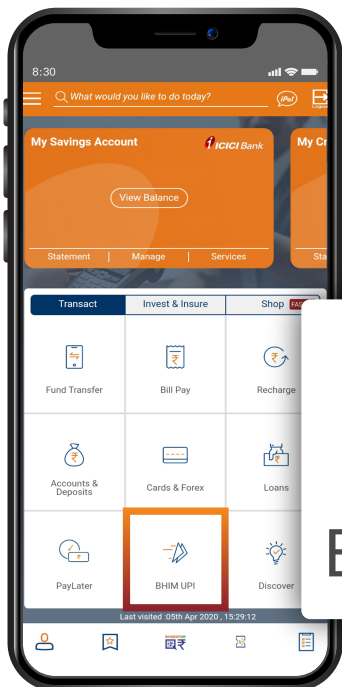


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GREY IS THE NEW BLACK

DIGITAL ISSUE

Outlook k

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July 6, 2020

Pakistan
terrorism,
unremitting
hostility

Nepal
defiant
revanchism,
anti-India
sentiment

China dragon
with a spanner
in our wheel

Little Fires EVERYWHERE

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China-
leaning junta

Bangladesh
water dispute,
NRC concerns
mar friendly
attitude

Sri Lanka
sharing
influence
with China

Maldives
ties on
political
tenterhooks

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The government has invited private bids for new coal mines, many of which are in dense forests. What will happen to these fragile ecosystems?

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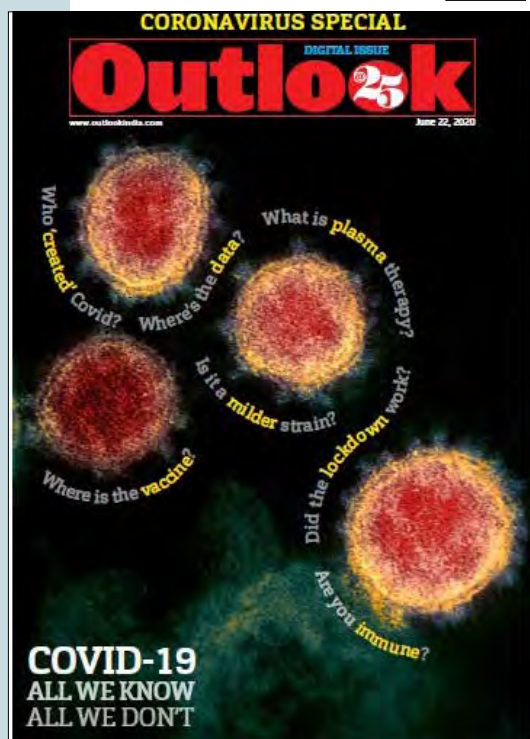
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22/6/2020



World Of The Virus

ON E-MAIL

Vijai Pant: Your special issue on COVID-19 (*All We Know. All We Don't*, June 22) is comprehensive, but did little to clear the air about how to deal with the pandemic. Stories like *Does India not have a milder epidemic?* and *Asymptomatics: Can they infect?* left the questions unanswered. Agreed that the virus is still in the process of unravelling itself—it is not following a fixed pattern across the world and there are many unknowns—but busting the growing myths associated with the disease that cause unreasonable fear and panic would have served us better, rather than knowing about the presence of zillions of viruses on earth. Eventually, the issue didn't turn out to be the informative and exciting read that the cover promised.



Here And There

DEHRADUN

Rakesh Agrawal: This refers to the cover story *Can Indian Become China 2.0?* (June 15). It is merely a fantasy to think of India as the China of the post-COVID-19 world. Despite the reduction in trade deficit with China by \$10 billion to \$53 billion in

2018-19, it remains high. Even the Sardar Patel statue was made in China. It spends 2.19 per cent of its GDP on R&D, whereas India spends a meagre 0.85 per cent! This reflects in their institutions. China has about 2,000 universities, out of which eight are listed among the world's top 200, whereas India has 836 universities and none of those found a place in the prestigious list. On top of that, this government is determined to destroy

FROM THE Daak Room

Queen of Scotland
8 Feb. 1587

Royal brother, having by God's will, for my sins I think, thrown myself into the power of the Queen my cousin, at whose hands I have suffered much for almost 20 years, I have finally been condemned to death by her and her Estates. I have asked for my papers, which they have taken away, in order that I might make my will, but I have been unable to recover anything of use to me, or even get leave either to make my will freely or to have my body conveyed after my death, as I would wish, to your kingdom where I had the honour to be queen, your sister and old ally.

Tonight, after dinner, I have been advised of my sentence: I am to be executed like a criminal at eight in the morning. I have not had time to give you a full account of everything that has happened, but if you will listen to my doctor and my other unfortunate servants, you will learn the truth, and how, thanks be to God, I scorn death and vow that I meet it innocent of any crime, even if I were their subject. The Catholic faith and the assertion of my God-given right to the English crown are the two issues on which I am condemned, and yet I am not allowed to say that it is for the Catholic religion that I die, but for fear of interference with theirs. The bearer of this letter and his companions, most of them your subjects, will testify to my conduct at my last hour. It remains for me to beg Your Most Christian Majesty, my brother-in-law and old ally, who have always protested your love for me, to give proof now of your goodness on all these points: firstly by charity, in paying my unfortunate servants the wages due them - this is a burden on my conscience that only you can relieve: further, by having prayers offered to God for a queen who has borne the title Most Christian, and who dies a Catholic, stripped of all her possessions.

Your most loving and most true sister
Mari R

↑ **Filial Feelings** Translated excerpts of a letter Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots, wrote to her first husband's brother six hours before her beheading. Her first cousin, Elizabeth I, Queen of England from 1558-1603, had her executed.



India's best: JNU.

Transnational companies go to countries with greater ease of doing business, not where hate, animosity and mayhem are the order of the day. This reflects on the silken streets of India, where millions of tired, wounded and frustrated souls are limping back to their villages. Such a shameful spectacle was not visible in China!



NAVI MUMBAI

Ramani Subramaniam: China's disastrous incursions into Indian territory were imminent. These prove that it cannot be trusted. Now that Chinese bellicosity has come out in the open, we cannot rely on peace talks to improve our relationship. China might be superior in military strength, but India is also strong. It could not force India into submission and was surprised at the quick mobilisation of troops along the LAC. However, both countries must realise that we need each other—neither can afford friction. No one wants wars, which are extremely destructive. Both countries should take immediate steps to end the conflict.

NEW DELHI

Abhimanyu K.: This refers to your snippet on Corona Devi (*Worship Goes Viral, Mixed Shots*, June 22). It was fun reading about the new goddess in Bihar. Today, amid the gloom and challenges that we face, daily routines, companionship and gossip—all those immeasurable things that make life interesting—have gone for a six, causing anxiety. Temple visits are not just to appease gods. It is a wholesome package of worship, social contact, tasty treats—a pleasant excursion before one returns to the drudgeries of life. I wish these devotees well on their visit to their new deity. I hope Corona Devi will provide succour to them and keep them sane.

LUCKNOW

M.C. Joshi: I think it was from the March 16 issue onwards that COVID-19 began appearing on the cover of *Outlook*. A lot has been said about the disease during these three months. Now, a study of the Indian Council of Medical Research suggests that the lockdown shifted the peak of the pandemic by an estimated 34 to 76 days, which might now be in mid-November.

I have a complaint regarding the *Letters* section. You first slashed it by half—from four pages to two—and with your editorial obstinacy, refused to accommodate the request of readers to revert to the old page count. *Outlook* was a magazine where I never had to worry about the size of my letters. I felt free to express my view in as many words I wanted and the letters were published. Those days, however, are gone. Many letters are



now pruned drastically and are often not published. The column has lost its sheen after the unimpressive redesign last year. *From the Daak Room* has further eaten up the space. The old letters featured in *Daak Room* may have archival value, but they must be published separately. The long letter written in 1918 by a man in Plymouth, USA, during the Spanish flu has consumed about half a page in the June 22 issue. So many topical letters could have been accommodated instead of that!

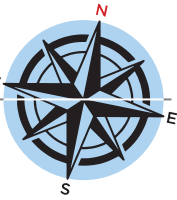
NEW DELHI

Sangeeta Kampani: This refers to your write-up on Basu Chatterjee (*Middling Perfection*, June 22). Indeed, nobody celebrated the middle class—its overseers and office clerks, its primary teachers and supervisors, its scores of ordinary folk and their uncomplicated joys—like Basu Chatterjee did. He was a master of middle-class minutiae and his movies had none of the staleness or tropes of regular Bollywood fare. That was a time in cinema when stories would revolve around either 'Paatal Lok' or 'Swarg Lok'. It goes to

Basu da's credit that he brought in people from 'Dharti Lok' with their first rush of love, their first raise, their tight budgets and all those consequential and inconsequential moments that lend colour and gravitas to life. He truly was a raconteur for the common person, depicting them beyond black and white. RIP Basu da!

GURGAON

Kamna Chhabra: This refers to *Balloting A Pandemic* (June 22). The Bihar elections will be the first democratic exercise after the pandemic. The COVID-19 scare could see the implementation of many precautionary measures that could disrupt campaigning. With spectacular showmanship difficult to achieve due to the restrictions, poll expenditure could be drastically reduced. This could give rise to a level playing field and offset the advantages of parties with overflowing coffers. It would be interesting to see if caste arithmetic still play a dominant role in the selection and victory of candidates. All in all, the elections will be interesting to follow. □



India recorded the highest single-day jump of nearly 16,000 COVID-19 cases on Wednesday while Delhi surpassed Mumbai after the Capital's cases soared to over 70,390. Mumbai has 69,625 cases. Delhi is the second worst-hit state ahead of Tamil Nadu. Over 14,000 new cases were registered in the country for the fifth day in a row to take the total to 4,56,183.



The Madras High Court set aside the death sentence of five convicts in the 2016 "honour killing" of Shankar in Tamil Nadu's Udumalpet. Kausalya's father, B. Chinnasamy, was acquitted. Kausalya and Shankar, a Dalit, were attacked a year after their marriage in 2015. Shankar, 22, died while Kausalya, then 19, survived.



Diesel price at Rs 79.88 a litre became steeper than petrol (Rs 79.76) for the first time in New Delhi after a steep hike in state VAT. A price notification of state oil marketing companies says petrol price was unchanged after 17 consecutive increases, while diesel rates were hiked by 48 paise a litre, the 18th daily increase in a row across the country.



PTI

Yesterday Once More Former CM Ibobi Singh was once again left clutching at straws after eight days of high drama.

Twist In the Tail

Congress power-play fizzles out, BJP wins back rebels

Abdul Gani in Guwahati

A political upheaval in Manipur that had threatened the BJP-led government in the state appears to have blown over, at least for the time being, with the party managing to win back the rebel MLAs who had switched sides and decided to back the Congress's bid for power.


The end of the eight-day-long drama was announced on June 24 by Assam minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, the BJP's go-to man in the Northeast who managed to pacify four rebel MLAs of the National People's Party (NPP). He also flew them down to Delhi on a chartered plane and arranged a meeting with Union home minister Amit Shah and BJP president J.P. Nadda.

"NPP will continue to support the BJP government in Manipur for the development of Manipur," Sarma said in Guwahati. Meghalaya chief minister and NPP supremo Conrad Sangma also termed their meeting with Amit Shah and Nadda as positive. Though there was no immediate clarity on what really transpired in the meeting of the rebels with Shah, it is learnt that the NPP legislators, deputy chief minister Y. Joykumar Singh in particular, strongly pressed for the removal of Biren Singh as chief minister. Shah, sources said, was non-committal on

the demand but assured the rebels that their problems had been taken note of and will be resolved.

For the time being, it appears former chief minister and Congress leader Okram Ibobi Singh's hopes of returning to power will have to wait. Especially, after he was questioned by a CBI team on June 24 over alleged financial irregularities amounting to Rs 332 crore in the Manipur Development Society. Congress alleged that the CBI probe was a desperate bid to save the BJP-led government in Manipur. "CBI is being misused by BJP to delay a new SPF (Secular Progressive Front) government in Manipur. It is a political vendetta," said Manipur Congress spokesman Ningombam Bupenda Meitei.

Besides checkmating the Congress, the BJP also managed to win the lone Rajya Sabha seat on June 18 when its candidate Leisemba Sanajaoba—Manipur's royal scion—defeated Congress's T. Mangibabu by four votes.

Weeks ahead of the RS poll, the high court ordered that seven Congress rebels who were supporting the BJP government, would not be allowed to set foot in the assembly until the Speaker disposes off the anti-defection proceedings pending against them. Assembly speaker Khemchand Singh, however, allowed three of these MLAs to attend the assembly and vote in favour of the BJP candidate in the RS polls. 

SNAPSHOT



← **Sukaphaa**, founder of the Ahom kingdom in Assam

The Troll Invasion

Abdul Gani in Guwahati

ASSAM

In many ways, the work of a social media troll is easy—he thrives on negative criticism, abuses, fakery, hate-mongering, rabble-rousing, and he risks little considering the protection he gets for doing the dirty job of his political masters. So, when a so-called political commentator in Calcutta—a self-attested “Bengali nationalist”, a former leftist, and a Trinamool Congress supporter now—spewed one poison tweet after another targeting Marwaris and Gujaratis with racist dysphemisms such as “BJP’s Dhoklas, Baniyas, Bhujias and Gutkhas”, he simply got away. He is not ours, the ruling class clarified. And he goes on...ranting through his waking hours against these communities (Gutkha is the slur for Hindi-speakers) and more, especially the Assamese.

That’s Garga Chatterjee—leader of Bangla Pokkho, a self-styled Bengali patriotic front, and who calls himself a ‘brain scientist’. Here are two samples of what he does on Twitter. Exhibit One: “Why no Marwari or Gujarati in list of freedom fighters in Andaman cellular

jail? What were they doing when Bengalis fought for freedom? How come today these Marwari & Gujarati moneybags fund Hindi racist Gutkha goons who think they can give lectures abt patriotism to Bengalis?” Exhibit Two: “Why does @sarbanandsonwal regularly celebrate a Chinese invader and his invading army? Why does our banned separatist group ULFA also celebrate the Chinese invader? Do real Indians know that Indian tax money is being used by BJP in Assam to put up statues of a Chinese invader?”

The second one is from June 17, and Chatterjee ended up trolling king Sukaphaa, founder of the Ahom kingdom that ruled Assam for 600 years—the longest continuous rule by a single dynasty in India—and which



thwarted 17 Mughal invasions, several of which were plotted in and launched from Bardhaman or Badh-e-dewan, whose rajas acknowledged Mughal suzerainty. Sukaphaa and his band of followers came from present-day Myanmar in the 13th century, assimilated with the natives, and their descendents adopted Hinduism. More importantly, they gave the land its current identity—the Anglicised Assam from Axom, or uneven, drawing from its topography. Axom Divas is celebrated on December 2 to commemorate the first Ahom king.

The tweet was double-edged: target the BJP and upset Assamese sentiments. Well, the “commentator” had tried that before with a ‘Chalo Paltai’ campaign, ostensibly for Bengali domination in Assam where the two communities have been at loggerheads in the past and chauvinistic elements from both sides often try to snap the fragile peace. Calling Sukaphaa a “Chinese invader” was another attempt at that—quite successful too. It was timed immaculately too, just as the India-China border flare-up in Ladakh has spawned strong anti-Chinese sentiments across the country. He also posted a video clip purportedly showing the ABVP’s Assam unit shouting slogans against the Indian Army. The ABVP called the slogans an “inadvertent mistake”.

A battery of litigation engulfed Chatterjee soon after and chief minister Sonowal sent a police team to Calcutta following a court warrant for his arrest. Sonowal underlined the need for legal action against such “offenders”, and offensive remarks misinterpreting historical facts, to discourage such acts in future. The cops, however, returned without him and alleged that Calcutta police didn’t cooperate. “We will see what legal action can be taken now,” said police commissioner Munna Prasad Gupta. For its part, Bangla Pokkho alleged that there’s an attempt to harm Chatterjee because he spoke for the “marginalised” Bengalis in Assam. And for him, he got what a troll craves: headlines.



TAMIL NADU

The Place With Bones

G.C. Shekhar in Chennai

ALMOST 24 years since Madras bowed out to Chennai—people still pick bones over it—there was another mad rush for changing place names in Tamil Nadu to appeal to nativist sentiments and thereby score an easy political point. The majority supported the state government’s move this June to rename 1,018 cities, towns and localities to sync with their Tamil phonetic names rather than their Anglicised versions. Yet, the strangest thing transpired—probably the first time a government did a U-turn following objections from “only 10 per cent that did not speak Tamil”. Tamil development minister K. Pandiarajan said as much after the order was withdrawn.

The government announced its plan on June 11, by which Egmore became ‘Ezhumboor’, Coimbatore became ‘Koyampuththoor’, Saidapet became Saithappettai, VOC Nagar in north Chennai was renamed Va Oo Si Nagar and so on. Though the order was dated April 1, the announcement in June drew flak from the public, language experts

and historians for being a pointless exercise amidst a pandemic which the government could scarcely control.

In truth, the state government had no answer to pointed questions if it would spend millions to repaint all signboards, reprint all government stationery and school text books and change all spellings in government websites, especially of the registration department. It was also at a loss for words when asked why, by the same logic, Tamil Nadu had not been changed to ‘Thamizhnaadu’.

Experience has shown that it is impossible to reproduce the Tamil syllable ‘zha’ (ங) with an exact English equivalent, leading it to be mispronounced as ‘za’ by non-Tamils. For that matter, most Tamils themselves fail the test, as it requires the tongue to be rolled back and touch the soft upper palate of the mouth—most take the easy way out and pronounce it as ‘la’. Even if Egmore in

Chennai is renamed ‘Ezhumboor’, Tamils would only end up calling it ‘Elumboor’, which would then mean “a place with bones” and not “the seventh village” that the British had acquired.

Pandiarajan explained that the order was being withdrawn only to address inconsistencies in spellings that had been pointed out as three different protocols were followed in the renaming exercise. “We will absorb all the feedback and reissue the order with correct spellings,” he declared.

The panel that had recommended the new names had Tamil language experts with little experience in transliteration from other languages. Also, two Central departments—railways and postal—that would be most impacted were not consulted. “From signboards in stations to name boards on trains and ticketing software, everything has to be changed,” pointed out a railway official. □



breviis



Indian-American scientist **Dr S. Panchanathan**, from Arizona State University, will head the National Science Foundation, which supports research in fundamental science.



Vera Lynn, Britain’s wartime Forces Sweetheart, whose musical recordings and performances were enormously popular during the WW2, has died at the age of 103.



Film director and script writer **K.R. Sachidanandan**, 48, has died of a cardiac arrest in Thrissur. His *Ayyapanam Koshyum* was the biggest grosser before the lockdown.



Ian Holm, a British actor whose films included “Chariots of Fire”, has died at 88. Today’s moviegoers know him as Bilbo Baggins in *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* trilogies.




Former Reserve Bank of India governor **Urjit Patel** was appointed chairman, National Institute of Public Finance and Policy, an economic think tank.

Mixed Shots


GO CHOWMEIN SAMOSA GO

TILL just a few days ago, Union minister Ramdas Athawale was an exemplar of the dictum 'Hindi Cheeni Bhai Bhai'. In the august company of the Chinese consul general in Mumbai, Tang Guocai, his chants of "Go corona go" reverberated so forcefully, one would imagine the novel coronavirus quivered in fear.

Guocai, for his part, kept a straight face as he witnessed what he presumed must be an ancient Indian ritual. But like India and China, Athawale seems to have forgotten the dictum of friendship. After the incursions along the LAC, he wants Chinese products/food to be banned. We are not sure, though, if he is referring to actual Chinese food, or its misbegotten Indian progeny, such as chowmein samosa and paneer schezwan dosa. 




GIMME MOR

KONI, 10 km from Gorakhpur, seems like just every other village in the cow belt. That is until you notice it has more peacocks than humans, giving it the appellation 'mor wala gaon' (peacock village). Legend has it that during a flood in 1998, its residents gave shelter and food to two marooned peacocks. After the water receded and they returned to their homes, the peacocks followed them. The pair proved to be so fecund and the village so hospitable that over the years, their numbers surged to 170. They have settled well around the four ponds in the village surrounded by bamboo trees. 




CURE WORSE THAN DISEASE

A toddler in a tribal region in Amravati, Maharashtra, was suffering from stomach bloating. So his father took him to a 55-year-old witchdoctor who came up with a cure so horrifying that bloodletting, snake oil and animal sacrifices seem cutting-edge in comparison. She branded the child 100 times with the tip of a scalding sickle, which predictably led to severe burns. The police have now arrested both the father and the quack. It's not a one-off incident, though. Cases of branding, which purportedly scorches a certain nerve that is responsible for diseases, have been reported from Rajasthan, Gujarat and Odisha among other states. 




DEATH BY DUNCES

A 40-year-old on a ventilator at a government hospital in Kota was fighting for his life, until he suddenly died. The reason was not a sudden worsening of his condition—in fact, his COVID-19 test was negative—but because his relatives unplugged his ventilator. But why! It was too hot, you see, so they removed the life-saving device from the socket and plugged in an air cooler. For 30 minutes, the ventilator ran on backup power, but it finally stuttered to a halt, along with the hapless patient's life. If that were not bad enough, his relatives even attacked doctors. But how did they get into an isolation ward? 



CHUK CHUK COOL

IT was a marvellous idea—turning railway coaches to isolation wards for COVID-19 patients and suspected cases. But as anybody who has travelled by sleeper class can vouch, the cauldron-like temperatures during summer are unbearable. So the railways used bamboo blinds, heat-resistant coating, hay and bubble wrap to cool the ovens that the coaches were turning into. It meant a relatively pleasant stint for those isolated in the giant steel boxes, but there was something the railways hadn't accounted for: the attack of bloodsuckers. A family of six stationed in a coach in Mau, Uttar Pradesh, were more fearful of contracting dengue and malaria from the swarming mosquitoes than coronavirus. Luckily, they tested negative and were soon able to return to a vermin-less abode. 





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BUSINESSES MUST GO DIGITAL TO SURVIVE THE COVID-19 CRISIS

COVID-19 has been a learning experience for businesses and economies. Many businesses have collapsed or are struggling and worried about the future. Digital solutions can help improve your work and rebound once this crisis is over.



Mr. Harnil Oza
CEO, Hyperlink

Overview:

Money is important. Every person on this fragile planet is working on something, whether it is educating someone or selling products. Unfortunately, time is not under human control. There are many ups and downs—the best example of this uncertainty is the pandemic. COVID-19 has had a devastating impact on working, earning people. Many industries are experiencing unprecedented turbulence. Even developed countries are unable to withstand the ravages of this crisis. As economies tank, citizens face a tough time. Many countries are grappling with such difficulties. With every passing day, we hear of closures and entire industries tanking.

The whole supply chain is affected. Industrialists aren't able to get services and goods from the companies they depend on. Everybody is eagerly waiting for things to change so they can return to their former lives, especially in sectors like food, delivery, retail, construction, automobiles, education and manufacturing. These sectors have suffered the most during the pandemic. We need to bolster these sectors with digital solutions that will help them make a speedy recovery and become profitable. Here are some solutions for various sectors:

Education:

During the pandemic, students are not able to attend school. Teacher-student interaction has become virtual and it has become difficult to pay attention to each student. Examinations are also difficult to conduct during the pandemic. This situation affects students and could have an impact on their future earning potential.

As it is, it is difficult to engage students in the classroom and inspire them to learn. Without the physical presence of the teacher, this becomes even more challenging. It is possible that after the pandemic ends, students might want to avoid classroom lectures.

Many **top app development companies** can help in such a situation after the pandemic by creating online platforms for students. Many educational institutions are offering lectures, tutorials and entire courses online. These have helped students keep up with coursework and learn new topics. Such digital solutions can help students improve their comprehension abilities and boost creativity. It will also help save on travel time to the school and reduce the need for lugging heavy backpacks with multiple notebooks.

It is possible that even after the pandemic ends, educational institutions will continue teaching online. Even examinations could be conducted virtually. We need to devise better systems and quality-control mechanisms to ensure no student is left behind.



Retail:

No matter how bad people’s economic circumstances get, survival is important. Regardless of their financial condition, they will continue to buy food and essentials, such as food, soap, toothpaste, medicines etc. Due to the lockdown, people are not able to access the items they consider essential as many stores are locked. Due to this, the retail industry is facing huge losses. As people are losing jobs and have less spending power, this reduces their ability to purchase from e-commerce platforms.

The retail industry must connect with the software industry to brainstorm digital solutions. For brick-and-mortar stores that are facing losses, selling products online is a viable option. As long as social distancing rules are necessary to contain the disease, people will remain fearful of venturing out. Thus, retail stores must offer digital solutions such as online ordering, contactless delivery and cashless payment. To support such activities, many trusted app development companies are available. They can help stores develop user-friendly apps and interfaces that will help boost sales. It is important to connect retail stores to digital platforms if they want to thrive despite the lockdown.

Food:

The pressures of modern life are such that often people don’t have the time to cook nutritious meals. They often order in or eat out at restaurants. But due to the pandemic and rules for social distancing, most restaurants remain shut or are offering only take-out options. As the supply chain and transport systems remain affected, it is difficult for restaurants to manage.

To minimise such losses, the food industry must come up with innovative solutions. It could help make the process of preparing food at home easier through ready-to-eat preparations. Entrepreneurs

can provide solutions to grow food at home.

As people become more health-conscious, they will prefer nutrient-dense food rather than junk food. In such a scenario, health and wellbeing apps can help people make the right decisions for better nutrition and wellbeing. These can make proper food recommendations with the right nutrient profile and calorie density. With advances in machine learning, these can provide solutions tailored to each individual. Gyms and fitness centres can build fitness apps to help people stay healthy. This will not only help people improve health indicators, but also live a long and fulfilling life.

Delivery:

It has never been easier to buy products from all over the world. With a few clicks, all kinds of things reach out fingertips. It helps save money and time and also reduces transportation costs. However, with fears about contracting the virus, the delivery sector has also been affected. Many migrant labourers have returned to their homes and delivery operations are suffering from a lack of resources and delays.

Many delivery companies are equipping themselves with digital innovations to reduce their losses. In the future, most delivery companies will link to digital platforms through tracking apps. They will use Internet-of-Things and artificial intelligence technology to



maintain inventories of goods and understand product demand. These will also help make delivery schedules more effective. Such companies must identify a good app development company to scale their operations and make profits. A digital portfolio will be important to succeed in a post-COVID-19 world.

Manufacturing:

The manufacturing industry is one of the backbones of a country’s economy. But the backbone seems to have broken now. It’s tough for companies to continue production. Many have even shut down or laid-off workers.

COVID-19 has led to a major fall in the manufacturing output. To remedy such a tough situation, a few companies are running with minimal employees and stringent safety precautions. In the future, companies can increase their efficiency by enabling work with technologies like AI and IoT. By enabling such digital technologies, manufacturing industries will be able to tide over the crisis.

Construction:

COVID-19 affected construction work throughout the country. Many buildings’ construction remains at a standstill due to the pandemic. Many workers have returned homes and the disruption of supply chains has led to an increase in the cost of raw materials. To keep costs to a minimum, builders have stopped their work. Some are not sure how to deal with the surge in prices and whether to pass on the costs to their clients. In these situations, online data and cloud technology can help builders stay updated with respect to price listings. Also, using cloud technology will help manage the work effectively. Even artificial technology will be of help to builders. This will in turn give a boost to the companies that **develop AR apps**.

The CEO of Hyperlink Infosystem, Mr. Harnil Oza, says that regardless of the situation, we must brainstorm solutions to overcome challenges. A positive mindset is important. Thankfully, technology provides us convenient solutions to the challenges posed by the pandemic. If we adopt technology, it will make our life more convenient and boost our incomes.

COVID-19 might have unsettled our lives, but nothing is permanent. This too shall pass. During the pandemic and after, app development companies can help industries in different sectors boost their business and profits. It is important that we adopt technology and make the most of it.

Puneet Nicholas Yadav

THE debate between the State's desire to harvest its mineral wealth by displacing its people—development versus conservation—has been an old one. We have been here umpteen times before; each time a mining project or power plant is sanctioned or when forests and aboriginal habitats are sacrificed for infrastructure development. And, each time this debate begins afresh, the State moves calamitously close to pushing its people over the precipice.

Coming on the back of his aggressive push for making India atmanirbhar—self-sufficient—Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent decision to open up 41 coal blocks across the country for commercial mining threatens to settle this debate firmly in favour of the State and a handful of industrialists who stand to profit from the move. The coal blocks, 11 of them in Madhya Pradesh, nine each in Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Odisha and three in Maharashtra, are located within dense forest areas that are home to heavy concentrations of tribal populations and are a natural habitat for a wide range of flora and fauna.

By opening up commercial mining for the private sector and placing no end-use restrictions on the 225 million tonnes of coal that these 41 blocks can collectively produce per annum, the Centre hopes to generate Rs. 33000 crore in investments over the next five years. This grand scheme is also driven by the hope that global players in the sector would come flocking to India to invest, thereby generating local employment. If the plan takes off as expected, it would end the monopoly that State-owned Coal India Limited enjoys in the mining sector and also substantially reduce India's need to import nearly 250 million tonnes of coal annually. As mining giants move in with their arsenal to quarry the earth, the remote regions within which these blocks are situated can also hope to see massive development—in situ employment, new roads, better public infrastructure, et al. The elusive vikas will finally arrive; like a dream come true. Or so it would seem.

The arguments in favour of Modi's decision, thus, sound rational. But then, this is just one half of the debate.



Mine Your Own Business

Modi government's push for self-sufficiency in coal revives age-old debate over the cost of development

The other side of this dream, however, is a nightmare, from an environmental, humanitarian and even constitutional viewpoint. While the coronavirus-fuelled restrictions on public gatherings have prevented any street protests against the government's decision, the condemnation of the move has been swift and palpable.

Jharkhand Janadhikar Mahasabha, a people's movement for civil rights in the predominantly tribal and mineral rich eastern state, has called for mass protests, even if only virtual, against the government's decision. Elina Horo of the Mahasabha says, "The decision taken without any consultation with

the people of the areas in which these coal blocks are situated exposes the crony capitalism of the government; in the name of atmanirbharta (self-reliance) the move takes away all ownership rights of the land owners and gram sabhas and opens up natural resources for corporate plunder".

The Centre has asserted that it would protect rights of people who are bound to be displaced from their land once the mining process begins. Union minister for coal and mines, Pralhad Joshi, told journalists, "I want to assure people of these regions that labour welfare and development of coal bearing regions are foremost on our mind.

Welfare provisions for contractual labourers in event of mishap will be no less than that for regular employees.”

Joshi’s assurance, however, is on just one set of potential problems that are likely to arise from the government’s move—that of labour rights. However, the concerns over displacement of people, the ecological impact of culling large tracts of dense forests, pollution and climate change, among others, have not been addressed at all.

Jairam Ramesh, former Union minister for environment and forests, has dubbed the Centre’s move as “environmentally disastrous and irresponsible”. He says the decision shows Modi’s “calousness and utter disregard for climate change realities.” It was during Ramesh’s stint as environment minister during the UPA regime that 30 per cent of India’s coal blocks spread over 6,00,000 hectares were declared ‘no go zones’, making them practically impossible for any extraction exercise. The Centre’s decision has, effectively, undone these checks and balances put in place to prevent reckless mining activity.

In a letter to Union environment minister Prakash Javadekar, Ramesh, who is now the chairman of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Science & Technology, Environment, Forests and Climate Change, has urged that “coal blocks in ecologically fragile and sensitive areas put up for auction are cancelled immediately”. The letter also says, “...coal blocks in very dense forest areas are being opened up for mining. This is a triple disaster: first, the mining, transportation of coal will impose a very heavy environmental cost; second, the loss of very dense forest cover will mean loss of a valuable carbon sink and third, public health will be even more severely affected.”

The environmental cost that Ramesh speaks about can be ascertained from the fact that nearly every coal block now opened for commercial exploitation by private entities has a minimum 50 per cent forest cover. Coal blocks like Morga II, located within Chhattisgarh’s Hasdeo Arand forests, which is among India’s largest contiguous dense forest spanning over 170,000 hectares, have 85 per cent forest land. Similarly, the Gotitoria East coal block in Madhya Pradesh has an 80 per cent forest cover. The indigenous population, predominantly of tribal and



“Coal blocks in dense forest areas are being opened up for mining. This is a triple disaster.”

JAIRAM RAMESH
Ex-environment minister

“...Labour welfare and development of coal-bearing regions are foremost on our mind.”

PRALHAD JOSHI
Union minister, coal and mines



marginalised communities, is predictably up in arms against the Centre’s plan to displace the locals.


Gram sabhas and sarpanches of nine villages located within the Hasdeo Arand have written to Modi, protesting against the mining of coal blocks in the region which will force the displacement, loss of livelihood and culture of tribals who live in this forest and sustain themselves from its produce. The Jharkhand Janadhikar Mahasabha agrees with the contention of the people of Hasdeo Arand and says that the Centre is also violating a litany of laws and Supreme Court verdicts.

“The decision violates laws and constitutional provisions that aim to protect the rights of Adivasis to self-govern. Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act, 1966 and Schedule V provisions clearly define the role of gram sabhas as primary decision-making body of a village,” says Horo. The Supreme Court had also, in 2013, held that ownership of minerals should be vested with the land-owners. Even the Forests Rights Act defines forests as a community property of the Gram Sabha. Horo says the Centre “did not even bother to discuss its plan with the Gram Sabhas.”

The Hemant Soren-led JMM-Congress coalition government in Jharkhand has now moved the Supreme Court challenging the Centre’s decision to auction coal blocks. Soren had romped to power in the state last year riding on the disaffection among Jharkhand’s tribal population against the previous Raghubar Das-

led BJP government. Among his key promises to the electorate was to protect the interest of the indigenous population against corporate interests who wish to plunder the state’s mineral wealth. The Jharkhand chief minister has also written to Pralhad Joshi demanding a moratorium of the auction process by six to nine months but his feeble protest has left his voters unimpressed. Members of the Mahasabha have said it is “deeply worrying” that Soren’s government has extended support for the Centre’s decision and that a moratorium will only delay the auction process but won’t stop it.

Like Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, the Centre’s decision has also been met with stiff resistance from locals in Maharashtra’s Chandrapur where the Bander coal block is situated. The block lies near the periphery of the famous Tadoba Andhari Tiger Reserve and locals allege that any mining activity in the area will naturally lead to wide scale deforestation and eventual displacement of the tiger population.

The Centre may hope that opening up the coal blocks for commercial exploitation will bring in swift financial benefits for the country’s stagnating economy. In a style characteristic of the Modi government, the grand plan may even be implemented in brutal disregard of the people’s protest and obvious impact such mining activity will have on climate change. However, will the gains really be worth the ecological and human cost they’ll extract? 



Private Limited



States' cooperation vital for success of revamped mining policy

INDIA has the fourth largest reserves of coal (estimated at more than 300 billion tonnes) in the world and the annual requirement of coal in the country is only around 900 million tonnes. Yet, we are short of coal and import almost 25 per cent of our requirement. Hence, the announcement made by the finance minister, as part of a Rs 20-lakh crore package announced by the Prime Minister, relating to “opening” up of coal mining for commercial purpose by private entities is a welcome one. A leading English daily ran a headline,

“Government ends monopoly in coal”. This was a trifle misleading. Yes, commercial mining is the need of the hour and a great decision but the decision relating to commercial mining was taken more than a year ago. In fact, government ‘monopoly’ in coal mining had ended long ago. Private sector had been mining coal for quite a while but the end-use of coal that they mined was restricted. These mines were for captive use only. Accordingly, they were not entitled to sell the coal in the market. The decision to allow sale of mined coal by private sector in the open market was taken last year. The announcement made by the finance minister recently thus was a reiteration of the decision taken earlier.

Whether commercial mining of coal will actually happen and lead to targeted additional production of more than 200 million, whether the overall production in the country will reach the targeted 1.5 billion tonnes per annum by 2024-25 and whether the “new” policy will eliminate import of coal are all moot points. These have to be analysed and discussed in the context of what happened and didn’t happen during the past five years.



India has enough coal reserves to meet its requirements

Encouraged by a record level production during 2014-15 by Coal India Limited (CIL), the first announcement for increasing coal production to 1 billion tonnes by 2019-20 was made in 2015. Despite the fact that coal production saw an unprecedented increase during 2015-16, we are now here near 1 billion tonne production by CIL in 2019-20. In fact, on account of shortage of coal in the country, imports have been going up since 2016-2017 from 191 million tonnes to 235 million tonnes in 2018-19.

CIL will continue to be a major player as far as coal production is concerned. It is hoped that commercial mining will add to the kitty after a few years. However, the success of commercial coal mining will depend upon a number of factors.

The first and the foremost factor would be the quality of the coal blocks that are earmarked for the purpose of coal mining. The best of coal blocks (in terms of stripping ratio and the quality of coal) are with Coal India. Most of the coal blocks that are left have problems relating to stripping ratio (the depth at which coal becomes available), accessibility and quality of coal. Thus, the geo-technical feature of the coal blocks will be an important factor that will determine the viability of the block. The size of the block will also be a factor as commercial miners would prefer large blocks

The next step would not be that difficult. The protocol for auction of coal blocks is already there and was hailed as transparent and objective when coal block auctions (non-commercial) were held in 2014. No one raised any doubt about the process and the same process can be used now.

The real problem in mining coal will be around (1) land acquisition, (2) environment and forest clearance and (3) evacuation of coal. During the period 2014-16 when coal production reached unprecedented levels, the first two elements were tackled by engaging intensively with the state governments because these problems relate primarily to the states. The clearances were fast tracked through the instrumentality of the Project Monitoring Group (PMG) as were the coal evacuation projects


As coal is embedded in inaccessible area, evacuation was always a key concern. Additional investment is welcome. Evacuation will be a major issue even for commercial coal block allottees. It is not clear from the announcement where the money for evacuation projects will come from. However, even if such funds become available, new projects will take a long time to fruition. For the immediate future, what needs to be done is to fast track the existing evacuation projects that are languishing on account of variety of reasons but primarily on account of delays in clearances. Yet again, activating the PMG would help as would an intensive engagement with state government.

All the factors mentioned above will determine the viability of commercial mining projects. This viability will also be dependent upon the capability of the end-user of coal to pay up. The situation at present appears to be very grim in this regard. Most of the power generating companies (GENCOs) are in serious trouble because the distribution companies (DISCOMs) to whom they supply power are not in a position to pay up. These GENCOs owe CIL more than Rs 15,000 crore and DISCOMs in turn owe GENCOs more than Rs 30,000 crore. Ujjwal DISCOM Assurance Yojana (UDAY) was put in place to improve the health of DISCOMs but it

didn't travel much distance. Most of the DISCOMs are in a bad shape. Apart from other announcements as a part of the package mentioned in the first paragraph, the finance minister also declared that Rs 90,000 crore would be made available to improve the finances of DISCOMs. However, this alone will not help. UDAY (or its new version) will have to be implemented in letter and spirit.

Even if the production of coal increases as envisaged, import of coal is not likely to be eliminated. Out of the coal that is imported, 50 per cent is of such quality (coking coal and the quality of coal for power plants located close to the ports with boilers that require a specific quality) that is not available in India. The focus, therefore, should be on eliminating import of such coal that is available in India

The government will have to get down to business immediately if commercial mining has to make headway. The bidders will have to be assured that the government or its agencies will not sit on clearances as has been the case in the context of coal mines that were auctioned earlier. The previous auctions were quite smooth but the processes thereafter were debilitating. Consequently, mining could not commence expeditiously in most of the blocks that were auctioned. This will need to be taken care of while auctioning blocks for commercial mining. Government will have to act as a facilitator, hand hold those that win the bids. The Union government will also have to take the states concerned on board. Incidentally, all the coal-bearing states are ruled by non-NDA parties and some of them have already making a noise. Clear-cut action plan will have to be worked out outlining what needs to be done, how will it be done, who will do it and by when will it be done?

The decision to go ahead with commercial mining is a sound one but if it has to happen on the ground, lessons have to be learnt from the success achieved in coal production during 2014-16. The approach needs to be understood and replicated. It can be done because it has been done in past. It happened for Coal India then. It can happen for commercial mining now. 

The Union government will have to take the states concerned on board.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the all-party virtual meeting called after China's PLA killed 20 Indian soldiers at Galwan valley

Missing In Action

The pandemic may not be the real reason why Parliament is not in session

Preetha Nair

IT seems history threatens to repeat itself in the current face-off between India and China. India's first PM Jawaharlal Nehru's military and diplomatic 'bungling' of the 1962 border conflict with China is an episode India may not want to repeat. However, the Modi government can take a leaf out of Nehru's statesmanship on another count—at a time when India is missing its Parliament in action, Nehru's gesture of holding a Parliament session in the midst of the 1962 war looks impressive. It was at the height of Chinese aggression on October 26, 1962, that Atal Behari

Vajpayee, then a young parliamentarian, wrote to Nehru demanding a special session of Parliament. Without hesitation, Nehru agreed to the proposal of his young colleague from the Jan Sangh. The week-long session that started on November 8 is remem-

bered for Vajpayee's scathing attack on Nehru's foreign policy and the way India handled China's aggression. Under attack from the parliamentarians, then defence minister V.K. Krishna Menon had to put in his papers.

Cut to 2020 when the country is facing serious crises on many fronts—health, a crumbling economy, and now border security. Yet, Parliament, which was adjourned on March 23, a day before the announcement of national lockdown, still remains in recess. While lockdown has not stopped many countries from holding parliament sessions through virtual platforms or limited physical sittings, what is holding India back, ask experts. While the

Many MPs feel a special session of Parliament is necessary to send a strong message to the world.

British parliament has taken to a hybrid model of in-person and video conferencing, many other countries have been holding sessions by video conferencing or by following physical distancing. The Inter-Parliamentary Union's list cites many parliaments such as France, Italy, Spain, Argentina, Brazil, Afghanistan and Nepal that have shifted to various platforms to hold regular meetings for addressing the concerns of the pandemic. Though the Modi government called an all-party meeting to discuss the escalation of tension with China, many MPs feel a special session of Parliament is necessary to send a strong message to the world on this. During the meeting, most of the opposition parties pledged their support to the government, putting aside political differences over national security.

Rashtriya Janata Dal MP Manoj Jha, whose party wasn't invited for the all-party meeting, says the statements emanating from the government, including the PM, sent confusing signals to the world. "Had Parliament been in session, these anomalies wouldn't have happened. A message goes out to the world if Parliament debates the issue. Many important issues, including Nepal's stance, need to be discussed in Parliament."

P.D.T. Achary, former secretary-general of the Lok Sabha, recalls how both houses of Parliament smoothly functioned when India and Pakistan engaged in a 13-day war in 1971.

"Every two hours, the defence minister used to brief Parliament on the developments. PM Indira Gandhi received thunderous applause after the surrender of Pakistan," says Achary, adding that the central government should have followed the conventions and convened a session of Parliament in the wake of the standoff with China.

Parliament is expected to scrutinise the decisions taken by the executive. However, major decisions regarding the Covid-induced lockdown and migrant crisis were not discussed with the parliamentarians.

"Parliament should meet and MPs should be taken into confidence considering the unprecedented crisis. Parliament ensures accountability. If it's not allowed to function,



←
Jawaharlal Nehru held a Parliament session in the middle of the 1962 Sino-Indian war

the parliamentary system becomes weak," says Achary.

Starting from the announcement of the lockdown, to the migrant crisis and the announcement of a Rs 20 lakh crore stimulus package, the opposition parties were kept in the dark on many important decisions taken by the government, rues Congress MP Gaurav Gogoi. "Why didn't the home ministry put in protocol from day one with regard to the movement of migrants? The merits of the financial package need serious discussions. These are important questions on which the government trying to evade responsibility and accountability," says Gogoi.

In the absence of any mechanism to check it, the government has a free hand in introducing many new policy decisions. M.R. Madhavan, president of PRS Legislative Research, points out that the central government has issued 800 notifications in connection to control the pandemic. "All the lockdown notifications have affected every Indian. It caused great distress to migrants. Where is the accountability

for that?" asks Madhavan. "According to the Constitution of India, Parliament has to ratify the policy decisions made by the government. We are betraying the vision of the Constitution."

The government's decisions to open up the coal mining, space travel and nuclear sectors to private parties, and allow 74 per cent FDI in defence manufacturing, have also drawn much criticism. Revolutionary Socialist Party MP N.K. Premachandran says the ruling party is using pandemic as an opportunity to implement drastic economic reforms, some of which would otherwise have had to face the wrath of even its own cadre. "Without any institutional checks and balances, the government introduced major policy and legislative changes. They took the ordinance route. By doing this, the government took away the legislative powers of Parliament," says Premachandran.

The non-functioning of parliamentary committees has dealt another blow to the democratic process, say MPs. "Parliamentary committees are considered to be a mini-parliament. At least they should have met digitally," says Jha. While virtual meetings have been stopped on security grounds, the MPs aren't convinced. After all, the PM interacts with state chief minister and other officials online. Many MPs feel it is not a technical issue that is keeping the ruling party from convening a Parliament session. They allege it just doesn't want a debate on the measures it is taking at a critical time. ■

At the height of Chinese aggression in 1962, then MP Atal Behari Vajpayee wrote to Nehru demanding a special session of Parliament.

Congress leader and chairperson of the parliamentary committee on home affairs, Anand Sharma, tells Preeti Nair that it's unfortunate that the central government is not letting the parliamentary standing committees function. Excerpts from the interview:

Why do you think it's imperative to convene a Parliament session now?

In these challenging times, people expect their elected representatives to take up issues that need urgent attention. The pandemic is an unprecedented crisis. It is important that all the decisions of the government are scrutinised by Parliament as that is what the Constitution stipulates. If required, the MPs can also make suggestions for the government to consider. Therefore, it's a matter of concern that the government is evading parliamentary scrutiny altogether. The PM was urged by opposition leaders individually and collectively to take the nation into confidence, and to brief the leadership of the political parties. We have taken it up through the defence minister and conveyed to the government that they need to brief us. They said they will do it at the appropriate time. The country and the parties stand united on national security and territorial integrity. It would strengthen any government when there is a national consensus and resolve. They should consider it and find ways to convene Parliament and inform us.

After all, the British parliament functioned during World War II. Even now it's functioning. In 43 countries, parliaments and parliamentary committees have been meeting. In the US, both the Senate committee and the



'The Modi government is evading parliamentary scrutiny'

House committee have been meeting physically to approve stimulus packages. Now in Britain, the PM's cabinet and the shadow cabinet that is the Opposition are physically present inside the House of Commons. And the other MPs are virtually connected. So why are these things not happening in India? It's very sad that parliamentary

"An abnormal situation has been created for parliamentary democracy in India."

committees have not been allowed to meet even though India is the largest democracy.

The parliamentary committee on home affairs was scheduled to meet on June 3. Why was it cancelled?


I have convened it and sent letters twice. We have been denied permission on the ground that MPs cannot be connected to a virtual platform. It's very unfortunate and they cannot say confidentiality clauses have been invoked. The PM can have meetings with the heads of state or chief ministers and opposition leaders. The defence minister and home minister can have meetings with army commanders. As the PM is conducting meeting through the portal

developed by National Informatics Centre, we are also asking for that. If they are still saying confidentiality will be lost, it's casting aspersion on the members of the committee.

Why should the standing committees function?

Standing committees are very important. It is through them that Parliament really functions. When it is not in session, Parliament continues to work through the standing committees. They scrutinise bills, important decisions, subjects are taken up and reports are given to both the Houses.... This government is deliberately evading parliamentary scrutiny and accountability.

The government made some important decisions to open up the coal mining, space travel and nuclear sectors to private parties, and to allow 74 per cent FDI in defence manufacturing....

It's an extraordinary crisis, but an abnormal situation has been created for parliamentary democracy in India. The opposition parties will have to make a collective effort and the government must listen to us because it's a damage that has been inflicted deliberately on the institution. 

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CM Naveen Patnaik watches the Rath Yatra on TV

The Political Juggernaut

Behind the first Rath Yatra without pilgrims in Puri is a nail-biting tale enmeshed in a legal tangle that puts the Naveen Patnaik government in poor light

Sandeep Sahu in Bhubaneswar

LONG after it is over, this year's Rath Yatra in Puri will leave a bitter taste in the mouth. Not because of anything that happened during the showpiece event of Odisha's socio-cultural calendar, but due to events leading up to it. And the dubious role that the Naveen Patnaik government played as the suspense built up.

It was edge of the seat, nail-biting stuff till the very end. The prolonged series of rituals leading up to the pulling of the three chariots of the deities—Lord Jagannath and his siblings Lord Balabhadra and Devi Subhadra—on the 3-km-long Bada Daanda (Grand Road) was scheduled to begin at 3 am on June 23. But, until 3 pm on June 22, it was not certain whether the spectac-

ular event would take place at all! The go-ahead by a three-judge bench of the Supreme Court headed by Chief Justice S.A. Bobde for a Rath Yatra without devotees, reversing its own order banning the big event due to the COVID-19 pandemic, came barely 12 hours before the rituals were to begin. Despite the ban, preparations for the event had been going apace in anticipation of a last-minute change in the court's opinion. Even as the verdict was awaited on June 22, hundreds of

Many devotees in Odisha and outside believe divine intervention cleared the decks for the Rath Yatra.

makeshift shops on the Grand Road were being cleared by the district administration. The ropes (to pull the chariots) were fastened on the three chariots and the 'agyaan maala', the prelude to the shifting of the deities from the sanctum sanctorum to the chariots, had also been duly brought.

Minutes after the verdict, top honchos of the state administration and police, including the chief secretary Asit Tripathy and the director general of police, rushed to Puri to oversee the arrangements such as the sealing of the whole town and a complete ban on entry of outsiders, to comply with the conditions imposed by the apex court. More than 800 servitors, who would participate in the pulling of the chariots, were tested for the coronavirus in a jiffy.

Many devotees believe divine intervention cleared the decks for the Rath

Yatra. “What else can explain why the same bench allowed the Rath Yatra just four days after disallowing it?” asks Somanath Mishra, a devotee in Puri. On TV screens, old men and women were seen weeping and raising their hands in supplication to the Lord.

Asked if he would miss the unique experience of pulling the chariot, Biren Nayak of Bhubaneswar, who hasn’t missed a single Rath Yatra in 40 years, says, “That is also the Lord’s wish. If he wants me to watch the Rath Yatra on the TV, so be it.” Sadananda Mohanty of Puri says, “We all understand there was no way a normal Rath Yatra with the participation of lakhs of devotees could have taken place this year. The show must go on—that’s the important thing.”

Millions of devotees and hundreds of servitors are happy, but nobody is going to forget in a hurry the ‘run with the hare, hunt with the hound’ stand the Naveen government took during the first hearing of the case in the Supreme Court on June 18. While lulling the people into a false sense of complacency by allowing important pre-Yatra rituals like the Snana Purnima, the making of the chariots and so on to go ahead, it did everything it could in court to make sure the Rath Yatra does not take place. In an act that inevitably invited allegations of ‘case fixing’, the state government got its star counsel Harish Salve to actually argue against the holding of the Rath Yatra on the ground that “10 to 12 lakh people” would gather in Puri for the event. In doing so, the government was only being too clever by half because a Rath Yatra with the participation of devotees was never on the table. In its recommendation to the state government long before June 18, the Temple Management Committee had made it clear that it would be a token Rath Yatra with only servitors and policemen pulling the chariots. It was a strange hearing on June 18 as the petitioner seeking a ban on the Rath Yatra, an NGO named Odisha Vikash Parishad, and the respondent—the state government—appeared to be on the same side.

The tide began turning on June 18 itself as the government came under fire from just about every quarter. Allegations flew thick and fast that the petitioner NGO was actually fronting for it. Those who followed the developments closely asked how else this little-known organisation could afford a lawyer as expensive as Mukul Rohatgi, whose daily appearance fee reportedly runs into several lakhs. The government got cold feet after the Gajapati king of Puri, Dibyas-



The king of Puri (top) arrives at the Rath Yatra

ingh Dev, ‘first servitor’ of the Lord, dashed off a letter to it on June 19 asking it to seek a modification of the Supreme Court order. The Shankaracharya of Puri’s Govardhan Peeth, Swami Nischalananda Saraswati, too did his bit by urging the court to urgently take up for hearing the batch of petitions filed by individuals and organisations seeking modification of the June 18 order, putting further pressure on the government. When it realised that further dil-

ly-dallying could cost it politically because of the religious sensitivity involved, the Naveen government decided to do an about-turn and back a Rath Yatra minus devotees—something it could have done on June 18 itself, but had not. But if past experience is anything to go by, this too will pass—in any case, elections are nearly four years away! The Naveen government has been unscathed despite presiding over some of the worst fiascos in the history of the temple. One of the most noteworthy was related to the 2015 Nabakalebara, a once-in-19-years event that sees the deities changing their ‘bodies’, and another to the keys of the Ratna Bhandar, the treasure trove of the deities’ gold and diamond ornaments, which went missing in 2018 and remain ‘missing’.

Nabakalebara—in which the ‘brahma’ (soul) of the deities is taken from the old wooden idols and transplanted in new ones by designated priests—is considered the most sacred ritual in the 12th-century temple. As per the scriptures, the ritual is supposed to take place in the dead of the night in the presence of a select group of priests. But in 2015, the ‘soul transfer’ happened the next afternoon and became a virtual free-for-all, with all and sundry getting in. Some even managed to smuggle in their mobile phones and merrily clicked pictures! As if this was not bad enough, there were credible allegations of fixing in the selection of ‘darus’ (trees from which the new idols are made), which is supposed to be a divinely ordained exercise with the Lord instructing the priests in their dream (‘swapnadesh’).

L’affaire missing keys came to light in 2018 when a team of officials went to inspect the condition of the Ratna Bhandar as per a directive of the Orissa High Court, but reported that all is well without going in because the keys they had gone with failed to open the locks! Given the fact that an inventory was last made way back in 1978, the revelation about the missing keys predictably led to allegations of large-scale pilferage of the ornaments valued at hundreds of crores of rupees. ❑



WORLD TOUR



UK A lone attacker went on a stabbing spree in a busy park in the southern English city of Reading, killing three and injuring three more—the deadliest terror attack to strike Britain since 2017’s London Bridge attack. A 25-year-old suspect arrested in connection with the attack was named across the British press as Khairi Saadallah, a Libyan refugee resident.



S. KOREA Activists have launched thousands of leaflets by balloon across the border with North Korea after the North abruptly resumed its belligerence. N. Korea had blown up an inter-Korean liaison office and threatened to nullify 2018 agreements aimed at lowering frontline military tension. The North is trying to apply pressure on Seoul and Washington amid stalled nuclear diplomacy.



ENGLAND Archaeologists have discovered a prehistoric monument under the earth near Stonehenge that could shed light on the origins of the mystical stone circle in southwestern England. The site has 20 huge shafts, over 32 feet in diameter and 16-foot deep, forming a circle over 2 km in diameter. Around 4,500 years old, they could mark the boundary of a sacred area in the larger Neolithic settlement of Durrington Walls.



FOREIGN HAND

PRESIDENT Donald Trump has vowed to pull thousands of American troops from Germany—a move that fits a pattern of disruptive moves against allies that have cast doubt everywhere about the future of partnering with the US. Trump has consistently dismissed the conventional view that a far-flung US military presence, while costly, pays off in the long run by ensuring stability for global trade. Germany, as the country that once faced the Soviet bloc, has long been the centrepiece of American defence strategy in Europe through NATO, has lately been the focus of Trump’s ire. He has asserted that the Germans, and NATO, had long shortchanged the US on trade and defence, declaring that “until they pay” more for their own defence, he will reduce US troops. But fellow Republicans say a reduced US commitment to Europe’s defence would encourage Russian aggression and opportunism.

Amid nationwide anti-racism agitation, protestors take out a Trump likeness during the US president’s rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma

Trump is supported by some who see declining value in the NATO alliance. Ted Galen Carpenter, a foreign policy expert at the CATO Institute, wrote in *The National Interest* that cutting US troop levels in Germany carries little strategic risk. “The Red Army is not poised to pour through the Fulda Gap in Germany and try to sweep to the Atlantic,” Carpenter wrote, referring to a Cold War nightmare scenario that prompted the US to station over 3,00,000 troops in Germany for a time. “Today’s Russia is a pale shadow of the USSR in terms of population, economic output, and military power.”

Trump has taken a friendlier approach to Poland, which has lobbied for a bigger US troop presence as a bulwark against potential Russian aggression. The Poles floated the idea of flattering Trump by offering to pay the cost of establishing a ‘Fort Trump’ as a permanent US base, an idea that went nowhere.

People recall newspaper ads Trump bought in 1987 to urge Washington to stop paying to defend wealthy countries like Japan. He also has argued for a faster withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan—the kind of antagonism toward allies that bothered Trump’s first defense secretary, Jim Mattis, so much that he quit in December 2018, when he was upset by Trump’s decision—later amended—to remove all US troops from Syria, abandoning their Kurdish partners.

Trump has also created a rift with South Korea over sharing the cost of hosting the approximately 28,000 US troops based there. Last year, the US stunned Seoul by demanding a five-fold increase in S. Korea’s share of the cost, to \$5 billion, over which they remain at loggerheads.



Episode - 8

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Special 26, *Bhonsle*, *Aligarh* and
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In conversation with



Mitrajit Bhattacharya
Columnist & Author

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Neighbour's **ENEMY**

India's paternalistic attitude towards neighbouring countries generated resentment and created space for China. New Delhi must now shore up inner confidence, make up for past brashness and regain their trust.



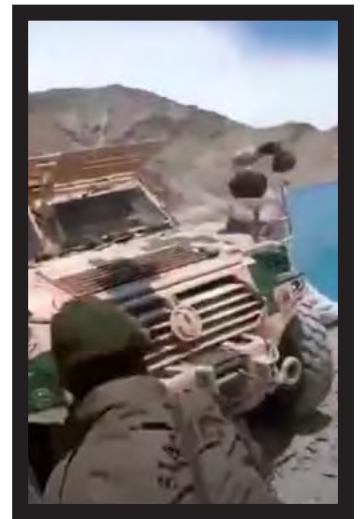
Seema Guha

From the time India was scissored into its present shape out of a larger piece of brown parchment, the question has lingered: how exactly do we orient ourselves to what surrounds us? There were no easy answers. On the flanks were parts that were formerly India, severed by amputation; on the north was an indistinct set of fluid dotted lines cutting across icy swathes, where human populations and oxygen levels both dipped to nearly zero. Four major wars in the first quarter-century after freedom marked a legacy of flux: diplomacy had to forge its subtle tools in this fire. One possible diplomatic answer to that question came from a man whose natural instincts harked back to a pre-split state of unity. Not a surprise, for Inder Kumar Gujral (b: 1919) had lived through the Partition, and carried a strong residue of old Lahore inside him—along with the diction.

Through the decades, when he was ordinarily resident in Lutyens' Delhi, with his capital at IIC, even Gujral would not have imagined himself as the one on whom would fall the chance to deliver the 50th anniversary I-day address from Red Fort. The experiment with history was short-lived, but his 11-month stint as India's PM left behind a semi-formally enunciated way of being for the country: the Gujral Doctrine. Still relevant in the Modi era? Yes, of course.

It's an interesting menu of what-if options in history. Gujral's tenure and his soft, unassuming persona may seem to belong to another epoch—the unilateral declaration of India's muscular nationalism of a year later, Pokhran-II, would certainly not have happened had he continued. Nor its consequences: Kargil, and a decade of heightened conflict. But his legacy also endured as the other pole of India's dichotomous foreign policy: in the strenuous peace-making of the Vajpayee-Manmohan years, the Lahore bus ride, the cricket diplomacy, an attempted détente in Kashmir. And with his 'Neighbourhood First' stance, what Prime Minister Narendra Modi came into office with was his own variation on that doctrine. He had essentially borrowed Gujral's idea—of paying greater attention to India's smaller neighbours, nurturing relations within South Asia and beyond—and made it his own, with a few tweaks.

He made a statement by inviting all SAARC leaders for his oath-taking in 2014. That August, he travelled to Nepal and punched all the right buttons in his speech to Nepal's Constituent Assembly—even Kathmandu's streets weren't immune to the excitement. Then, President Xi Jinping came calling in November and visited Ahmedabad, the PM's home town—the first of many meetings. Contrary to what pundits may have predicted, Modi even tried to make peace with Pakistan, stopping over in Lahore on his way home



Doklam 2017 and Pangong Tso 2020—Indian and Chinese soldiers fight as the border row keeps flaring up in fits and starts



AP/PTI

This May 22, 2020, satellite image provided by Maxar Technologies shows a People's Liberation Army (PLA) base in Galwan valley along the Line of Actual Control. Chinese and Indian commanders have agreed to disengage their forces in the disputed area after a clash left 20 Indian soldiers dead. The commanders reached the agreement on June 22 at their first meeting since the June 15 confrontation.

from Afghanistan to greet Nawaz Sharif on his birthday on Christmas Day in 2015. It worked well for a while; then the Uri terror attack put a stop to those attempts. There has been no turning back since. By now, a year into his second term, the Neighbourhood First policy itself seems a historical relic.

All of it was not due to Delhi's miscalculation. Pakistan is genuinely difficult to predict and deal with so long as the army calls the shots. And a resurgent China under Xi has its own ambitions of a Sino-centric world order—for it, a Doklam or a Galwan Valley is a small piece on a chessboard that sizzles with bigger points of contention: Hong Kong, Taiwan, South China Sea, Senkaku.... To understand the difficulty with our other neighbours, one needs to return to Gujral. His doctrine was built around compassionate engagement: in Indian foreign policy, it marks a pole of maximal generosity of spirit. He wanted India to exude a more humane, gentler image to smaller neighbours daunted by India's size and population. This was an attempt to reverse a legacy of paternalistic thinking in New Delhi, one that assumed a natural arc of influence—if not a formally writ one—over the affairs of independent countries in the subcontinent, some of whom were often seen as nothing more than protectorates. A former foreign secretary, in his ambassadorial days in Colombo, was even nicknamed the 'Viceroy'. It's this unexamined machismo in India's behaviour that Gujral wished to dial down, so as to engage as equals.

That core ethos has not necessarily accompanied every gesture by India, within its borders or without. Relations with 'Pakistan' or 'Bangladesh', for instance, cannot exactly go into realms of boundless bonhomie if the names get to be freely used as the nastiest cusswords within Indian discourse. In June 2015, hyperventilating Indian media reportage on a cross-border strike at NSCN(K) militants in Myanmar caused some embarrassment even with a friendly Naypyidaw. In September that year, all the warmth towards Modi's India evaporated in Nepal as New Delhi initiated a nearly five-month-long blockade of the landlocked Himalayan nation, then freshly ravaged by one of its worst earthquakes. A top Indian diplomat, now in high office, was described as "uncouth, brash and imperial" in his conduct towards Nepal's politicians. There was, to be sure, a perceptible gap between the intended spirit of 'Neighbourhood First' and the actual execution. It is into this gap that China insinuated itself, investing its 'String of Pearls' strategy towards the Indian Ocean Region with an extra buzz and purpose around India.

All the inroads China has been making into India's 'backyard' emanate here—and it's not just about the Chinese ships and submarines that frequent the high seas. Take Xi's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) across Asia: an astonishing bid to create a modern Silk Road network where all the world's asphalt converges on Beijing. India is a lone big ab-

sentee; every other regional nation with the exception of Bhutan has signed up. Every country is in need of funds for infrastructure, and it's difficult to resist China's chequebook diplomacy. China now has a military base in Djibouti on the Horn of Africa—just like the US and old European powers. The latest flashpoint on India's periphery—the bloody faceoff in Ladakh—is an extension of this new harnessing of territory. A kind of Chinese lebensraum. No wonder, India's South Asian neighbours are watching the situation with interest—indeed, a touch of glee is not absent.

The presence of China hands all of India's neighbours something substantial to leverage against what many of them perceive as a local bully—even if India has hardly exited the game. The Maldives had turned its back on New Delhi under Abdulla Yameen, welcoming China with open arms, but pulled back when the regime changed. In Colombo too, the Rajapaksa brothers are back in the saddle—President Gotabaya and PM Mahinda have struck all the right chords for now, but everyone knows the China card can always be brought out at critical moments. Even Dhaka has discovered a new bipolarity. Last week, China announced massive tariff exemptions to Bangladesh—on an astounding 97 per cent of its products. Even that left a bad aftertaste in Dhaka after a Calcutta-based Bengali daily described it as “charity (khyoraati)”, though the paper apologised on June 23. “Many are disappointed. This word is not acceptable to me,” said foreign minister A.K. Abdul Momen—he stopped short of making a formal protest, using a more diplomatic tack. “India is indeed our biggest friend,” he said, and affixed a qualifier, “India-China are both good friends, close neighbours...development partners”. Islamabad, of course, has no need for as many niceties, nor does the exchange stay verbal. The LoC remains red hot. It has been so ever since Uri/Pulwama—firing is common and casualties routine.

Via Kathmandu

But the new ambidexterity developed by Bangladesh is matched—indeed, surpassed—only by Nepal. Last week, Kathmandu issued a new map which showed three contested areas—the Lipulekh Pass (which connects Kumaon to Tibet), Kalapani and Limpiyadhura, some 370 sq km altogether—as its own. After Nepal's parliament endorsed the new markings, India called on it to “refrain from unjustified cartographic assertion”. Nepal has harked back to the 1816 Treaty of Sugauli signed with the East India Company to establish its claim to these slivers of land, located on the strategic India-China-Nepal trijunction. The Communist Party

Gujral's 'Neighbourhood First' policy was about India exuding a gentler image to neighbours daunted by its size and population.



The I.K. Gujral Doctrine—paying greater attention to smaller neighbours—is still relevant

government of K.P. Sharma Oli is now sitting pretty and asking for foreign secretary-level talks—a kind of brinkmanship that could scarcely have been imagined earlier. “Nepal has pushed itself into a corner by publishing the maps. Kalapani is in Indian territory, will they fight and take it from us?” asks former diplomat Gautam Bambawale. Asked whether Nepal would actually get together with China and Pakistan for a loose alliance against India, Kunda Dixit, editor, Nepali Times, retorts: “Not a chance. If Indian media keep talking of Nepal's generals and politicians tilting towards China, it may one day become a self-fulfilling prophecy. But ganging up is unlikely.”

Yet, a congruence is visible. The new map was triggered by India inaugurating the Lipulekh road last month, quite like how China resents India building roads, bridges and airstrips in border areas. The Ladakh faceoff has undoubtedly emboldened Kathmandu too. India is soft-peddling the issue, aware that much of this ultra-nationalism is domestic posturing. Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli needs to do—and indeed goes back to the wave of anger triggered by India's 2015 blockade. That was classic old-style India, acting on its ‘natural sphere of influence’—strongly reminiscent of how a similar blunder by Rajiv Gandhi in 1989 had actually exacerbated anti-India sentiments, a fact the MEA's institutional memory should have alerted it to.

When Nepal's new Republican Constitution was unveiled in 2015, New Delhi took the side of the disenchanted Madheshis, a linguistic-demographic continuum from eastern India. Nepal, which transported 80 per cent of its essential supplies through India, was hit hard. And Oli, PM then, vowed never to repeat the strategic mistake of depending on one country. He turned to China and wrapped up a string of deals. Beijing also promised a rail line from Tibet to Kathmandu. Soon after the blockade was lifted, Oli was ousted—he suspected an Indian hand. His re-election campaign in 2017 focused on memories of the blockade, and promised those days of suffering would never recur. A thumping majority ensued, and while he has repaired ties with New Delhi, China now has a new omnipresence in Kathmandu.

Neighbourhood Watch



India-China: Rival Asian Powers

BOUNDARY DISPUTE: China has differences with India on both the McMahon line in the east (its border with Arunachal Pradesh) and the Ladakh-Tibet LAC. A claimant and effective occupier of Aksai-Chin, China now claims all of Galwan Valley, a part of Ladakh. China also claims the entire Arunachal Pradesh. Border with China: over 4,000 kms.

RIVERS: A grave problem brews, with Chinese diversion of Brahmaputra water, which flows from Tibet and enters India in Arunachal Pradesh. China building dams on its upper reaches, which will reduce the volume of water downstream. Northeastern states concerned.

BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE: India has refused to join China's BRI despite Beijing's best efforts as a vital road connecting Xinjiang with Pakistan's Gwadar passes through Gilgit-Baltistan in PoK, thus infringing India's sovereignty. India is also mindful of the debt trap ensnaring those who borrow from China.



India-Pakistan: Hostile Neighbours

KASHMIR: Pakistan has fought three wars over Kashmir and challenges the basic Indian position that Kashmir is an integral part of India. Abrogation of Article 370, that scrapped Kashmir's special status, is a new sticking point.

TERRORISM: India charges Pakistan of using terror groups like Lashkar-e-Toiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed in fomenting constant trouble in Kashmir. Pakistan-backed terror groups are responsible for attacks on Parliament, 26/11 and the J&K assembly, among others. Pakistan accuses India of aiding Baloch insurgents.

WATER: The 1960 Indus Waters Treaty gave India use of three eastern rivers and Pakistan that of the western rivers of the Indus river system. But a brooding dispute over building of dams is likely to flare up in future as the countries fight over the quantum of water released.



India-Bangladesh: Teething Differences

WATER: The sharing of the Teesta waters is an emotional issue in Bangladesh. No progress yet despite excellent ties between New Delhi and Dhaka.

NRC: Though the National Registrar of Citizens exercise in Assam is an internal affair of India, since many of those excluded from the NRC are Bengali Muslims living near the Bangladesh border, Dhaka fears a reverse migration.

CITIZENSHIP AMENDMENT ACT (CAA): The act gives citizenship to minority Hindus, Sikhs,

Buddhists and Christians persecuted in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh. Dhaka is furious—it says it does not persecute minorities.

ECONOMY: Bilateral trade has grown steadily. Indian exports stood at US\$ 9.21 billion and import at US\$ 1.04 billion in 2018-19. India announced a second line of credit (US\$ 2 billion) in 2015 for infrastructure projects. Third credit line of US\$ 4.5 billion was announced in April 2017, one of the biggest by India to any country. Both governments are trying to restore pre-1965 rail links and increase frequency of Calcutta-Dhaka Maitree Express and Calcutta-Khulna Bandhan Express. Bangladesh imports 1,160 MW of power from India.

India-Nepal: Old Partners, New Freeze

TERRITORIAL DISPUTE: Nepal released a new map that shows the areas of Kalapani, Limpiadhura and Lipulekh—hitherto regarded by both as part of India—as Nepali territory. Located at the trijunction between India, Nepal and China, it is of significance. While disputing it, India wants to resolve the issue through dialogue.

WATER: Unresolved, intermittent talks about sharing of river water.

MADHESIS: These are people living in the Nepali Terai adjoining India with deep links with our nation. India's 2015 blockade of Nepal was aimed at getting Madhesis their rights in the new Nepali constitution.

ECONOMY: India is Nepal's foremost trade partner and the leading source of foreign investments. Total bilateral trade stood at US\$ 8.27 billion in 2018-19. Motihari-Amlekhgunj cross-border petroleum pipeline opened in 2019. Indian assistance in post-2015 Nepal earthquake includes about 40,000 houses, over US\$ 1.65 billion in line of credit extended to Nepal. India offers about 3,000 scholarships to Nepalese students every year.



India-Bhutan: Druk Bond

STRATEGIC PARTNERS: India has an agreement for protecting Bhutan's external borders. This is a focal point of the Doklam standoff with China in 2017 as Indian troops tried to stop Chinese road construction in territory claimed by both Thimphu and Beijing.

ECONOMY: India has committed Rs 4,500 crore for the 12th Five Year Plan of Bhutan (2018-23). India assists in developing hydro power. The trade volume stood at Rs 8,560 crore in 2017.



India-Myanmar: Gateway

STRATEGIC PARTNERS: Change in power from military junta to democracy brought a new friendship between the two countries. A niggle was Indian Army's 'surgical strike' deep into Myanmar territory across Manipur against militants holed out in the neighbouring nation in 2015.

ECONOMY: Bilateral trade stood at US\$ 1.7 Billion in 2018-19, an increase of 7.53 per cent from 2017-18. India is the fifth largest trading partner of Myanmar. India is building the Kaladan transport project, which includes a 109-km road from Zorinpui in India to Paletwa in Myanmar. It is part of the Look east Policy. Under the Rakhine state development programme, India has committed over US\$ 25 million.

India-Afghanistan: Close Knit

STRATEGIC PARTNERS: Since 2001, India has been a close ally of the democratically elected Afghan government and provider of diplomatic/strategic assistance to Kabul, though it has never sent its military to support the Western troops there. India's assistance is mainly humanitarian help in reconstruction. It has over 140 community development programmes (US\$ 120 million), covering education, health etc.

ECONOMY: Bilateral trade stood at US\$ 1.5 billion. The nations have a dedicated air freight corridor, launched in 2017. Afghanistan also exports to India through Chabahar port in Iran.



India-Sri Lanka: Ties Under Watch

TAMIL MINORITIES: Even after the end of its civil war, Sri Lanka is loath to give its Tamil minorities all that was promised in the India-Sri Lanka Accord of 1987. New Delhi keeps urging Colombo to settle the issue.

THE CHINA FACTOR: Delhi is wary of the Dragon's growing influence in Sri Lanka. Memories of the time when Chinese submarines docked in Colombo during Mahinda Rajapaksa's last term not forgotten.

FISHING DISPUTES: Fishermen of the two countries drift into each other's waters, arrests are made and boats seized. A recurring problem not easily solved.

ECONOMY: India announced line of credit worth US\$ 450 million in 2019 for infrastructure projects. Bilateral trade in 2018 amounted to US\$ 4.93 billion.



The 'Bangladeshi'

Though less rancour-ridden, recent years have not been exactly salubrious for India's ties with Bangladesh, one of our closest friends in the region, besides Bhutan. The Awami League government of Sheikh Hasina has always been India-friendly. But since 2019, the shadow of NRC/CAA has vitiated the air, what with loose talk of deporting alleged Bangladeshi migrants back home, and the equation of Bangladesh with Pakistan and Afghanistan as a country where religious minorities are persecuted. Hasina, whose regime prides itself on its secular-liberal values, said nothing much in public. But the Opposition and citizens' groups planned open protests during Modi's scheduled visit to Dhaka for Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's 150 birth anniversary celebrations. The pandemic gave Dhaka an excuse to scale down the celebrations. The prime minister cancelled his visit. Altogether, not the best hour for diplomacy. Bambawale makes light of the issue. "I don't see how a foreign country can be impacted by India's domestic issues, be it the scrapping of Article 370, the NRC or CAA. There are fissures within India, which Indians have to reconcile among themselves," he says. But domestic issues often have a way of resonating beyond borders—the same reason why New Delhi finds the Madhesi issue relevant enough to India to intervene in another country.

Using 'go to Pakistan' as an all-purpose slur against dissidents, or describing Bangladeshi migrants as 'termites' may resonate well with the BJP's electorate. But it's that very aggro that has given China new latitude in the subcontinent—thus contributing to India's diminution here. Bambawale, an old China hand who has had long stints in Beijing, including as ambassador till his retirement in 2018, believes that's offset by a larger gain. "Don't really know what China gained from the current crisis...making this hot border even hotter," he says. This view derives from the fact that there are circles within concentric circles here. If Madhesi-Nepal-India forms one loop, and that's set inside the bigger one of Nepal-India-China, even that's a subset of a bigger one. The world's biggest tussle for dominance, the new not-so-Cold War, is raging between China and the US, along military, technological, trade and currency axes. India, in this picture, is analogous to the Madhesi of Nepal: a chess piece. "They have pushed India closer to the US. With a hostile China looming large, India may be left with no option but to move closer to the US," says Bambawale. He feels China has lost out strategically for whatever small advantage gained in Galwan. India's potential alternatives: linking up unambiguously with elements like the Quad or Donald Trump's


After laying claim to three border areas as its own, Nepal asks for talks. The Ladakh face-off has emboldened it.



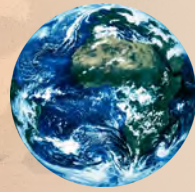
Army chief General M.M. Naravane meets soldiers in Ladakh during a visit to review the situation after the Galwan face-off with China

new-fangled Pacific Deterrence Initiative. India's tilt towards the US dates from P.V. Narasimha Rao's government in the years following the break-up of the USSR, gathered pace in the Vajpayee years and ripened during Manmohan Singh's UPA regime with the 2005 India-US nuclear deal. As China's global clout grew during those years, so grew a bipartisan consensus—spanning the Clinton, George W. Bush and Obama presidencies—about regarding India as a countervailing force to China in Asia.

At one time, there was much talk of India and China rising together in the 'Asian century'. That prospect still lives in deep economic ties—the thousands of million dollars of Chinese investment in India, in smartphone brands like Oppo, Vivo, Xiaomi and Huawei, in Indian brands like Paytm, Flipkart, Zomato, Makemytrip, Big Basket, Policy Bazaar, Ola et al. But the new trust deficit winds the clock back to 1962. Questions are being raised about the government's China policy, whether Modi's personal style of diplomacy has back-fired. Had the Wuhan spirit and the Mahabalipuram tete-a-tete lulled India into complacency? Has Modi—beginning with his four China visits as Gujarat CM, when he was not welcome in US or Europe—made the same mistake as Nehru by being too trusting? And within this matrix, what about the subcontinent? A new restraint is visible vis-à-vis China: not many party loudmouths are going ballistic on television shows. Can the same spirit be extended to our smaller neighbours?

Former diplomat Bhaswati Mukherjee believes this is a dilemma faced by any large country. Smaller neighbours naturally tend to be overly sensitive and often misinterpret the actions of a larger country. Modi's overtures to Nawaz Sharif fell through "because Pakistan did not play ball due to its own domestic reasons. It's not India's fault," she says. "Under these circumstances, the only policy that stands up is not to be provoked." On China, it's a question of a vigilant engagement, she says. "China is doing what it does across Asia. It's important to manage relations. But we must consider that this is 2020, not 1962. India is no pushover." A meaningful reboot of 'Neighbourhood First' is perhaps overdue—and something like the Gujral Doctrine flows only from an inner confidence. 

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INDIA'S WILD PLACES: THEN & NOW




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DR. M.K. RANJITSINH
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In conversation with ▶
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COVER STORY
INDIA/CHINA

Smoke The Tso

As the difficult goal of status quo ante in Ladakh is being pursued, fresh diplomatic and military solutions to deal with China are aired. And the politicians squabble, pointlessly.

Bhavna Vij-Aurora

A many-layered, dynamic riddle can have no single, simple, or permanent answer. India is at this moment presented with a set of fluid questions embedded within more fluid questions, rather like a perverse Russian doll—or shall we say, a Chinese doll? And geopolitics is not a lab science where one can isolate one strand and spend years perfecting the answer. The burning matches you see on this week's cover of Outlook are a simplification: in reality, this situation has military, diplomatic, economic and geostrategic dimensions. And none of those domains offer complete, permanent answers even within themselves, leave alone any question of them being made compatible with each other. Since 'status quo ante' seems out of reach, New Delhi is at present fire-fighting, trying to maintain at least a tenuous status quo, while asking itself some searching questions.

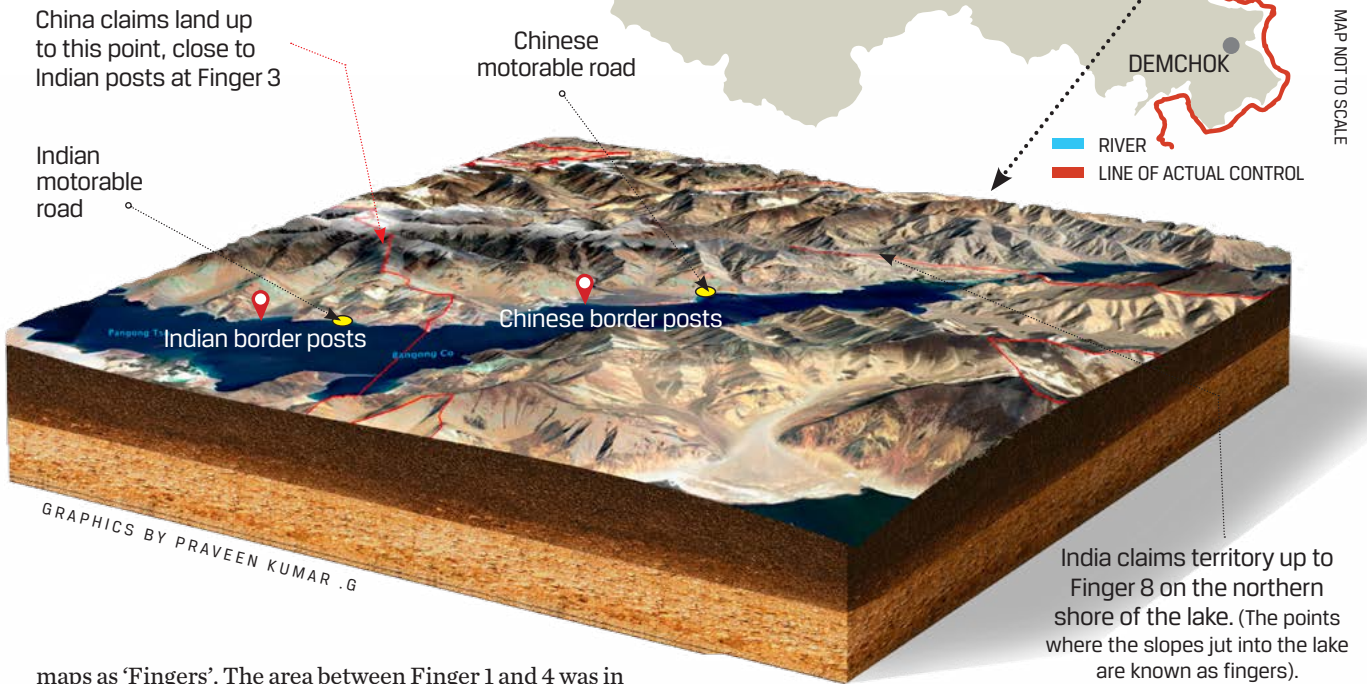
What exactly happened in Ladakh over the last few weeks, and why? And how can it be stopped? The last question was easier to attempt. So thousands of additional troops have been moved up to the LAC—itsself seemingly no permanent

line in the riverbed sand. Many, rushed from the blistering heat of the lowlands of Uttar Pradesh, did not get time to acclimatise to the sub-zero temperatures, but they have dug in their hastily allotted snow-boots on the rooftop of the world, dogged as Indian jawans are wont to be. Gen M.M. Naravane, chief of army staff, also flew in on June 23 to meet the freshly deployed sentinel. Checking on operational preparedness was only one of his objectives. He was also there to be debriefed by corps commander Lt General Harinder Singh about his ongoing marathon talks with his Chinese counterpart, Major General Liu Lin. Government sources chose to describe the 11-hour-long discussions as "positive, with a mutual consensus to disengage" from all friction areas in eastern Ladakh. But even that's only a partial description.

Why? Pangong Tso, for one. Here, some 230-odd km south of Galwan, the Chinese have come till 'Finger 4' and have built defence structures, including a bunker. Top government sources admit the statement regarding "mutual consensus to disengage" does not include Pangong Tso; the Chinese have shown no inclination to even discuss it. The spurs of the mountain range on the northern bank of the Pangong Tso jut towards the lake like a palm, with the protrusions looking like fingers. They are demarcated on the

PANGONG LAKE

The LAC passes through this mountain lake in Ladakh, but the demarcation has been disputed. The lake has been a major source of hostility between India and China



maps as 'Fingers'. The area between Finger 1 and 4 was in India's control; between Fingers 4 to 8 was an area that both India and China patrolled. Indian and Chinese PLA soldiers had had a scuffle on Finger 4 on May 5. Besides building a bunker, the PLA had also constructed a moat-like structure to deny Indian soldiers access to an area they regularly patrolled before. Plus, they deployed additional troops. India responded with extra troop presence too, resulting in a standoff. That has cooled, but the bunker and moat stay.

Besides military-to-military engagement, the apparatus of bilateral diplomacy is also in action. Joint secretary-level talks have started with the forbiddingly named 'Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India-China Border Affairs (WMCC)' meeting virtually. The man-

darins of geostrategy, who have not been this busy in a long time, are not pinning too much hope on these though. They believe the time has come to craft a new China policy. Former foreign secretary Kanwal Sibal says the established systems of engagement between the two countries don't seem to have worked. There have been 14 rounds of WMCC talks at the joint secretary level since 2012, when the mechanism was set up. There have also been 22 editions of 'special representative-level dialogue' between the neighbours since 2003—the last being held in December, between National Security Advisor Ajit Doval and Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi. "Nothing much seems to have come out of these meetings," Sibal tells Outlook.

It's a big step China has taken this time, and it's unlike its past incursions, says the former diplomat. "They wouldn't have done it without detailed advance planning. They have a good understanding of Indian capabilities, but maybe they did not anticipate the mayhem. They have bitten off more than they can chew. The situation can deteriorate," says Sibal. According to him, the situation is quite worrisome since the Chinese have entrenched themselves in Pangong Tso—even if Galwan and Hot Springs eventually see disengagement. "Getting the Chinese troops to withdraw from Pangong is not going to be easy. The question is whether China is willing to move back to

Sources admit "mutual consensus to disengage" does not include Pangong Tso; the Chinese won't even discuss it.

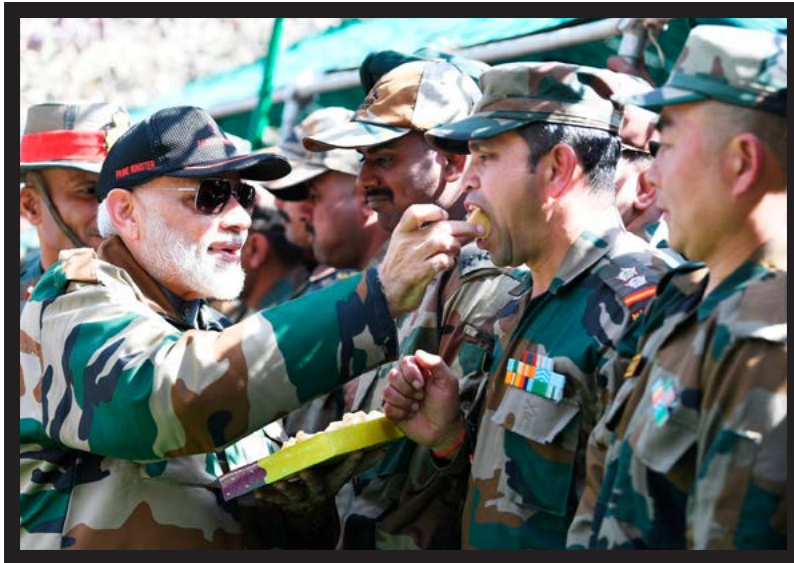


"A noble nation like ours is being troubled by our neighbours while the Centre stands helplessly. We need a strong government to change this."

"Security of the nation is under threat. What did China do? They enter our borders and we silently watch."

"China withdraws its forces but I wonder why Indian forces are withdrawing from Indian territory? Why did we retreat?"

Congress leader Shashi Tharoor retweeted on June 18 these three old tweets of PM Narendra Modi. One posted by Modi on February 8, 2014, and two by the Twitter handle of his website and mobile application dated May 13, 2013, and August 15, 2013.



Finger 8, and if they do, what will they ask from India. There are no easy answers," he says. Sibal favours a constant, incremental push for status quo ante.

But that's only military—he feels things should be ratcheted up elsewhere, and suggests using Tibet for leverage. "I don't know why India has been reluctant to use Tibet; it's the core problem between India and China. India should raise the issue of demilitarised Tibet. The time has come for China to engage with Tibet and the Dalai Lama. I don't see any downside, and India can gain enormous manoeuvring space," he says.

FORMER army chief Gen Bikram Singh, naturally, has a military solution in mind—outside of and concurrent with political-diplomatic engagement. To thwart China's expansionism, "we must always keep our guard up along the borders. Our combat power, besides thwarting evil designs, should enable us to hit back expeditiously at places of our choosing. This requires compatible infrastructure, which must be developed at the earliest," Gen Singh tells Outlook. What would that look like? The former army chief had pushed for raising a Mountain Strike Corps (MSC) with the capability of striking across hostile mountain territory. He believes the time has come to revive the proposal. An MSC, he feels, would provide India with "requisite deterrence" against China—"and should that fail, help win decisively any war thrust upon us." This entails taking a leaf out of the PLA's own book. The former general is looking at a capacity for "synergised multi-domain operations", for which "we need to modernise and transform, like China is doing."

But that comes up against an old peeve: lack of funds. An initial raising expenditure of about Rs 65,000 crore was required for the MSC, but a separate outlay never happened—an entire corps was expected to be raised by hiving off portions from the usual defence budget. So, while sanctioned in 2013, the MSC was stalled two years ago for paucity of funds. The army had by then managed to raise only one of its two proposed divisions: it's now being tested for the army's new integrated battle group (IBG) concept. Each IBG is proposed to be an agile, self-sufficient unit comprising of

about 5,000 soldiers along with tanks, artillery, air defence, engineers and other support units. "This is the need of the hour," says a senior serving army officer, "and it requires political will and support".

The political class, of course, is embroiled in its own combat games. With the Modi regime facing one of its biggest security and diplomatic challenges, the Congress has sprung into action—keeping up a fusillade of questions. While trying to walk a tightrope so as not to be seen as opportunist, the temptation to taunt the BJP on its pet theme of aggressive 'nationalism' has been hard to resist. Congress leader Rahul Gandhi chose the open platform of Twitter to point-blank ask the government whether it has ceded any land to China. Even former PM Manmohan Singh weighed in, warning Modi against any "historic betrayal of people's faith". Referring to Modi's claim of there being "no intrusion", Manmohan said "disinformation is no substitute for diplomacy or decisive leadership". Modi had told the all-party meeting on June 19 that "no Chinese troop had intruded into the Indian territory". His office later claimed a "mischievous interpretation" of the PM's statement.

At the CWC meeting on June 23, Congress president Sonia Gandhi too was unsparing on the Modi government, accusing it of mismanaging the border. The BJP, in turn, is certainly in no mood to take the charges lying down. Party president J.P. Nadda accused Manmohan of presiding over 600 Chinese incursions between 2010 and 2013, and having "abjectly surrendered" hundreds of square kilometres of India's land to China. Former finance minister P. Chidambaram struck back, asking Nadda about 2,264 Chinese incursions since 2015. BJP general secretary Ram Madhav charged the previous Congress governments with signing bilateral pacts that suited Beijing's interests. And it goes on and on.

A serving security official can't see the point in this trading of barbs. "All successive governments have failed to read China. It's high time we acknowledge that India's China policy, as a collective, has not worked in the past seven decades and rules of engagement need to change drastically. The time has come to rethink how we deal with China and the world," he adds.

Outlook

the **Outlier**

A D SINGH

Entrepreneur and restaurateur

ON

FUTURE RESTAURANTS,
INNOVATIVE DINING AND
TIPS FOR START-UPS

In conversation with



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June 28th, Sunday, 11:00 a.m.

Satish Padmanabhan

Executive Editor, Outlook

BORDER TROUBLE IN VALLEY VIEW

UMER ASIF



Tension on the China front haunts Ladakh even as the Valley witnesses a familiar spate of encounter killings

Naseer Ganai in Srinagar

AS the Indian Air Force jets hover over Leh, capital city of newly created Union territory Ladakh, there is deafening silence on the ground in the cold desert. Amid the roar of fighter jets and unprecedented security build up in Ladakh, the police are not allowing anyone to move in the streets of Leh citing COVID-19 restrictions. There has been a steep rise in coronavirus cases in Ladakh over the past one week, forcing the government to resume the lockdown. However, the border tension following deadly clashes between Indian and Chinese soldiers on June 9 looks

more worrisome than the pandemic.

“China carries out aggressive acts every year, but they have crossed all limits this time,” says a shopkeeper in the main market of Leh. Many politicians in the city argue that the Chinese will not stop here if they are not pushed back. “They have taken our cultivated land, our grazing land, and if they are not stopped, it is not going to end,” warns Rigzin Spalbar, former chairman of the Ladakh Hill Development Council. Ladakh MP Jamyang Tsering Namgyal asks, “If we know ‘Azad Jammu Kashmir’ as Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK), why not to call Aksai Chin ‘China-occupied Aksai Chin’?”

In contrast to the silence on the roads in Ladakh, there has been no pause in the almost-daily encounters in the

Kashmir valley, leading to the killings of young militants, some of whom took up arms barely a month ago or even later. When the government snaps the internet connection in a district, people there come to know that encounters are about to take place. These days, the internet is shut down almost every morning in the south Kashmir districts of Shopian, Kulgam and Pulwama. On June 21, internet connection was snapped and three militants—all new recruits—were killed in the heart of Srinagar's old city, taking the total number of militants slain this year to 106. Over 70 of them were killed during the COVID-19 lockdown. After the June 21 encounter, the police claimed to have recovered an AK-47 rifle and two pistols.

Many here believe that regardless of how the situation plays out on the LAC, it will have an impact on Kashmir and counter-insurgency operations. When former CM Omar Abdullah tweeted asking people not to look towards Beijing and cited the plight of the Uyghurs in China, he faced such a backlash that he deactivated his Twitter account. "There was rage against Omar as he didn't gauge the mood in Kashmir," says a member of a mainstream political party. "With the BJP government working for demographic change in J&K by enacting law after law, you cannot browbeat Kashmiris by brining up the Uyghurs. India's Kashmir record is so terrible and inhumane that even citing the Uyghur example is seen as an affront here and Omar realised it within half an hour of his comment."

Police, however, see social media as a challenge. "The major threat and challenge is from the radicalisation and instigation of people through social media. We can call it 'virtual militancy'," says Inspector General of Police Vijay Kumar. "In December 2019, at least 252 militants were active in Kashmir, and now the number has come down to 100-200. The police don't go by numbers; it is their job to kill militants wherever they get a lead about their presence."

Nearly half (51) of the militants killed this year were from Hizbul Mujahideen. Since the killing of Hizbul's longest-serving operational commander, Riyaz Naikoo, on May 6 in Beighpora village of Pulwama, the largest Pakistan-backed insurgent organisation in Kashmir has been taking a hit almost every day. On May 20, Hizbul divisional commander Junaid Sehraie—son of Tehreek-e-Hurriyat chief Mohammed Ashraf Sehraie—was killed in Fateh Kadal area of Srinagar along with other two militants. Nineteen houses were burned down during the operation and three civilians, including a child, died when a shell left behind at the site exploded later.




UMER ASIF

"India's Kashmir record is so terrible that even citing the Uyghur example is seen as an affront and Omar Abdullah realised it within half an hour," says a politician.

"It is true that the Hizbul is bearing the brunt of the ongoing counter-insurgency operations," says a senior police officer based in south Kashmir. "And it looks like the organisation is facing a shortage of weapons too. In some encounters, only pistols are recovered. In others, only one gun is recovered from three or four slain militants. The absence of civilian protests and civilian killings during the encounters this year also marks them as different from previous ones."

According to the officer, Jaish-e-Mohammed and the newly formed The Resistance Front (TRF) now pose the biggest challenge to government forces. "The number of foreign militants killed this year is less than before. When a foreign militant from Jaish escapes during an operation and leaves behind a US-made M-4 carbine, you realise where the real challenge comes from. Emergence of the TRF is another signal that foreign militants are now going to take centre stage," he adds.

IGP Kumar, however, says he doesn't see any difference among various militant groups as all of them work together in Kashmir. According to official figures, around 50 locals have joined militancy so far this year—145 had joined in 2019 and 220 in 2018. Instead of handing over the bodies of militants to their families, government forces are taking them to Baramulla or Sonmarg in north Kashmir for quiet burials. Relatives of militants often visit the graveyards in Sonmarg and Baramulla to look for the graves of their kin. How this emotionally sensitive issue plays out in future has to be seen. Analysts in Kashmir believe the killing of militants won't wipe out militancy from the region, and that the present situation only indicates government forces have an upper hand at the moment.

While all eyes on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Ladakh, the Line of Control (LoC) between India and Pakistan in Jammu and Kashmir has been witnessing intense shelling for the past few weeks. An Indian soldier was killed on the morning of June 22 as the armies of India and Pakistan exchanged heavy fire in the Nowshera sector of Rajouri district in Jammu. A couple of days earlier, five civilians had been wounded due to shelling at a village in the strategic Haji Peer sector in north Kashmir's Uri, around 100 km north of Srinagar. Earlier in June, at least six civilians had been injured and over a dozen houses damaged at Nambla village of Uri. "One of the shells fell near the Uri police station," says a Uri resident. Sources say intense shelling is taking place in areas along the LoC where it had not been reported earlier. In PoK, journalists have reported five deaths in the past week due to cross-LoC shelling. 



Michael Kugelman

A Wise Gardener

India is far from being isolated in the neighbourhood. But to push China back will need a symphony of strategic tasks.

CHINA'S recent provocations in Ladakh mark the latest manifestation of Beijing's growing clout in India's backyard. The current border crisis, which has plunged India-China relations to their lowest point in decades, will sharpen New Delhi's desire to push back against Beijing's deepening footprint in South Asia. Mustering the capacity to do so, however, will not be easy.

The main accelerant of Beijing's growing presence in South Asia is its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—a mammoth transport corridor project that uses infrastructure investments to gain influence and access to markets and strategic spaces. In South Asia, BRI is most visible in Pakistan, where the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has become the project's most operationalised component. New Delhi opposes CPEC because it entrenches one bitter rival on the soil of another, but also because it is envisioned to pass through territory India claims as its own. And yet, BRI's tentacles extend far beyond Pakistan. Last year, a Chinese thinktank released a report that identifies three additional South Asia-focused parts: the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (an admittedly ambitious component, given its inclusion of a BRI-resistant India), the Trans-Himalaya Corridor (involving investments in Nepal), and a Maritime Silk Road initiative enveloping Bangladesh, Maldives, and Sri Lanka. Each part has made ample progress, though

India has unsurprisingly not participated in BCIM.

All but two SAARC countries—Afghanistan and Bhutan—explicitly figure in China's BRI plans. China hopes to expand CPEC into Afghanistan if that nation ends its long-running war. It has invited Bhutan to join BRI.

Factors aside from BRI further strengthen China's prospects in South Asia. The coronavirus pandemic has assailed many South Asian economies, which affords Beijing opportunities to step up financial assistance and gain more influence. Its recent announcement to grant tariff exemptions to 97 per cent of Bangladesh's China-bound exports is instructive. Political transitions have also been helpful; the Sri Lankan leadership that took office in November 2019 enjoys strong ties with Beijing.

Not surprisingly, China is leveraging its foothold in South Asia to pressure and test India—including in areas where New Delhi has traditionally held sway. Witness the Doklam standoff, at the India-China-Bhutan tri-junction. Or, more recently, Nepal—where Beijing may well be leveraging its growing ties with Kathmandu to push it to take a hard line in its current border spat with India. Ladakh is just the latest—but arguably the boldest—attempt by Beijing to provoke New Delhi in its broader backyard.

The good news for India is that China does face vulnerabilities. Prior to the pandemic, BRI states enmeshed in Beijing's 'debt-trap' diplomacy faced considerable economic risks from China's largesse. A 2018 Center for Global

Development study found that five SAARC states—Afghanistan, Bhutan, Maldives, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka—faced a “quite high” risk of debt distress from new BRI-related funding. The catastrophic economic consequences of COVID-19 may make them more uneasy about taking on loans they will struggle to repay.

Additionally, the Ladakh crisis, with its multiple Chinese incursions and brutal violence by PLA forces, reminds South Asian states Beijing’s increasingly aggressive steps. Because of this and its poor initial handling of COVID-19, Beijing is suffering a major image problem. This may make some SAARC states wary about deeper cooperation with Beijing, given the reputational costs.

So there’s an opportunity for New Delhi to push back against China in South Asia. It already has something to build on. Indeed, for all the talk of New Delhi’s struggles in its neighbourhood, it could be a lot worse. Nepal remains a key partner (India is its largest aggregate investor, with robust collaborations on infrastructure). Despite recent tensions with Dhaka over India’s new citizenship law, India-Bangladesh ties are stronger than they were a decade ago. Afghanistan and Bhutan remain close friends. The relationship with Male has improved markedly since Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, a China critic, was elected president in April 2019. And Sri Lanka’s new administration, despite past affinities with Beijing, has signalled its unwillingness to be overly dependent on China.

In effect, contrary to the claims of detractors in Islamabad, India is far from isolated in its neighbourhood. And yet, slowing China’s march into India’s backyard amounts to a tall order—and not just because of the depth of Beijing’s clout and resources.

Consider just how favourable the geopolitical dynamics of South Asia are for China. It is one of the world’s most disconnected and poorly integrated regions. Its infrastructure is notoriously poor and its main regional institution, SAARC, is ineffective. Thus, intraregional trade is modest. Enter China, which can mobilise quickly to deploy huge infrastructural assistance in short order. This isn’t just something Beijing can do; because of BRI, it’s a top strategic priority. Additionally, a disconnected region with a hobbled regional organisation and limited trade is not hardwired for robust diplomacy and cooperation. Rather, it complicates efforts by New Delhi to build goodwill and confidence with its neighbours, and deprives it of forums to push back against the perception of some of its smaller neighbors that it acts like a bully.

To this end, India’s best bet, at least initially, is to hold off on regional charm offensives and other diplomatic blitzes. There’s no need to reinvent the wheel. Instead, it should continue its longstanding military modernisation efforts, build on existing agreements and plans with its neighbours, and embrace newer regional institutions that don’t suffer from the problems of SAARC. Energy and connectivity projects, under the aegis of BIMSTEC and its member states, offer a useful start. In recent years, India has concluded energy deals with Bangladesh, Myanmar, Nepal, and Sri Lanka.

There have also been discussions on an electricity-sharing arrangement with Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal.

Indian efforts to push back against China’s deepening influence in South Asia would benefit from US support. And from a strategic standpoint, Washington is certainly game. The Trump administration’s Indo-Pacific strategy is all about balancing out China’s power. Washington’s free-falling relationship with Beijing, coupled with its rapidly growing partnership with New Delhi, give it added incentive to offer cooperation.

It’s no coincidence that US leaders have been unusually public in their messaging on Ladakh—including comments from an influential Congressman and a senior State Department official that were deeply critical of China, as well as a tweet from Secretary of State Mike Pompeo offering condolences to India for its fallen soldiers.

However, tactically speaking, one can’t count on US assistance to counter China in South Asia. The Trump administration is focused laser-like on the pandemic, the sputtering US economy, and the election in November. Additionally, US attention to China’s activities in Asia tends to be focused more on East and Southeast Asia—areas that are home to American treaty allies. Furthermore, outside of its partnership with New Delhi and its military presence in Afghanistan, Washington’s track record and footprint in South Asia are relatively modest. And it can’t hold a candle to the Chinese infrastructure projects that account for much of Beijing’s imprint there. There’s been talk in Washington in recent years about developing “a new Silk Road” in South Asia and other vague aspirations, but relatively little to show for it on the ground other than

some rare concrete achievements like the US-backed Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India pipeline.

Still, with the Ladakh crisis generating more talk of how India should more openly side with America, it’s the right time to push for more US-India cooperation in South Asia. Indeed, South Asia now fits into Washington’s geographic conception of the Indo-Pacific. Recall the comment made at this year’s Raisina Dialogue by Matthew Pottinger, a senior White House official, that the Indo-Pacific stretches from “California to Kilimanjaro”. Additionally, new US institutions can help hasten collaborations with India in the western Indo-Pacific. The BUILD Act, signed into law by President Trump in 2018, facilitates America’s ability to deploy resources for overseas development projects through the formation of a new development agency known as the US International Development Finance Corporation.

India-China rivalry is entering a potentially destabilising stage that will likely become an extended new normal. India will need to draw on domestic, regional, and international resources alike to reassert its clout against an emboldened nemesis that is increasingly projecting power in areas too close for New Delhi’s comfort. **□**

(MICHAEL KUGELMAN IS SENIOR ASSOCIATE FOR SOUTH ASIA AT THE WOODROW WILSON INTERNATIONAL CENTER FOR SCHOLARS IN WASHINGTON, D.C. VIEWS ARE PERSONAL.)

The PLA’s brutality in Ladakh, China’s poor handling of the pandemic may force its SAARC partners into a rethink.



Shreerupa Mitra

The Crude Truth

A glut in oil production has seen prices hitting rock bottom. And the global crude war is getting interesting.

THE oil markets should have been the rare unifier for India and China. The adversarial neighbours flash similar profiles. China is the biggest consumer of energy while India is the third-largest.

Chinese demand for oil is 13.5 million barrels per day (mb/d) of which about 11 mb/d—nine mb/d import and two mb/d in equity oil—comes from international purchases and about three mb/d from domestic production. This is a high 70 per cent import dependence despite importing oil from 45 countries, mostly from Russia, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Angola. India, on the other hand, consumes 4.6 mb/d of crude oil for which it is 85 per cent import-dependent—Saudi Arabia replaced Iraq as its top supplier for April and May.

The over dependence of these two oil guzzlers on the

Middle East for its supply affects the two countries similarly—marked more stark this year when the markets reeling from the impacts of the SARS-CoV-2 faced lockdowns and many unhealthy firsts. The supply and demand-side dynamics have seen violent swings from March onwards resulting in some windfalls and some trouble for both New Delhi and Beijing. The countries, yet again, felt the disproportionate sway that the OPEC+ cartel—a wobbly alliance of oil producers that includes Russia—still has on oil prices.

As the novel coronavirus gobbled global demand at an unprecedented rate—it fell by one-third of its 2019 levels in April—an infighting between Riyadh and Moscow left the world being awash with crude oil. The two competitors failed to agree on the oil volume slash amid the coronavirus outbreak with Russia reportedly refusing to carry out a

Riyadh-proposed supply cut to the markets—the deepest since the global financial crisis. Saudi Arabia and Russia opened its oil spigots to their full capacity, unleashing a turf war for capturing Europe, Asia and North America and pushing down official selling prices (OSPs) to record lows. Other countries from the OPEC cartel followed suit with competitive ramping-up of oil supply. For the first time, the so-called Asian premium, the extra charge that Asian countries pay for OPEC oil as compared to European or American markets, were scrapped.

This glut of about 10 mb/d oversupply combined with nosediving demand made for what International Energy Agency's Dr. Fatih Birol calls a "Black April". Consuming countries, which include China and India, scrambled to fill their pipelines, commercial inventories and strategic petroleum reserves apart from employing floating oil storage to capture the gains from the unprecedented low oil prices. Oil storage reached a critical mass when the world ran out of space for storing crude. Consequently, for the first time, West Texas Intermediate— an oil price benchmark—futures sunk about \$40 in the negative territory, making US oil a liability for the month of April while Brent crude—the international oil benchmark—touched multi-year lows. Though WTI Nymex May futures prices picked up next month onwards, a psychological barrier had been breached for the crude markets.

The price war among the Middle Eastern and Russian producers also significantly tamed the American shale industry, which needs at least \$30-\$40 oil price to rake in capital investments and survive. The shale shut-ins since March have wiped off more than 4mb/d of oil from the markets. The flush output from the shale wells catapulted the US as the largest oil producer in the world touching 13 mb/d at its peak, steadily en route to significantly alter geopolitics. US president Donald Trump declared the nation "energy independent" and set out to capture the marketshare of OPEC+ producers in the Asian and European markets.

The meteoric rise of the shale industry also offers a much-needed respite to major consuming countries, like India and China, to wean off some of its oil dependence from the volatile Middle East region and counter the monopolistic tendencies of the OPEC+ bloc. The energy trade between the US and India was \$7.7 bn last year while American share in the Indian oil basket is around 8 per cent. However, the US-China energy trade record has been far more checkered. Though American oil export to China touched a high in July 2018, the figures slumped after trade tensions between the two economic superpowers. According to the now-on-now-off US-China trade deal, Washington's energy exports to Beijing will jump over the next two years with an additional \$18.5 bn worth of purchases in 2020 and \$33.9 billion in 2021.

The fairy tale of the shale story seemed to be cut short by the slumping crude prices. This led to a rather bizarre situation where Trump, the consuming nations, the G20 countries were threatening and coaxing—depending on their

leverage with the OPEC+ countries—to quickly sort out their internal matters and prop up crude prices, also in view of the collapsing markets from the COVID-19 pandemic. The powerful oil producing cartel didn't disappoint. It withdrew a whopping 9.7 mb/d of crude—about 10 per cent of the global supply—from the pipelines for May and June, and later extended the pact to cover July, tapering it thereon to 7.7 mb/d from August through December. Adding to the list of unprecedented happenings for the crude market, the OPEC+ cartel has shown remarkable compliance to the pact—a monitoring committee has also pulled up truant countries, like Iraq, Nigeria and Angola, to make compensatory cuts over the coming months for not meeting their quota cuts.

The two benchmarks of WTI and Brent crude have since recovered to around \$40 a barrel while shale is snapping back in action, which in turn has further buoyed crude prices. "While there has been huge drop in the drilling rigs in the (American shale) region, which is likely to impact

JITENDER GUPTA

Amidst global oversupply, the Asian premium—extra charge that Asian countries pay for OPEC oil—is scrapped for the first time.



shale dominance in the long-term unless the investments come back, in the short/near term there are many drilled but incomplete (DUC) wells, which are likely to be put into production with oil prices hovering around \$40/bbl," says D.L.N. Sastri, executive director (International Trade), Indian Oil Corporation Limited. "With reports of sharp increase in fracking crew in the region, some of closed/suspended production of shale oil is expected back in June/July with encouraging support from current level of oil prices," Sastri adds.

In the recent past, apart from being struck by sharp swings in OSPs and the sudden glutting or withdrawal of global oil supply, Indian and Chinese refineries, along with others in the crude-importing region, have had to accept big reductions in their regular contracted volumes from producers, such as Saudi Arabia and Iraq. This should have made the Asian nations natural allies to throttle a better hand vis-a-vis the OPEC cartel. In 2018, New Delhi had floated the idea of a consuming nations' bloc to include China, South Korea and Japan for a combined negotiation around issues, like the Asian premium. The divergent interests and leverages of the nations thwarted the initiative from seeing the light of day. □

SHREERUPA MITRA IS THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE ENERGY FORUM AND EXPERT ON INTERNATIONAL POLITICS FOR HPCL. (VIEWS ARE PERSONAL).

The 1962 Sino-Indian war

Must Our Hearts Break?



The horrific privations of families of fallen heroes are, thankfully, a thing of the past. While affirming the Indian Army's great tradition of selfless duty and sacrifice, this is an anguished appeal to the political leadership to not cheaply throw away men's lives and to the public to tend always to their morale.



Neeharika Naidu

IT whirled and it spun and then.... And then time stood still. Have you, in a manner of speaking, ever gone through a whirlwind, a tornado? A tornado of feelings that drives you into a vortex of uncontrollable spins? I have only seen a tsunami hit the shores of Thailand in pictures and held my breath in disbelief and terror. Time must have stood still for all those who were swept away by the unforgiving force of nature.

Time, similarly, stood still for me on November 24, 1962. My father, Lt Col Brahmanand Avasthy, commanding officer of 4 Rajput, was leading a part of his battalion back to base after the ceasefire in the Sino-Indian war was announced. The Chinese, devious as always, laid an ambush and massacred the column of approximately 200 men. The Indians fought bravely, to the last man and the last round. Hand-to-hand fighting followed and, grossly outnumbered, they lay down their lives. Their bravery in battle has gone down in the annals of military history. The Chinese dug a common grave and threw the bodies there. They gave my father the dignity of rolling him in a blanket and put a mess tin with an inscription: "Commanding Officer. He fought like a

TIGER". From his pocket was found a blood-soaked letter to my mother. Most of his letters written to us arrived home months after he died, with his sparse material objects...uniforms, the last civvies he wore and his medals. He had kept letters written by us in his pocket. Maybe his last thoughts were of his wife and his two little girls. Who knows? But I do know that as a soldier he must have wanted to achieve victory for his nation till his last desperate breath.

The local Lamas of a nearby monastery were witness to the battle. Another witness, a young villager then, still lives there. He tells us stories of the valiant fight my father and his unit put up against the Chinese, who lay in ambush. Till today,

there is an annual fair held at the site. People come and pray to the "TIGER" of La Gyala Gompa, Morshing village, Arunachal Pradesh, as he began to be called.

Later, the army built a memorial at the spot and I could visit it, in the far reaches of Arunachal Pradesh, along with my husband, Lt Gen Milan Naidu, PVSM, AVSM, YSM, then vice-chief of the Indian Army. No doubt, the memory of my father makes us proud daughters. But children like us want an answer to the question: Why?

I must make it clear that amidst this

After the hysteria dies down, the fallen are forgotten, their families consigned to lives of loneliness and struggle.

cacophony of varying views, some provocative, some middle-line, some openly aggressive, I speak just as a wife, mother or a godmother. I do not speak for the thousands of those in uniform who I feel are also my family-members. They are promised to this country, for war or peace. But I and thousands of mothers, daughters and sisters like me will agree that all we want is the safety of our men. If a drop of their blood spills, it kills something inside us. There are perhaps no answers to the question: What will we gain by war. If war is inevitable, the forces should be made capable of victory, like in 1971. The soldiers are ready for everything in war or peace, but their hands should be fortified by powers that be. Their sacrifice should not go in vain.

Maybe I will get a lot of flak from armchair patriots. But has anyone given a thought to the families of the Pulwama casualties after a month of their deaths? After the initial hysteria dies down, all those men are forgotten. The women and children are forgotten and consigned to the lives of loneliness and struggle. This is a bitter truth. Every other day, our boys die in various sectors. Does anyone even try to reach out to their families? A bit of cluck-clucking on social media, and their job is done. My mother was looked after by the army and our friends; not the government. It pains me to say this, but it is the truth. Every country fights for their country's sovereignty. I proudly subscribe to that, but I don't condone sacrifices in vain.

I do hear and read on social media and from some heartless politicians that soldiers are paid to die. I throw the gauntlet to all here. Take what you want, but go and stay a few months on Bana Post on Siachen Glacier and protect India. The soldiers who do their duty uncomplainingly need a united heart of this country that beats for them.

Post 1962, people playing tambola would say, "6 and 2—62, Chinese aggression". For me, it was not only an invasion, it was the annihilation of my life, the life of my mother and that of my little kid sister, who was all of 5. A few days ago, I saw the picture of Col Santosh Babu's young son salute his father's lifeless body, draped in the tricolor, and memories flooded my mind's eye. China remains the perpetrator and young children are still thrown into trauma. Their fathers will always stay in their veins, alive in the tales of valour. But what is going to happen to those lonely days, those nights filled with fear? This feeling of cold dread grips my heart when I see video grabs of the Galwan battle casualties—young Satnam Singh, newly-married Sepoy Ankur, Havildar Palani's bodies arriving home to weeping, wailing mothers, wives and sisters. I see myself standing, a little lost child, not really understanding what is going on. "Where is my dad? This can't be my dad who I sent to war, waving and smiling, telling me that next month he shall be back and buy me my new frock and the doll I wanted so much!" My



Lt Col Brahmanand Avasthy, commanding officer of 4 Rajput, with his wife

little child's eyes watch as army officers, state government representatives all descend on the villages and homes of these warriors. 'Wow, isn't that army truck looking lovely with flowers?' Such is how children caught in the moment think. They do not have any idea of what lies ahead. They know nothing about white clothes their mothers will be made to wear; maybe cut her hair, as mine had done; or the smiles and joy that had forever been burnt in those flames that I see now, mercilessly licking away at their dad's remains.

I never saw my dad again. We never saw his body. I never saw any of these uniformed people or the sympathising hordes at our doorstep. Yes, it is a now a long-forgotten debacle. Nothing was what it is like today. We live in a replaced generation to whom only Kargil smells of war.

While I am deeply grateful that mothers, wives, sisters and children now are well cared for and looked after, I often find myself wonder what wrong we did. Did my mother make a mistake in marrying a soldier who was being led by the nose by faulty political promises and the policies of Nehru, Krishna Menon and B.M. Kaul? My father went to battle in cotton shirts and tarpaulin boots. He fought on frozen heights, under-clothed, underfed and under provided for. Today, I am glad to see our boys are well-kitted to withstand cold and are adequately looked after. If, god forbid, they fall in battle, their families are well provided for. It was not so when I was a child. I do have faint recollections of growing up wearing only 2 dresses and torn shoes, as the government of the word 'widows' for them. Those were times when men joined the army for 'izzat and namak' and to serve their nation. As a continuing tradition from the Raj, the profession of soldiering

On a mess tin they kept with my father's body, the Chinese wrote: 'Commanding Officer. He fought like a TIGER'.

Posing with his mates at the Officer's Training School in Pune



had an innate grace, pride and meaning attached to it. It was not a meal ticket. But India was just finding its feet and there were no policies or budgetary provisions for calamities like the Sino-Indian war. That is my reading. Today we do have a policy for the 'veer naris', their children and veterans. I feel contented that at least they will not have to beg for their meals, like we did.

I married a soldier and saw the life of a defence services wife from very close quarters. I experienced the chaos and the fear yet again during the '71, '87 and '99 conflicts. I was afraid of sitting on black trunks again on some roadside kerb, in some cantonment, not knowing where to go or how to get the next meal for my kids. I had seen my mother go through all of this. One day saw my mother, me and my sister sitting on black trunks in the pouring rain, having been ousted from homes of relatives. A generous man, passing by, took us home and I still remember Mr and Mrs Khanna in my prayers. They were strangers, but perhaps god had some plan in mind. In those days, post the 1962 war, the army was small and there was nothing called a 'field area' or family accommodation, or any accommodation to speak of. One lived in relics of the British Raj. We lived in soldiers' barracks in Mhow and cantonments were not at all well-equipped. The three of us were persona non grata to the government of India. If it had not been for the Indian army, friends of my father and my father's regiment, the Rajput Regiment, who took care of our small material needs, we would not have been better off than, metaphorically speaking, the torn survivors of the Holocaust.

Since my mother was educated, she got a job and brought us up with as much dignity and grace she could manage. Money was scarce; I remember once living in a room of an under-con-

My father fought and died under-clothed and underfed. I'm glad to see our boys are adequately looked after.

struction building generously offered by the contractor. It had no doors or windows. He gave us door planks to sleep on. We put some bricks, placed the doors on it and slept on it. Mercifully, such is not the case anymore and I am happy for it. The ladies are looked after from day one. Pensions are adequate and children, too, are looked after. This having been said, by no means can lives of our men be given away cheaply.

Yet, why is there war at all? Armchair strategists keep teaching everyone on social platforms as to how to fight the war.

There is frenzied rhetoric and media buildup on how, where and why the blood of our boys, my godsons, must be spilt. People whip themselves into a frenzy, ably assisted by the media and misguided missiles of the political and military fraternity. Most of them have either no knowledge of the ground situation because they are politicians and not strategists; the rest are long retired and are way behind times regarding actual ground situations. I ask them, when you were able, in uniform and in power, why did you not do something to repair situation? There are only a handful of people who give their considered opinion, derived from knowledge and good sense.

To people like me, who have seen too much bloodshed and too much pain, we hate the thought of war. I am a patriot and I love my country. I will give my life, too, for my country if the right reasons arise. All I ask is for the protection of the backs of our soldiers. I ask the nation to unite and care for the morale of our soldiers. I ask for material, financial and moral support for our soldiers and families and I ask for the political and military leadership to display a firm spine...so that families like mine have better stories to tell. Is it asking for too much?

(Views expressed are personal)



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Frieze On A Screen

As physical spaces are locked out, art galleries and other purveyors are taking culture online, where immediate gains are balanced out by immanent challenges

Girinandini Singh

“ILLNESS, insanity, and death...kept watch over my cradle and accompanied me all my life,” Edvard Munch, the Norwegian artist, whose art was marked by a strong sense of fatality, darkness, and despair, had observed, having lived through the Spanish flu. His *Self-Portrait with the Spanish Flu* made in 1919, depicts a resting man who seems to be fading away, featureless, and worn. Even his surroundings are tired and waning; it is one of the few works of art exploring what was until then considered one of the most terrible pandemics of the modern world. From the moment the ravages of COVID-19 seized India, experts rushed to strike a comparison

with the Spanish flu. All sorts of models predicting the future of a post-Covid world—its impact on economy, society, education and health regulations—were developed. What sort of art would come out of the pandemic? How would it impact a possible cultural revolution? Questions which perhaps stem from the cyclical nature that pandemics have had on the creative spirit in the past—the Renaissance in Florence came on the tails of the Black Death which spread through the city in 1348; further back, the Greek tragedies followed what was considered the first recorded pandemic in 429-426 BC, known colloquially as the ‘wrath of god’.

The Spanish flu was followed by a resurgence of art and literature: major works of Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Joyce (*Ulysses* was published in 1922),

Georgia O’Keeffe (the American painter who also happened to be a recovered patient), and French illustrator Georges Lepape, but it was rare for these artists and writers to use the pandemic as a direct subject matter. There is, as a matter of fact, very little art that dwells on the human suffering of the pandemic, only a restructuring of the market and the mediums. Looking at the impact of this pandemic, perhaps it is easy to understand why artists chose not to create a product out of their experience, and yet it left its impression on culture. Today, as the art market reinvents itself to face these difficult times, we find ourselves considering what models, if not art, can one expect out of COVID-19? Is the digitally savvy consumer native to the contemporary age a boon or a bane to art organisations?

As early adaptors to the lockdown business models, galleries have been fluidly quick in their response. TARQ, based in Mumbai and Shrine Empire in New Delhi were the first to conceptualise, curate, design, and launch whole virtual shows which could be experienced on mobile phones, tablets, and computers. With a large digitally literate audience forming the consumer base, it is as though the culture industry has finally caught up. Virtual shows which have since gained immense popularity are becoming an outlet to provide hope and encouragement—a natural first response for many creative practitioners.

Resurgence, an online show exhibited by TARQ, Mumbai, could only be viewed through a virtual exhibit room. It is a commentary on the ideas of environmental degradation, acknowledging the uncertainty and stillness that surrounds us. The show received a mix of a younger, newer demographic alongside its older audience via platforms such as Instagram and Zoom. Their collaboration with Serendipity Arts Foundation, based out of Delhi, included a live conversation with artists Savia Mahajan and Sameer Kulavoor.

Undoubtedly, the digital realm comes with perks like widespread reach, new formats, and new audi-

The Italian renaissance came after the Black Death, and the second burst of modernism followed the Spanish flu.

ences. However, the issue of critical engagement has been a recurrent problem for the cultural market, and becomes more substantial when taken online. Unlike physical space, virtual space is over-populated and saturated with a multitude of options. For instance, a live conversation by Serendipity Art Foundation has to compete with an Instagram session with Zoya Akhtar, or a Miss Malini livestream in the same time slot because of a shared audience.

“The big difference between our audience on the ground and our audience in the virtual space is that online we run the risk of consumer saturation. There are too many options vying for their attention. On the other hand, when people come to an arts festival

they are there solely for the festival, committed to performances, panels and talks. The digital medium increases reach, because you’re attracting a wider demographic who can just as easily be one-time consumers,” explains Smriti Rajgarhia, director, Serendipity Arts Foundation.

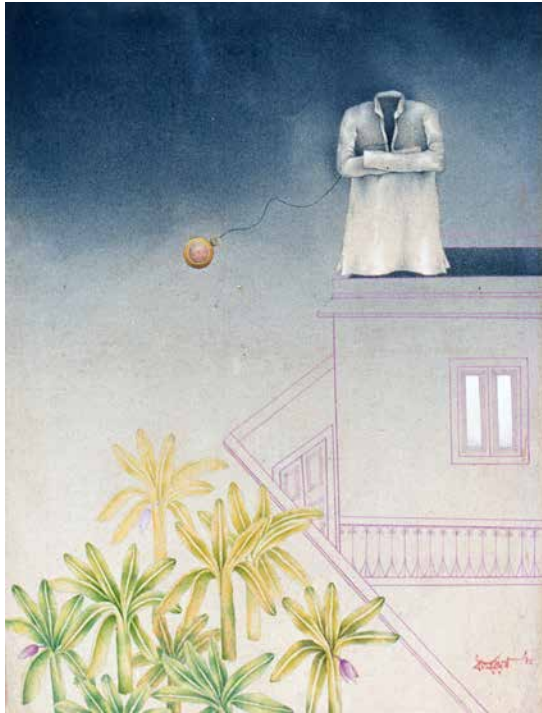
Considering that digital savvy comes with short attention spans, how does one induce people to critically engage with the arts amidst a virtual cacophony of competing genres? Is it fair to place celebrity gossip on the same platform as art, film, and literature, even with the noble cause of educating first-time consumers? This seems to be the question many organisations find themselves grappling with. The sudden shift in business models didn’t help either, with many organisations much like Serendipity rushing to adapt to online programming with off-the-cuff sessions, crowd-sourced ideas, often spreading themselves thin to offer variety—visual arts, theatre, music, and dance—while others like Delhi Art Gallery found themselves vastly ahead of the curve.

For DAG, establishing an online presence has not been a problem, as their niche, developed consumer base allowed them to concentrate on



← **An Elegy for Ecology** by Sharbendu De at Shrine Empire Gallery

→
 Dharamanarayan
 Dasgupta's
Kurta Series,
 1981, tempera
 on canvas, sold
 for Rs 2.9 lakh.
 Krishen Khanna's
**Lament on
 a Battlefield,**
 dry pastel
 on paper, fetched
 Rs 3.12 lakh.



engagement, in their case through the medium of storytelling. The need to hone a predominantly virtual profile during the lockdown had the gallery taking a serious look at how information was being disseminated, explains DAG content head Pramod K.G. How does one approach active storytelling when you're looking to scale? A recent endeavour has been their collaboration with Google Arts and Culture and The Ganesh Shivaswamy Foundation, where DAG shared two of Raja Ravi Varma's sketchbooks with rare preparatory drawings and watercolours—works which provide new depths to the artist's technique, available to viewers all over the world to explore at length through the Google platform.

Skipping between the real and the virtual world, exhibitors and visual content creators sometimes find themselves lost in crucial translation. The result is a less than satisfactory conveying of what one can expect in a gallery space. This was a key exploration for Shrine Empire in their show *Speculations On a New World Order* curated by Anushka Rajendran, which made a conscious effort towards the particularities of an online exhibition as something that differs from the process of a gallery exhibition. The 30-minute virtual show is a commentary in every form on the self-isolation and

social distancing of our times, not only through the experience of it but also through the core ideas it represents. As a representation of the 'self-absorbed' human condition fractured by isolating existences, it presents a stark reality of the 'now'. "The digital interface is still very nascent, but the exhibition was able to access an audience that otherwise would not have made it to the gallery. We received a large international viewership, which points towards an untapped audience we need to further explore," says Anahita Taneja, director, Shrine Empire Gallery.

Auction houses too haven't escaped unscathed. Saffronart has been grappling with a shift to a predominantly digital space by conducting a mix of large-scale and smaller weekly auctions, garnering an interest from younger first-time buyers and collectors, explains Minal Vazirani, its

president and co-founder. "To entice a wider audience, our strategy is to play with themes and frequency when it comes to our auctions, along with our knowledge-sharing platform and discussion series," says Vazirani. A sample of Saffronart's virtual *Dialogues in Art*, which includes webinars with experts who share research on the changing ecosystem and other such relevant topics, was a discussion on Raja Ravi Varma with author Manu S. Pillai and Maharani Radhikaraje Gaekwad of Baroda. It proved to be massively popular among consumers, many of whom were first-timers.

Perhaps it is also interesting to consider if the pull towards engagement isn't generated by the presence of young thought leaders such as Pillai, who are a touch more relatable to a new, youthful demographic. This, indeed, might be one way of bringing mass consumers to engage with the cultural market. As we chart our way forward in uncertain times, with a market that pivots and moulds itself daily, it is heartening to confirm for ourselves the knowledge that art is infinitely adaptable. We may not get art out of this pandemic but, considering that history has a knack of repeating itself, these might be the inchoate moments of a 21st century renaissance. □

Virtual space is saturated with opinion. Thus, critical engagement with art has been a recurrent problem.

AUDI 5



Steering Stories

Amar Maibam's *Highways Of Life* chronicles the experiences of truck drivers stranded in Manipur due to protests and blockades



FOR someone who spent a lot of time on the road—he was once a bus conductor—it is befitting that Amar Maibam made a documentary on truck drivers. His movie, *Highways Of Life*, has won the Best Film award at the Liberation DocFest in Bangladesh.

It follows a group of truck drivers in their journey to Manipur amid protests and blockades that often leaves them stranded in hostile territory. National Highway 37 and 2, which the truckers take, are considered among the worst roads in India. The journey from Jiribam to Imphal, around 220 km, can take as many as four to five days. The roads are so damaged that often the drivers have to fill in potholes with dirt and gravel so they can continue driving. After the collapse of the Barak bridge, the landlocked Manipur was cut off from the rest of the country. The film chronicled the drivers' experiences as they stayed together for

at least 24 days and forged friendships amid the hardship.

Highways Of Life was shot between 2013 and 2017. It is Maibam's fourth film and won him his first international award. Before this, the movie won several awards in his native Manipur. "I am happy that my film got international recognition. This win will ensure a wider audience for the untold stories of highway truckers, who are the unsung heroes of landlocked Manipur," says Maibam. "When I was travelling on highways, the lives of truck drivers always used to strike me. That's how it all began. I always wanted to tell their stories. Finally, it happened and I'm glad that people from across the border could also relate to the emotions portrayed in the film."

Maibam made his directorial debut with *City of Victims* (2009), based on extra-judicial killings in Manipur. The 42-year-old filmmaker and cinematographer, however, has endured many a bumpy ride, literally and figuratively. "Life has been the biggest lesson for me. My father (M.A. Singh) was a filmmaker and that's how I got attracted to this craft. When I was a kid, my father used to give me a tiny still camera and asked me to shoot on the sets. That's how it all began," recalls Maibam.

Later, his family went through tough times. In 1995, when he was in Class 10, he had little option but to work as a bus conductor to help make ends meet. "I was on the highway for almost 10 years. It was a life-changing experience. I continued my studies, though. I used to study sitting on the rooftops of buses during breaks," he says. After completing graduation, he went to the Calcutta Film and Television Institute and Film and Television Institute of India, Pune, for several short courses such as film appreciation and scriptwriting. "That's how I nurtured my filmmaking skills. Also, I was always with my father on the sets. That was a huge learning experience for me," he says.



—Abdul Gani

PEGASUS

Prized Pixels

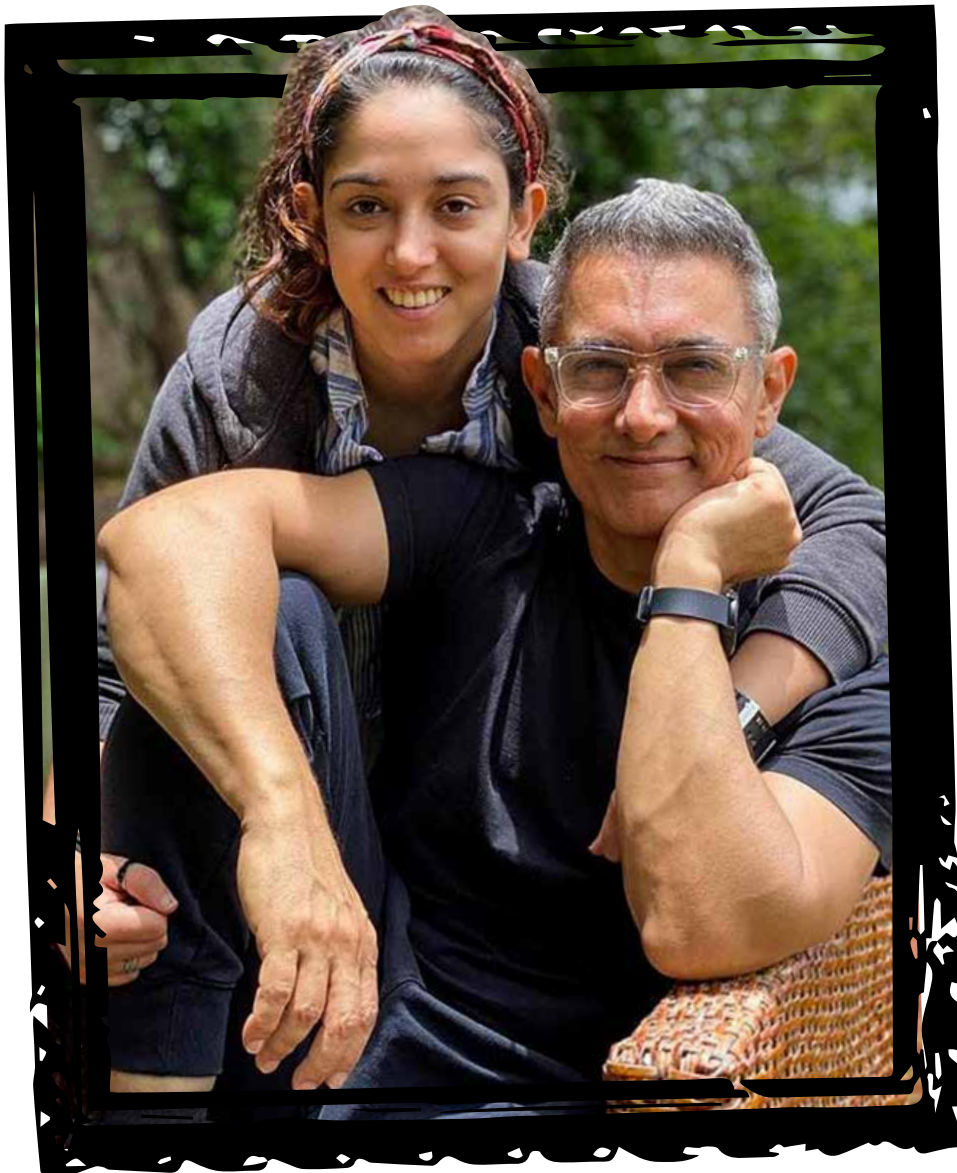


IF celluloid can have its multiple award ceremonies and spectacular galas, why should digital content be far behind? To recognise the contribution of actors and creatives in the digital realm, entrepreneur Vineet Bajpai has instituted the Talentrack Awards, now in its fourth edition. This year, the award received entries from over 400 filmmakers, OTT platforms, YouTubers and Bollywood luminaries among others. Saif Ali Khan won the award for 'Best Actor (Multi-season Performance)' for *Sacred Games*, while Gaurav Kapur was declared the 'Best Anchor' for his sports talk show *Breakfast With Champions*. Some of the other awardees are Sayani Gupta, Manoj Bajpayee, Prajakta Koli and Jennifer Winget. A gala celebration has been postponed due to the pandemic, but, befittingly for an award that lauds talent in the digital space, they announced the winners online.



—Syed Saad Ahmed





A Grey Area

Some would 'dye' for a silver strand, some won't turn a hair

Lachmi Deb Roy

IF a single strand of silvery keratin follicle makes your hair stand on end, make it stand out. Like Aamir Khan—ageless at 55, posing with daughter Ira on Father's Day; black tee, joggers, glasses and a mop of salt and pepper to look his age. A Bollywood star's stay-at-home style! Well, the coronavirus-spurred lockdown has been the harshest on people's hair—that jewel in the crown the Kingdom of Goldilocks invests a fortune to protect and nourish. Salons were shuttered, hairstylists sequestered, and even the neighbourhood barber had vanished. You can shut down hairdressers; you cannot order hair not to grow. Those who had invested on a

trimmer went DIY. Those who didn't found their crew cut mature into a mullet. Some found help in their partner for the clip and coif. Like Anushka Sharma, with a pair of kitchen scissors and a dream, gave Virat Kohli a snip, while the self-made Sachin Tendulkar sorted it out all by self: "From playing square cuts to doing my own haircuts, have always enjoyed doing different things." Politicians and their families got some self-reliant grooming. Uttar Pradesh basic education minister Satish Dwivedi went snippy-snippy cut-cut on his son and daughter. Didn't go well for daughter but son looked fine, he appraised himself. Do women score better with scissors? Perhaps, yes. DMDK leader Vijayakant's wife Premalatha shaved his scruffy beard, coloured his hair and moustache, clipped his nails and gave him a pedicure as well. In

Jharkhand, Dumka deputy commissioner Rajeshwari B. did a fine job trimming her husband's hair after he "messed up on the kids' hairdo".

But not all fretted about split ends and frowned upon the over-growth. Mrs Mehta from a quiet Delhi suburb east of the Yamuna worried about the fading dye. "What a hag I have become," she would wonder and panic each morning while she fired up the tea pot. Similar scenes played out at households around the closed nation. For all its grey starkness, many were anxious about the silver streaks showing up, the colour sachets running out. Some went for quick fixes like homemade henna and hibiscus juice. Until parlours reopened with masks, hazmat suits, tanks of disinfectants et al. Some didn't give a damn. TV actress Seema Mishra was one—doesn't mind letting people see her natural grey hair. "I don't have to fuss about going to the salon. I am glad I am safe. I am grateful for that."

Seema's mountain full of confidence provides a sharp contrast to Jane Fonda's hair epiphany at the Oscars this past February. The diva's grey hair was something to 'dye' for—she took seven hours to transform from blonde locks to funky icy. Hidden under those practiced brushstrokes of paint, the born-brunette-dyed-blonde has three inches of natural whites, characteristic of the inevitable process of ageing. She is 82 and still not completely grey. But her hair hue has deeper roots—that our die-cast sense of beauty is directly proportional to the amount of black, blonde, brunette, red (colours we are born with) on our heads. That organic white is a no-no; it's a sign of old age: a primal fear.

Such signs are getting anachronistic, turning on their heads. More and more people are getting comfortable with grey, learning to age gracefully. Head-turners like Milind Soman are happy to be a silver fox—saying no to henna and hydrogen peroxide alike. Milind is a role model for the *au naturel* (the hair, we mean, not that nude shot with Madhu Sapre and a snake wrapped around them 25 years ago). Comb outside Milind's honorary spotlight, there's an increasing population of



☪ **Salt & Pepper**—Milind Soman, Anjana Dubey and Arihant Nahar aka White Beard

people at ease with their shades of grey. "I don't understand what this big deal with black hair is?" exclaims author, journalist and educator Lalita Iyer of Mumbai, who started greying in her thirties, but made a conscious decision to stay off colour. Like all camouflages, as the anti-dye collective says, hair paint is fakery. Iyer underscores the vicious cycle: ONE, parents start colouring their hair, mostly out of social pressure to hide the whites; TWO, the children aren't aware of their mom or dad's dye job most of the time; THREE, the parents find it difficult to get out of the closet, fearing causing trauma to the kids because of the sudden visual transition; FOUR, they continue to colour their hair every fortnight or month. RESULT: A grossly disproportionate visage—wrinkles, wattles and wobbly fingers, with a head-full of dark hair. And thus, a warped perception of beauty is seeded into young minds, which hardens into a conviction and it carries to adulthood, and the next generation.

Iyer illustrates the paradigm. A friend's daughter once popped the inescapable question. "Ma, how old is Lalita aunty? She has so much grey hair. She must be older than you, no?" It sounds hyperbolic, but such kids grow to live in boxes of old/young, tall/short, black/grey, fat/thin. Iyer explains: "Life is not about binaries. It's important to send out this message to kids. I often get told that I am really gutsy to go all out with my grey and women wish they could do it, but they cannot summon the courage to stop colouring, because they get sucked into 'what will my child think?'" So yes, she let go the opportunity of looking 40 at 50, "but seriously, what's the big deal?"

Absolutely no big deal, if you were to ask 38-year-old blogger Anjana Dubey from Ajmer whose blog *sparplingsilver.com* screams her attitude. She covered her greying top



“Pair your grey with bright dresses and accessories”

Author, screenwriter and advertiser Anuja Chauhan talks about her salt and pepper journey

Why made you go grey?

→ We actually go grey very young in my family, so by the time I was in my late twenties I had a sizeable amount of grey. But there was this whole thing about not colouring while you're breastfeeding, so I used henna. But once I weaned my third baby and was free to experiment, I went a bit nuts with all the just-arrived-in-the-desi-market Loreal shades. I tried mahogany, plum, darkest brown, chocolate souffle...it was really exciting! But the monthly touch-up became a drag eventually. It felt artificial and dishonest. My face started ageing, the contrast became too stark.

→ The bright and the dark side of going grey...

I love to wear outrageous clothes and making two pigtales, neither of which is age-appropriate. If I sported those with my greys, I couldn't be accused of trying to look like my daughter's older sister. Why would I want to look like that? I am her mother. But it's not all sunshine on this side of the hill. I am complimented for my hair but often, when I'm with my dad, I get mistaken for his wife. He's 86, I am 49.

→ How do you manage to look gorgeous?

It helps to be fit, so you get that nice, startling contrast of a youthful stance and grey hair. But I would also urge you to be colourful with everything else. Your clothes, earrings, flowers, makeup. The idea is to celebrate being older, wilder, stronger, not a demure, eager-to-please young girl anymore, but a powerful, care-a-damn woman.

→ What your friends and family have to say about it?

The ladies loved it mostly. The men weren't so hot on it. They were all like you look so much older. We hate it! Colour it! But I feel coloured hair was infantilising me (coupled with my short stature and chubby cheeks). This new grey forces men to acknowledge my age. People take me more seriously. Also, I get saluted by security now. That never happened before.

for around 20 years, until the snap moment in 2018 when she discovered what it's like to love your natural look. She documented her greying journey on Instagram. “I was a victim of depression. My grey hair could be one of the reasons. Isn't it shocking for a 13-year-old to see silvers popping on her head? I thought I lack something and it was not normal.” Much before Dubey found her genetics playing tricks, hiding the grey became a task. “I started with henna. Eventually my hair turned down henna. The dye came. It gave me fake confidence for a few years, but every time the grey roots showed, the confidence started shaking.” That confidence is built on the belief that women with grey hair don't feel younger, sexier and more fashionable. Dubey's husband encouraged her to shed the mask. “I could always read in his eyes, ‘Yes you can’.”

Ageing is a privilege, if taken positively. Whining about society's views on stereotypes seldom helps. Time changes, as do old beliefs. If grey equals to old, why would young girls and women dye their hair silver? Why not embrace the natural sil-



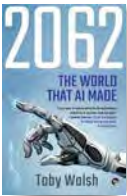
↑ Post-Covid hairdressing can be stressful...masks, coveralls et al

ver and flaunt it with style? Model Arihant Nahar aka White Beard struts his white hair in style. It wasn't that easy. For a Mumbai high school kid to wake up to an early onset of full-blown greying hair was depressing. He walked into class to a jeering ovation of “buddha, buddha” every single day. The assault was two-pronged—bullies plus pokey well-wishers with tips. A battered Nahar chased numerous medical and herbal solutions. “I wanted to fit in. If you ask me what changed, let me take you back to college.” It was Pune, summer of 2015, his first day in college. Nahar says: “You should have seen the look on their faces. Remember Freddie Mercury onstage, all eyes on his flamboyance. Suddenly it dawned on me. New city, new faces and I could be anyone. I could be me. I became White Beard, easy to locate in a crowd.”

For the shock of hair, the best “hairline” (the follicular equivalent of a tagline) comes from actress Taapsee Pannu: “And they have a life of their own.” 📺

TOP PICKS WORLD

2062: The World That AI Made
Toby Walsh

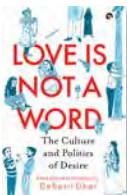


The author conjectures that machines will surpass humans in intelligence by 2062 and explores its effect on our race. He

draws from case studies—the exponential growth of blades in shaving razors, the sexism in translation services, technology’s infringement on privacy etc—to engagingly delineate the contours of this brave new world.

Love Is Not A Word: The Culture And Politics Of Desire

Edited by Debotri Dhar



This anthology explores the interstices of politics, history, literature and culture with love. Its scholarly essays delve into a Dalit

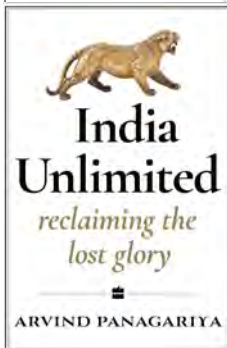
woman’s experiences on dating apps, Ghalib’s ideas of the beloved, love without the trappings of marriage and family that turn “private ecstasy into social routine”, yearning in barahmasa poetry and the adoration of cities and trees.

Mastaan: The Fallen Patriot Of Delhi
Vineet Bajpai



Bajpai has set the novel around the revolt of 1857. As the British tighten their stranglehold, Indian sepoy band together

in opposition. The highly regarded warrior Mastaan also seeks revenge against the East India Company. But will his love for Fay, the younger sister of his regiment’s commander, come in the way?



Arvind Panagariya
INDIA UNLIMITED:
Reclaiming the Lost Glory | HarperCollins | 300 pages | Rs 799

Leaving The Bog

The need to embrace new policies in various sectors for faster growth is set out with clarity and evidence

Pavithra Rangan

THE year 2020 has not been kind to India thus far. Slowing economic growth and a strained social fabric are now capped by a pandemic which is putting many lives, and even more livelihoods, in peril. For anyone wondering how we can deal with the economic doom and gloom, Arvind Panagariya’s new book, *India Unlimited: Reclaiming the Lost Glory* could not have come at a better time. While the title feels appropriate for these times, the ‘lost glory’ actually harkens back to the first 1,800 years AD, for most of which India made up roughly a quarter of the world’s economy, as opposed to the paltry 5 or so per cent at present. *India Unlimited* presents the author’s case, backed extensively with data, evidence, and coherent arguments, on how we can grow faster and regain our spot as one of the world’s more successful economies.

But first, why should we at all care about this issue now? By tracing India’s inward looking, ‘command and control’ economic policies, and contrasting their results with the experience of similarly poor but more export and market-oriented nations like Japan, South Korea and China, Panagariya shows clearly how we scored several own goals in the first 45 years after Independence. And while laying out the data on the 1991 reforms and the subsequent sharp reductions in poverty, he writes, “No matter how we dissect the data, there is unequivocal evidence of significantly faster poverty reduction alongside faster growth.” His message is implicit, but obvious—if you care about the poor, you must concern yourself with economic growth. Panagariya’s point stands on its own, but the writings of numerous other development economists like Lant Pritchett for instance, corroborates it. So, to avoid any more self-goals now, it is important we learn from our past.

Panagariya proceeds to examine the economy’s main sectors—agriculture, manufacturing and services, to try and establish where growth might come from, and how. With rigorous analysis of the many aspects of employment and productivity, this section is among the book’s strongest. Spoiler alert: what will transform Indian’s economy is not agriculture or small firms.

The rest is about what it would take to make that transformation happen. The labour reforms to support the creation of attractive jobs in labour-intensive manufacturing, the need for planned urbanisation, the changes needed in the financial sector, including a competitive banking sector and finally reforms in governance that would allow these changes to take place. While his policy prescriptions all flow naturally from the analysis and evidence presented, the author recognises that we have a tough task ahead—“For a country that has spent many decades pursuing counter-productive economic policies, there is no escaping a long list of reforms.”

India Unlimited is an excellent resource for anyone interested in the direction that India needs to go if it is to reverse weakening growth in recent times and sustain that reversal over the medium term. The book walks, with aplomb, the tightrope of presenting enough analysis to make a compelling case for any reader, while at the same time not so much as to overwhelm them.

PANAGARIYA'S MESSAGE IS IMPLICIT, BUT OBVIOUS: IF YOU CARE ABOUT THE POOR, YOU MUST CONCERN YOURSELVES WITH ECONOMIC GROWTH. OTHER DEVELOPMENT ECONOMISTS AGREE.



Take That, Dolts

Bollywood's tepid rumour mills roll on as the pandemic blows hot, sulfurous air on it, and down our trembly, tingly necks. The need some louts have to sexualise any human friendship, especially between famous people, reflects their own bestial thoughts. So was the suggestion that *Dangal* co-stars Fatima Sana Shaikh and Sanya Malhotra share a Sapphic relationship. Fatima had the good sense to dodge the canard in a neat side-step and then talk about the friendship she shares with Sanya. They are as they appear here: goofily happy.



Five Paces Away

She has a large fan-following on the strength of cardboard characters in TV serials, photoshoots and a constant, wandering presence in social media. Hina Khan, however, is a scaredy cat these days, perennially afraid of catching the dreaded C-virus, and took the feeling along to a dubbing studio for (absolutely, we imagine) necessary work. "I realised it's unsafe to inhale/exhale so close to the microphone. God knows how any have dubbed there," she says, her voice on an edge. That's her, when she wasn't so yellow as now, out for some faux gardening, soaking in the sun, hiding behind those shades. Another...gasp...of those shoots.



Masking Serious Talent

It's a dispiriting thought for you boys. Is an outrageously visionary talent, a rambunctious proclivity to brag about it and billions of dollars to show for it all that matters to two of film's most attractive women? For talk has flowed in of a 'disclosure' that hatchet-faced Elon Musk has had a steamy three-way with lovely Cara Delevingne (catwalk stunner, author and imparter of intensity to her still insubstantial film roles) and lovelier Amber Heard (those eyes convey dreaminess better than many others) in 2016. The claim was instantly denied. But fret not friends, it seems this is a fallout of an acrimonious divorce between Amber and her husband of one year, Johnny Depp.

Gladly Uppity

Indian fakirs and sadhus, in those ghastly days of rampant, stereotyping Western Orientalism, were known across the world for their powers of levitation. They now have a latter-day competitor in the fabulously athletic form of Madhavi Nimkar. We have admiring eyes not only for her floral-printed workout leotard, but for those shoulders and forearms that elevates her being so exemplarily on the International Day of Yoga. So between jawans doing extreme asanas in Ladakh's extreme climate and Madhavi, who do you pick? We have a divided house on this.



COVID-19 SHIFTING

Diary



R. Balashankar
Is a political analyst
and former editor of
Organiser Weekly

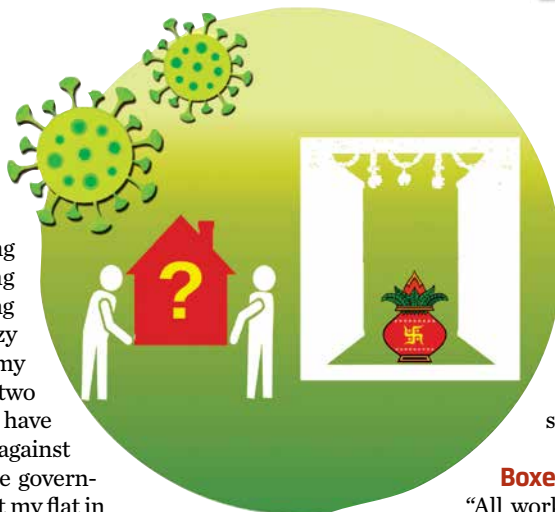
Lockdown Lockdown

I don't know if it was COVID-19 or the stupid lockdown that made my smooth home-shifting plans a three-month-long nightmare. I had been living happily for 27 years in a cozy Asiad Village flat allotted to my wife Mangala, but I lost her two years ago. My stay there could have been extended, but I decided against seeking such favours from the government. Luckily, I was able to get my flat in Mayur Vihar vacated and readied. In mid-February, I requested IGL to disconnect my gas connection. They promptly complied. I requested the DoT to shift the landline, but despite several reminders, the request remains unattended.

I was supposed to shift on March 25, the first day of Navaratra, as my two astrologers—one in Kerala, another in Delhi—suggested. Luckily, my astrologers were unanimous on the date, though they differed on the time. One wanted me to enter the house at six in the morning, light a lamp, perform Ganapathi Havan and boil milk before doing anything else. This was too early and too difficult. My Delhi soothsayer was more accommodating. He suggested that any day or time during Navaratra was auspicious—I could go to the new house whenever it was convenient and organise Ganapathi Havan after settling down. He, however, added, “While leaving the house, go to every room, pray and thank *Vastupurush* for protecting and accommodating you all these years. Keep one light on in the front room while leaving.”

Topsy-Turvy Janata

I had arranged movers and packers and asked friends to help me shift. For about a fortnight before that, I had moved my personal belongings—clothes, laptop, writing pads, papers, pen etc—in instalments to ensure they reach in one piece. This included Mangala's, my son's and my certificates, books, copies of articles, musical instruments (which Mangala



had a passion for) and a few photographs. I hoped to transition into the new house without taking much time to set it up.

On March 22, came the 'Janata Curfew' with its drum-beating. The harrowing lockdown began the next day. If there was a week or at least a few days' notice, I could have moved in with poojas, havans and all the other paraphernalia. However, with the sudden lockdown, things went topsy-turvy.

Boxed Decades

“All workers have left for their homes. We have to wait,” declared the packing company. In my enthusiasm, I had shifted all my air conditioners to the new place. So till June, I had to suffer the Delhi heat, which led to skin rashes. That was the least of tragedies. I had moved most of my clothes and personal belongings. As time passed, I had no dhoti to change into at home. I had to ask my neighbour, Professor Chandrasekharan Nair, to get a few from a Malayali store.

I was counting days for a letdown in the lockdown. When I consulted the astrologer for a second date, he said, “Get ready for a long haul. In a national trauma, all personal fortunes get suspended. Your individual horoscope will not work now. It's crisis time,” he said. I am not superstitious, but it is our traditional family practice to do *grahapravash* (entering a new house) on an auspicious occasion. But when I finally moved, exasperated, I could not care for the puja, the auspicious moment or boiling milk first.

The movers and packers were prompt. “I will come to oversee. All labourers will come with masks, hand wash and gloves,” the supervisor assured. In the first week of June, they came with all the permissions. Both the outgoing and incoming resident welfare associations have to permit you to move out and get in.

Workers suffer the most. Friends cannot be asked to help because of the risk. When one's most valuable possessions are books, files, magazines and bound volumes of paper cuttings, even the most patient packer gets frustrated. As they lug the cartons up and down the stairs, I'm sure they wonder if we have been collecting junk all our life—bags and bags of cassettes, CDs and pen drives. These days, who plays cassettes? Shall we take or dump these?

21st-Century Untouchability

The virus has taken us back to the Dark Ages. Neighbourhoods are practising new forms of discrimination. People who know nothing about the disease act as if they were experts. Official propaganda has only helped cement this mindset. It is debatable if the lockdown has succeeded in containing the virus, but the propaganda has spread fear psychosis. COVID-19 patients and essential workers have had to bear the brunt of prejudices.

The pandemic has taken humans back by hundreds of years, when families used to ostracise and abandon their own to merciless isolation and bizarre burials during an outbreak. They were even denied cremation for fear of spreading the disease. History seems to be repeating itself. The pandemic has taken away all mirth known to civilisation. And cynical, mirthless rulers seem to enjoy this widespread discomfort.