cannot reinvest in the land. So, future production is impacted, which in turn impacts future employment," says Dewan.

Another migrant worker from Uttar Pradesh, Ram Kumar has no plans to return to the satellite town of Gurgaon, where he was a tailor. Kumar, who was visiting his family at his village in Bulandshahr, says he would explore job prospects in the village, though op-

tions are limited. Kannan says many workers will have to stay back as the economy takes time to rebound.

"Unfortunately, the economy is not like a health crisis. The economy needs a lot of things to get back into shape," Kannan says. The uncertainty will continue till demand picks up and "many small industries will be shut. Only when demand picks up, they will be able to get back their jobs", he predicts.

If the surplus workforce is going to be a problem in some parts, Punjab and Haryana are faced with shortage of labour with the beginning of the harvesting season. "Usually, this time agricultural migrants from UP and Bihar migrate to Punjab and Haryana. Unfortunately, they won't be able to go this time. People who don't have land are going to be in great difficulty," says Drez.

The disruption in the demand and supply chain is going to hit the rural poor the most, fear economists. As the government claimed that they have enough stockpiles of food, immediate relief of free ration through the public distribution system is the need of the hour, they say. "The migrants should be helped with an immediate grant of minimum Rs 5,000," Kannan says.

To ease the burden of the rural poor, Kannan suggests that more thrust should be given to NREGA employment. Apart from expanding its 100-day limit, he says the government should also pay advance wages to all NREGA workers. "Work can be resumed when the situation becomes normal. Now, it's time to pay wages in advance".

Laboured March

Salik Ahmad

VISUALISE this. A young man with a boyish moustache walks along an expressway leading out of Delhi, one arm wrapping a child barely a year old to his chest, the other clasping an oddly-rectangular jute bag. His wife, a thin, small-boned woman, walks along, gripping the hand of their other child as he tries to keep pace beside her, taking in the scenes around them blinkingly. She is holding a bag too; it contains a precious cargo of biscuits and water.

The man is a mason, fitting tiles to perfection in mansions. He has Rs 450 in his pocket. And nearly as many kilometres to cover to his destination—his village in Kanpur. Because of the lockdown in the wake of coronavirus spread, the roads to his livelihood are shut to him. His immediate savings will not last to feed four mouths for the next 20 days; he's dimly sure of that. The one road is the road back—his village, he's equally sure, holds the meagre promise of roti and salt.

In this bedraggled procession they are part of, there are able-bodied men, 90-year-olds, physically challenged persons, pregnant women, widows—many of them with blisters on their feet, glazed eyes and fearful minds shut to the immensity of the task ahead or the ordeals awaiting them. Some hope to find a vehicle at a later point.

Some have endured police truncheons to make it this far. They make calls to update those at home of their progress, then switch the phones off. And they hopelessly signal the vehicles whizzing past for rides. It's a numbing walk for those who walk it, and a numbing sight for those who see this exodus.

Two days later, tens of thousands throng bus stations after the UP government announces buses from Delhi to various districts in the state. The roads witness a continuous, thick stream of migrants. Inflated bus fares fail many. More cannot find a place in already-packed buses. Some cannot find buses to their home districts—they are not prominent enough to be taken into account by bus operators.

After the government reinforces the lockdown a day later, and as visuals of massive crowds evoke strong and varied reactions, shamefaced authorities tell them to stay back. So those remaining go back to their colourless, careworn, subterranean existence—in the shadows of tall buildings, behind walls, under flyovers, in nondescript slums huddled in the darkness. All that stands between them and starvation now is government food/food grains supplies. And some good samaritans. One such person who was helping them with food, and occasionally money, tells me, "When you offer them money, they are a little taken aback. They have never taken charity."

NH-2, NEAR CALCUTTA

SANDIPAN CHATTERJEE







COVER STORY
COVID-19
EXODUS



DELHI
PTI



MUMBAI
APOORVA SALKADE



GHAZIABAD
SURESH K. PANDEY



ALLAHABAD



GREATER NOIDA

TRIBHUVAN TIWARI



NH-24, GHAZIABAD

PTI

COVER STORY
COVID-19
EXODUS



**ANAND VIHAR,
DELHI**
SURESH K. PANDEY



WORLD TOUR



HUNGARY The Hungarian Parliament granted Prime Minister Victor Orban power to rule by decree to deal with the coronavirus emergency, further splitting a polarised country. The opposition said Hungarian democracy has now been placed in quarantine amidst widespread fear of Orban misusing his new power against critics. Over 100,000 people had signed a petition opposing the move.



COLOMBIA The National Liberation Army halted their fight against the government for a month in view of the coronavirus pandemic. The "humanitarian gesture" came after 10 people died and 700 others tested positive for the virus in the Andean region. The rebels have been fighting for 50 years and in January 2019 had killed 20 police cadets.



ISRAEL Israel's year-long political deadlock ended after Benny Gantz agreed to join Benjamin Netanyahu's government. He had refused to work with his rival who has been facing graft charges. Gantz changed his mind after being elected speaker of parliament. He will serve as foreign minister under Netanyahu until September 2021, before taking over the premiership.



FOREIGN HAND

GETTY IMAGES

BRAZILIAN President Jair Bolsonaro—nicknamed “Trump of the Tropics”—is bent upon outdoing his American exemplar in ignoring the severity of the coronavirus pandemic. The spread of the deadly virus through 178 countries has affected around 800,000 people and taken 37,000 lives so far. But Bolsonaro describes it as a “little flu” and a trifling “cold”, accusing the media instead for creating a fuss.

“The coronavirus-denial movement officially has a leader, and it’s Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro,” says *The Atlantic*. Donald Trump has also been widely criticised for his slow response in arresting the spread of the virus in America which, with about 200,000 cases, is now the worst-hit country of all. But, for once, he seems to be listening to experts’ advice.

The White House coronavirus response coordinator Deborah Birx issued a dire warning on March 30, saying she was “very worried about every city in the United States”. In her estimate, in a best-case scenario, the US might have 100,000 to 200,000 deaths. But if people continue to ignore guidelines, failing to socially distance themselves and keep indoors, the toll could be a staggering over two million by the time it ends. “We can go from five to 50 to 500 to 5,000 cases very quickly,” Birx said. She admitted that in “some of the metro areas we were late in getting people to follow the 15-day guidelines”. But she stressed that “no state, no metro area will be spared”.

Trump who had earlier talked about easing the guidelines on social distancing by Easter, April 12, has extended it to April 30. He expects things to improve by June.

In contrast, Bolsonaro, who leads the world's fifth largest country and a dynamic economy, feels the virus is a “symptom-free nuisance” for 90 per cent of the affected Brazilians. He mulishly argued that Brazilians “never catch anything” even when they dive into “sewage”.

But few in the country share their president’s optimism. As people in Italy, India and elsewhere came out to their balconies, clanging plates and spoons, expressing appreciation of their government’s efforts, when people gathered at a similar fashion in Brazil, it was to show their anger against Bolsonaro.

The demand for his resignation is getting shriller in the Latin American country. Though the possibility of him stepping down could be as remote as the sudden disappearance of the pandemic. □



Taranjit Singh, MD, JIS Group



Educational Initiatives



Simarpreet Singh, Director, JIS Group

COVID-19 & Education - Simarpreet Singh, Director, JIS Group, Kolkata

As mankind grapples with the novel corona virus, or COVID-19, pandemic and collectively stares at insecurity and a spell of large-scale disruptions, education sector is going to suffer inevitably and this is unavoidable. The pandemic is reshaping education. To combat the extreme situation we have already started with Digital Classes in all our colleges. The situation being apprehensive, a workshop with the theme "Corona se Ladaai, Ghar se Padhaai" was held at the JIS Engineering College Campus prior to the lockdown. The digital classes are held to have interactive sessions between the students and the teachers and the sessions are also posted in JIS Group FB page for further reference.

Webinar or web based seminars are being held in the field of Management, Law, Engineering and Pharmacy regularly and the registration is free of cost. Almost 1000 delegates register regularly and the theme of the Webinar is Global Career College Counseling (GCCC). GCCC is initiated by industry experts. At the same time the Departments of Bio Technology, Microbiology and Bio Medical Engineering of the group is working on precautions to overcome the future virus attacks.

This once-in-a-century COVID-19 pandemic is striking the world economy burdened with record levels of debt. The corona virus has gone global, and it will bring the world economy to a standstill. The pandemic is a health and economic catastrophe, and that's placing enormous strain on the world's financial system. COVID 19 would affect student loans too. We also take in for questioning that Bank loan would be a problem for higher studies and students who peruse higher studies while working would get in to trouble if there are lay - offs. Campus placements will be affected too, accordingly we are conducting online training on placements. Examination procedures will have to be reworked and last but not the least there would be immense crisis of seats in local colleges across India.

Under any circumstances our students are our first priority, says **Sardar Taranjit Singh**, MD, JIS Group, Kolkata. "I have asked the faculty to keep in touch with every student individually so that they do not loose heart at this hour of crisis" He also added that the alumni of JIS Group have come forward and the network is in constant touch with the existing students which is undoubtedly a moral boost up for each one of them.

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Paradise Locked

As it waits out the shutdown, a circle of dangers presses closer on Bollywood

Giridhar Jha in Mumbai

THE cameras have stopped, and so have the entire universe that revolves around it, with its various, interdependent eco-systems—a near-biblical desolation. Not just Bollywood, the coronavirus scare appears to have infected the entire entertainment industry and it may take it months, if not years, to recover from the crippling blow.

As the rest of the world continues to grapple with a pandemic, the release of many a potential blockbuster has been

put on hold. Shooting schedules of several big-ticket extravaganzas have gone haywire. So has consumption of finished parcels of dreams and nightmares—all theatres, single-screen and multiplexes, have been shut down. With the deadly virus wrapping its tentacles over the Indian film and television industry, it has caught dream merchants—from big studios to independent film-makers—unawares.

Film industry pundits appear to be at a loss to even fathom the magnitude of current and future financial losses befalling a sector where every weekend matters in the long term. Even by a



Casualty of war Akshay Kumar, Ranveer Singh in *Sooryavanshi*, the release of which was postponed

conservative estimate, the entertainment industry stands to lose a minimum of Rs 500 crore in the first few weeks of the lockdown enforced by the Centre from March 25 to contain the spread of the contagion. It appears to be just the beginning of a prolonged, dark spell, something unprecedented in the industry.

Like the rest of the economy, the entertainment industry rolled on a

practised smoothness when the catastrophe struck mid-March, and theatres began to be closed in one state after another. On March 2, a jubilant film-maker duo, Rohit Shetty and Karan Johar, had organised a mega trailer release of their upcoming ambitious multi-starrer, *Sooryavanshi*, in Mumbai with fanfare. Scheduled to be released on March 24, the Akshay Kumar-Ajay Devgn-Ranveer Singh-Katrina Kaif starrer was widely expected to be a blockbuster. Its trailer generated a hum of excitement, prompting many in the trade to believe that it would dispel the clouds of despair spawned by the lacklustre business of a string of Hindi movies in the first quarter of 2020. The new year had started off on a grand note, with a blockbuster like Ajay Devgn's *Tanhaji: The Unsung Warrior*. Yet none of the other big tickets, including Tiger Shroff's *Baaghi 3* and Kartik Aaryan's *Love Aajkal 2*, were

mega successes. Bollywood, therefore, had pinned a lot of hope on *Sooryavanshi*, oblivious of the deadening stasis that lay in store for it. By the second half of March, once theatres in lucrative markets, including Delhi and Mumbai, had to down shutters as per the directive of the respective state governments, Rohit Shetty had little option but to defer the release of the film indefinitely.

"*Sooryavanshi* is an experience that we have created for you with over a year of dedication and hard work, and the response we received for its trailer was nothing less than electrifying and proved it truly belongs to its audience," a statement from Shetty's production house said. "But with the recent outbreak of COVID-19, we the makers have decided to postpone the release of your film keeping in mind the health and safety of our beloved audience. *Sooryavanshi* will be back for you just when the time is right."

Amid growing uncertainty, *Sooryavanshi* was not the solitary 'blockbuster-to-be' to be stopped in its tracks by the method needed to stall a lurking coronavirus. Kabir Khan's

Analyst Joginder Tuteja says Bollywood will return to normalcy only in the last quarter of 2020.



Stuck on 'em Films stalled midway include (from top) *Laxmmi Bomb*, *Coolie No. 1* and *83*

eagerly awaited 83, based on India's first cricket World Cup win at Lord's in England in 1983, was supposed to open on April 10. It, too, has been postponed. Actor Ranveer Singh, who plays Kapil Dev, took to Twitter to announce the decision stoically: "83 is not just our film but the entire nation's film. But the health and safety of the nation always come first. Stay safe, take care. We shall be back soon!"

The makers of 83 echoed him: "We urge our fans to take all the necessary precautions and take care of their loved ones. 83 is a film about fighting the odds and we hope we will all bounce back from this soon," a statement issued by its makers said.

"How soon?" That is the question that weighs heavy on Bollywood filmmakers. When the entire country is sequestered at home, resumption of normal business in the near future looks a remote possibility. Movie trade analyst Joginder Tuteja says Bollywood cannot expect to return to normality until the last quarter of the year.

"Coronavirus has made a huge impact. Hindi cinema had done a business of Rs 4,300 crore last year but the scenario looks too bleak this year. In the first few weeks itself, Bollywood has lost over Rs 500 crore," he tells *Outlook*. "Baaghi 3 and Angrezi Medium, released in March, have already incurred huge losses because of the lockdown." According to Tuteja, ripple effects of the crisis will have a long-term impact. "The bigger issue facing the industry is whether audiences will return to theatres as soon as normality returns. I am afraid I don't see that happening."

Tuteja believes that the industry will have to rejig release dates of many movies in future because of the changed scenario. "There will be a scamper for release dates, but things are unlikely to improve until Diwali," he adds.

But is the industry resilient enough to bounce back after enduring such a destructive tornado? Tuteja is hopeful. "There have been times in the past when no film was released for two months for reasons like strikes or the IPL tournament but it always managed to fight back by delivering good and hit movies," says he. "This time around, Bollywood will learn from this unprecedented experience. From the revenue



Portrait of an actor Salman Khan brushes up his sketching skills

perspective, I think things should be fine towards the year-end."

From superstars to spot boys, the crisis has affected everybody associated with the entertainment industry. But, as always, it's the lot of the common soldier to bear the brunt of a conflagration—Bollywood's daily wage workers. Since all shooting schedules of movies and television shows have been suspended until the lockdown ends, they have been left to fend for themselves. Like their brethren across the economy, many of them have gone back to their ancestral places for want of employment and thus sustenance. The Producers Guild of India has promptly set up a relief fund for daily wage workers but, given the situation, their woes are only likely to compound in the months to come as shootings are unlikely to resume soon.

Filmmaker Ankur Garg of Luv Films is mindful of the length of the shadow cast by these extraordinarily difficult times for the industry. "It depends on how long this period lasts. We have already lost many weekends and releases planned on those weekends will need to be accommodated," he says.

Garg believes that while small-budget films may find a way in exclusive releases on digital platforms to recover costs or even make some profit in

future, medium- and big-budget movies need a theatrical release to break even. "They will have no choice but to clash with other films on the same Fridays once the situation improves," he says. "Also, considering the adverse impact this period will have on the overall economy of the country, viewers will have to decide how many films in a month they can afford to watch in theatres. All of it does not augur well for the film industry," he adds.

Then there are mega movies stuck, cruelly, in medias res. They include Salman Khan's *Radhe*, Akshay Kumar's *Laxmi Bomb*, Varun Dhawan's *Coolie No 1* and John Abraham's *Mumbai Saga*, which were scheduled to hit screens in the next two to three months. With shootings or post-production work suspended, they will all miss their deadlines. The fate of many other movies due for release later this year looks uncertain too—shooting schedules are horribly off kilter. Industry sources say that getting the dates of stars such as Akshay Kumar, who are currently confined to their homes or farmhouses in and around Mumbai, will also be a big problem. At the moment, Salman Khan, for one, has chosen to fall back upon his old hobby of painting, while Saif Ali Khan is catching up with his reading. Others are busy reading piles of scripts or doing workouts at their home gym.

The stars patiently wait for the end of the extended staycation forced upon them by the Big C; the less fortunate cadge around for a living to feed their families, desperate for an end to their ordeal. The movies chose to forsake the once obligatory 'The End' in recent decades. They now wait passionately for its return. □

As always, daily wage earners bear the brunt of the industry lockdown.



Deepika Chikhalia carved a niche for herself in the Indian entertainment industry by playing Sita in Ramanand Sagar's iconic television serial *Ramayan*. The 54-year-old actress spoke exclusively to **Giridhar Jha** after the first episode of the 1987 show was telecast on March 28 amid a raging political controversy. Excerpts:

How was it watching *Ramayan* 33 years after it was first screened?

→ I remember the first episode of *Ramayan* being shot on the first day of the serial's shooting. That was also the first time I saw myself on screen as Lakshmi. It took us seven days to complete one episode because there was so much chroma keying involved. Also, it involved depiction of gods and goddesses, so we did not take it lightly. I am remembering (now) all those things and more. It was also nice to see myself look so young again.

People used to touch your feet back then...

This country has faith and lives with the understanding that there is god. That is why they treated us like demi-gods. I have respect for that. I cannot do anything about it, I just respect people. As they say, god is nothing without his worshippers, so let them do whatever they want.

What impact do you think the *Ramayan* rerun will have, espe-

'Ramayan is a wholesome treat for the soul. Don't politicise it.'

cially on millennials?

→ *Ramayan* remains relevant despite the multiple options on streaming platforms because it is more than a TV series. It will make you understand what your culture is all about. Ramanand Sagar's *Ramayan* is of the level of Valmiki's or Tulsidas's version. I was telling my daughter that you go out and eat the best of cuisines, but when you return home, you need dal-chawal or khichdi. *Ramayan* is that kind of food for the soul—don't treat it like entertainment. Millennials cannot read Tulsidas, so this is their other option to understand Indian culture.

The rerun of *Ramayan* has kicked up a row...

→ It is over and done with as

the telecast has already begun. There are people who would oppose it. As far as Ram is concerned, they have turned him into a political agenda. That is not correct. Ram is a king who lived with certain principles. It is a story about a king, a husband, a son, a brother. Treat his life as a learning lesson and do not see everything from a political point of view.

You did many regional films, but your career in Bollywood never took off.

→ I was versatile and welcomed with open hearts and arms in all regions I worked. I am afraid that Hindi cinema did not give me the kind of work I was looking for. So I did films in regional languages. All those turned out to be super-

hits and are remembered to this day. I was lucky that I moved on from Hindi cinema because there was a call within me as an actor to do good work.

Still, you quit cinema quite early in your career...

→ In 1991, I entered politics and contested elections. I had to travel often to my constituency. I was newly married and was not happy doing that. It was getting more and more difficult, so I let go of films. I left politics after my daughter was born because she needed me at home.

You have lately staged a comeback. Are you open to working in more movies now?

→ Of course, I am open to good work. I recently did *Bala* (2019). I am really looking forward to my second stint in Hindi cinema—not much happened during the first.

Are you also open to joining politics again?

→ Why not? At the moment, I am looking for a platform, not necessarily politics, where I would like to do something to serve the country. If you are a celebrity with a little power, it is important to have a certain responsibility towards society. I would definitely like to do something for the country.

Does it mean you will contest another election?

→ I have not thought about it. Anything I say at the moment would be a hypothetical answer. □



When Doordarshan re-telecast *Ramayan* from March 28, after more than three decades, audiences started demanding that other popular television shows of that era be aired again. Taking note of the public demand, the government has decided to show *Mahabharat*, *Byomkesh Bakshi* and *Circus*—with Shah Rukh Khan, the TV actor then. Social media is abuzz with calls of 'more, more'. The demand list includes the Milind Soman-starrer *Captain Vyom*, Mukesh Khanna's *Shaktimaan*, *Malgudi Days*, *Hum Log*, *Alif Laila* and SRK's *Fauji*.

Still, Faded Chalk On Blackboards

We see them as pits of despair, but, as this book shows, government schools and their unjustly derided teachers give both shelter and alphabet to millions

Saikat Majumdar

ON March 14, a national daily reported that as the coronavirus pandemic keeps students away from school, 3.75 lakh children registered with 33,115 anganwadis in Kerala will get material for their mid-day meals delivered at home. It brought to mind an article in an American higher education magazine, of college shutdown due to the pandemic forcing poor and minority students to lose valuable academic experience, as well as hot meals and a shelter. The closure have literally thrown them out on the streets.

S. Giridhar's *Ordinary People, Extraordinary Teachers* is a timely reminder of what government schools mean to the vast majority of Indian children. For a nation whose urban middle and upper-middle class increasingly identify K-12 education with private institutions, what is forgotten is that education is not just a venue of liberal humanist idealism—the widening of emotional, intellectual and ethical horizons. For the poor and marginalised, it is very often the ticket to a meal and a bed to sleep on. And in no country can this responsibility be carried out by private institutions. They are, as Giridhar says, the lifeline of 60 per cent our children.

But it is customary to dismiss


government schools as inefficient and dysfunctional, especially among the urban middle class and above, who would shudder to send their children to one. Giridhar's book is a robust dismissal of such dismissals. His is more a case for individual teachers rather than the system, of which he has his share of criticism. But any system is only as good as its individual practitioners—ironically, in this case, the whole can be much worse than the sum of its parts.

Clearly, the bad press government schools get in India are linked to the often superficial reasons for which people—ironically, from disenfranchised segments of society—send their children to private schools: 'they have a nice uniform with tie and shoes', 'English seek-hega' or bizarre ones like, 'my biradari (community) will think we are kanjoos'. And since private schools are more expensive, the choice also becomes a vehicle of gender bias: private schools for boys and government schools for girls.

The book is a collection of brief profiles on the people Giridhar aptly calls the "unsung heroes of real India", the teachers in government schools across the country who illustrate the heroic work of educating the nation's children, the vast majority of them from rural and poverty-stricken areas. The different chapters are clustered around different kinds of heroes—in Giridhar's evocative language, "the head teacher as CEO," "reflective practitioners", those especially committed to "equity and quality" or "teamwork".

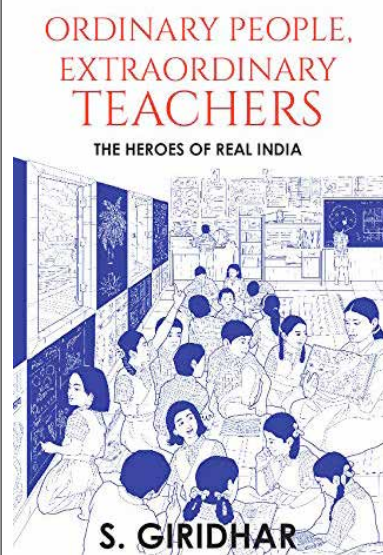
Giridhar makes the sad admission that the nation's best talent is not drawn to school teaching, much less teaching in government schools. But at the same time he deflates many negative myths about government schools, especially its teachers. As opposed to

"urban myths", these misinformed notions are "folk devils". One such folk devil is that of 'teacher absenteeism'. "Popular discourse—in parts of higher echelons of government—backed by some 'scholarly' research talked of absenteeism of 30 to 50 per cent," he writes. He continues: "We had never seen absenteeism rates, even remotely of this order." Rather, the study conducted by Azim Premji University found that of the 18 per cent of teachers who were not in school, 2.5 per cent were absent without cause, while 6 per cent were on sanctioned leave, and 11 per cent were sent on other work, such as training or government business. He makes a potent case against the last—sending teachers away on business when they should be in school. It is the kind of misleading publicity, such as calling teachers "missing" or "nadar" in the press when the majority of them were away on approved business, that builds up to the negative and hopeless image of teachers at government schools.

Yet there is no denying that government schools exist today across a landscape of bleakness, a gathering of travails real and imagined. Across this scene, the question Giridhar asked the teachers most persistently was: "Why do you come here?" The "gist of all answers," he says, "is the same: 'we want to learn to teach better.'" Like their stubbornly hopeful answers, Giridhar's book also does much to dispel the bleakness and spread light across this vast and crucial landscape. 

THE ONE FOLK DEVIL THAT BLACKENS GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS IS 'TEACHER ABSENTEEISM'. YET STUDIES SHOW MOST ABSENT TEACHERS ARE SENT AWAY ON OTHER WORK. THEY ARE THE ONES THAT HOLD THE SYSTEM UP.

S. Giridhar
ORDINARY PEOPLE,
EXTRAORDINARY
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la
dolce
vita

Under The Net

Congratulations are the norm when celebrities declare their love publicly; eyeballs are due when they prove it with photos. We offer both to badminton ace Jwala Gutta who has, she declares, not only been dating Tamil actor Vishnu Vishal, but plighted her troth to him too. There was a time when Jwala used to man the back court, allowing poor Ashwini Ponappa to do the heavy springing around up front. But that's the norm, too, in marriage, isn't it?



Cometh The Man

As the assorted Khans sit around, counting their curses in locked-up movies and kicked-out releases, eyeing, no doubt, their accumulated billions for comfort, out steps Akshay, with Rs 25 crore for the millions groaning and starving due to the loss of livelihoods. "I had nothing when I started," retorted he when wife Twinkle asked if he was sure about such an amount. In this bleak hour, forgive the man for the message on his T-shirt (it does him no credit). We unreservedly applaud you, sir.



GETTY IMAGES



la dolce vita

retro

ticket

Luminous Queen

She's the outlier, yet very much in the thick of things—four Hollywood opportunities, one from Cecil B. DeMille, an attempted kiss by the incorrigible Errol Flynn, two dream roles in *Sadhana* (1958) and *Woh Kaun Thi?* (1964), which made the careers of Vyjayanthimala and Sadhana. She spurned film offers and proposals equally. Chose marital bliss over mass adulation in her heyday in what was not known as Bollywood then. Nimmi (1933-2020) did all that, unfailingly holding her own opposite Raj Kapoor-Dilip Kumar-Dev Anand. She was top draw but happy to play second lead in several '50s blockbusters. After her mentor Mehboob Khan released the English version of *Aan* (1952) as *Savage Queen* with a world premiere in London, she resisted temptations to go global, even turning away her cheeks when Flynn got too close for a peck. "I am an Indian girl!" she told the actor. R.I.P. "the unkissed girl of India"!



With Kajol, Always

All happy families are happy in the same way—at least in photos. Ajay Devgn and Kajol's family confirms that queer genetic rule: the boy (Yug) resembles mom, the girl (Nysa) takes after dad. We also confirm that Kajol and Nysa are fine, for some jobs (mind you, even the jobless have more time) spread the rumour that they're down with coronavirus.

Yes, Pretty Please

As if to snub us pessimistic slob, here comes another good samaritan, daring us to defy her charm, snaring us in the folds of that gown's faux deshabelle, letting us catch our eye with those well-set pearls dangling from her ear, carefully matching that close-fitting neckpiece. For Pranitha Subhash, who is to appear in *Hungama 2* (with ancients Paresh Rawal and Shilpa Shetty) has pledged Rs 10 lakh for the PM-CARES fund. Lofty deeds start like this.





Seeing Off That First Hour

It's been a lazy morning, a rare day in my hectic life. We are into the second week of the three-week lockdown in India and the gravity of the worldwide havoc created by the COVID-19 virus is deeply concerning. We are staring at an uncertain future and against an unknown enemy. The lessons I learnt from cricket are very relevant now. As the situation demands, we have to take fresh guard, read the pitch, manage the swing and bounce, and above all, be circumspect. Those words we've heard a million times—application and temperament—are really the key in life too. Nobody wants to give his wicket away!

For me and my family, our lives are in reboot mode and believe me, it's one of the best phases we have had at home together. From Arjun, the youngest member in the family at 20, to my mother, who is 83, we are witnessing how one reacts to a situation variably as per one's age. We all have different tastes and choices, but for me, this period is a test of acceptability and adaptability. Collectively, we must really think for each other—for India's 1.3 billion people and for the global community at large.

Stay In The Pavilion!

There is no pressure of meetings and

stepping out of home is an absolute no-no. Sleeping well, going to the gym, a leisurely breakfast, a lunch of my choice and then it's time for some family entertainment. My mother must be the happiest seeing her son and grandchildren away from the hustle and bustle of everyday life. As a family, we are doing those simple things—watching TV serials, playing games and eating together—things that we otherwise tend to miss quite regularly.

As I said, 'accept' and 'adapt'...that works whether it's a hard top at Perth or a crumbling fifth-day Nagpur pitch, or life. The better we accept this situation and follow the simple dos and don'ts, the faster we combat the fear factor, and higher the chance that we survive...and thrive. With this crisis, 'adapting' calls for a sterner reappraisal of our playing style itself! As a family, we have accepted that coronavirus is a challenge to humankind and we need to revisit the way we lead our lives.

No 'Upar' Cuts, Please

What's good? For one, it's quite incredible to see the whole world united against a common foe. And what's not? Well, when a few people callously flout basic precautions, I find it very disturbing. Clearly, it's a matter of discipline and trusting the information shared by credible health organisations. I have been saying these in my messages for UNICEF, so do guard against fake news! And play within yourself....For me, this has been the time to introspect and plan ahead. I feel a person who utilises this time properly will always be a step ahead of the person who thinks he has nothing to do at home.

The Doctor Is 'In'

What better than having a doctor-wife at home in this hour of need! Anjali has been making sure that we constantly wash our hands and keep ourselves sanitised. This includes the people who help us at home. We have stopped guests at home—for one thing, it's not allowed; and with my mother vulnerable because of her age, we are extremely careful about who's meeting her.

I am glad our children have grasped the challenges and are doing their

Lockdown Diary

bit by making our lives easier at home. A lockdown can be quite challenging for young girls and boys, but both Sara and Arjun have understood the repercussions of what a wrong step could mean. As parents, we have tried to keep them mentally stimulated and that means spending a lot of quality time together, going to the gym with each other, eating home-cooked food, watching the TV serials and movies we love and, of course, music.

Of Varan-Bhaat And Bharta

I have tried testing my cooking skills a bit, but here too I tend to play in the 'V'! Which means sticking to the basics and having simple, normal home food—*bai-gan bharta* (roasted and mashed brinjal) is my favourite, so also *varan-bhaat* (a Marathi dish consisting of lentils and white rice). A bit of chicken adds to the spread, like that four off the last ball. We are foodies at home, but there is so much sense in eating basic stuff. It is distressing to hear of the conditions out there, with lots of people not getting even basic food or ration.

Pink Floyd Se Panga...

We have been watching the latest serials and movies on TV. We enjoyed the series *Special Ops* that showed how our security agencies use intelligence to combat terror and keep us safe. We also saw *Panga*, the Kangana Ranaut-starring sports movie on the life of a kabaddi player. Also *Good News, Chhapaak*—and among series, *Truth Be Told* and *Formula 1: Drive to Survive Season 2*. Knowing my love for cars, Anjali has also recommended a few documentary series on Formula One and I can't wait to watch them.

But what's binding us all together is a lot of music. I am a music freak and I enjoy tracks from the '70s onwards a lot. Generally, I can enjoy any good music. I may be listening to a Hindi song one minute, but five minutes later, it could be a Spanish one. We are also



enjoying plenty of unplugged versions on YouTube. Pink Floyd has been simply awesome. Also Coldplay, Dire Straits and U2, and any number of Hindi singers.... But the children love modern songs and here too we have to show our sense of adaptability in accommodating their choices!


Rain Stops Play

Finally, I must appreciate the call taken by the International Olympic Committee to postpone Tokyo Olympics in July-August. I won't be surprised if IPL is deferred too. These are challenging times and rescheduling sporting events or cancelling them outright is the right way forward. We can't afford to lose any more lives. We already have lost many. There are solutions for all other sorts of challenges, but death is an irreparable loss. We must learn to live while maintaining social distancing, but emotionally, we must be together.

I have been part of a World Cup-winning team in 2011, when we fulfilled the dreams of a billion people and I know what adulation means. But when I think of the hundreds of health workers and other personnel who are confronting COVID-19 by putting their lives at risk, I feel their levels of achievement and commitment are immeasurable. They are our real-world champions. Let us all do our bit and ensure that their efforts do not go waste.

A Credo For The Corona Age

Sports, they say, is a great leveller, and cuts across boundaries and knows no caste, colour or creed. The script you are handed in sports is always an open one and it's never perfect. The more one reflects on it, the more I see parallels with life. This virus too has been a true leveller. It has affected all of humankind, no matter what your status is. While we fight against it, we must focus on the brighter side. It offers us a chance, like a difficult pitch, to unmask our deficiencies—including a lot of our prejudices and beliefs. Also, it gives us time to introspect and look at humanity's effect on our planet as a whole. How, in the middle of it all, nature has found space and time to breathe and heal.

For now, it's stumps, folks! We are all together in this challenging match. Let's follow all the precautionary measures shared by the authorities. Let's pad up and wear our guards and helmets. We will come out of it stronger. 

As told to Soumitra Bose