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LETTER OF THE WEEK

MANAGING EDITOR PR Ramesh EDITOR-AT-LARGE Siddharth Singh Many thanks to Open for Rajeev Masand's interview DEPUTY EDITORS Madhavankutty Pillai with Joanna Rakoff ("You Want the Movie to Be More Rahul Pandita, Amita Shah, V Shoba (Bangalore), Nandini Nair like a Poem and Less like a Novel", March 30th, 2020)! It was good to know her mind before watching the CREATIVE DIRECTOR Rohit Chawla movie while I re-read Salinger as long as the lockdown is in place. Personally, I don't think anyone can capi-Lhendup Gyatso Bhutia (Mumbai), Moinak Mitra, Nikita Doval talise on Salinger's life—as Rakoff seemed to think ASSOCIATE EDITORS Vijay K Soni (Web), before she wrote her memoir on which the movie is based—enough given how little we know about him. CHIEF OF GRAPHICS Saurabh Singh In fact, as she points out in the interview, he didn't SENIOR DESIGNERS Anup Banerjee, even want his writings to be adapted to any other medium. It is rare to see a writer get so much scope DEPUTY PHOTO EDITOR Ashish Sharma on the production floor. This movie promises to be as much a book as a cinematic production. And it's only NATIONAL HEAD-EVENTS AND INITIATIVES apt that we will never see Salinger in the movie. We have only him as a great recluse, after all. Why should GENERAL MANAGERS (ADVERTISING) the movie be any different? We shall keep looking for him in all the places in the movie, not just during his NATIONAL HEAD-DISTRIBUTION AND SALES voice on the phone conversations. For that is how his readers know him. And that is how we read Rakoff's D Charles (South), Melvin George (West), Basab Ghosh (East) memoir too. Among many other things, it will also be interesting to see if we all agree with Rakoff's husband

> on casting Qualley to play her. As the interviewer says, now it's for Salinger loyalists to judge the movie. Susanne Blazey

Form IV

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Dated : 1 March 2020

B Y S F U N C T I O N A L LOCKED DOWN the productivity of many employees working in government and private companies ('The War on

SPECIAL REPORT ON COVID-19

LATE

Lockdown announced by governments the world over to prevent the coronavirus from spreading has affected Virus', March 30th, 2020). Companies have now switched to alternative options including staggered working hours, staggered holidays and work from home for almost all personnel. The move to encourage work from home is welcome at a time when the pandemic is on the rise, affecting public health and safety. In fact, companies and governments should use work from home not only in a crisis such as this but also to tackle air pollution and everyday traffic prevalent in urban ecosystems, hurting our lifestyles. A peoplefriendly policy should be now framed to mandatorily impose work from home whenever feasible, including in government offices which too are mostly computerised now. This will help government departments improve productivity as well as reduce vehicle emissions. Varun S Dambal

EDITOR'S NOTE



By S PRASANNARAJAN

he world is at an existential war, and we are all victims as well as warriors. It's that moment, a pause, let's hope, in time when our mounting sense of vulnerability is matched by our resolve to overcome. Even as we fight an untamed virus spreading across the world, we realise, we know, that being together while being separated, we have the resources, coming from the State and the states of mind, to contain the invasion. We also know that, in our atomised togetherness, even as we struggle, as dutiful citizens and modest humans, to remain alive and alive uninfected, we need to forsake, sacrifice, compromise. In this war, victory requires a joint mission by science, statesmanship and expertise. Fear evokes not just an irrational sense of mortality but instinctive bravery of the survivor too. Being afraid is to remain aware, and that's the difficult part.

Difficult because, at times it seems, we are being exiled into a dystopia by our mobile phones. Information, when retailed without caution, makes some of us alarmists, apocalypse-sellers, amateur prophets, gleeful conspiracy theorists, outright cynics, unsolicited moralists and me-alone island dwellers. In a ghastly painted scenario, we are all destined to be like the man and his son in Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road*, navigating through the charred Day After. Or, we are mere guinea pigs in a biological war waged by a Dan Brown world-dominator. In real time, we are somewhere else, not as a doomed species but as a global community, united in our isolation and dread. Still, we could be deceptive, as China did in the beginning, or misleading, as the WHO boss did in the beginning about China, in spite of Beijing's commendable post-Wuhan recovery through

administrative ruthlessness and bio-surveillance. In free societies too, a certain amount of ruthlessness and our willingness to cede some civil liberties are necessary. And we need to listen to experts instead of undermining their intelligence. In this war, lockdown or not, borders bring us closer.

As information overwhelms, the work gets tougher for the media. They, too, are fighting to reach you, dear reader, in spite of collapsing support systems. So the mornings of some of yours go without the

printed newspaper, and some get a thinner edition. And I'm not sure how many of you are reading this on a printed page. Even if you're not, *Open* is out there, maybe some copies unclaimed, but it's there, for our readers. This is that moment, maybe the most dreadful after the flu of 1918 that reportedly killed between 50 and 100 million, when information may not save your life but, if responsibly consumed, can make it more rewarding for the living. In harder times, the media matters more.

In a magazine, the story is a bit different. We are telling stories, stories we think carry within them a habitable, metaphorical, moral universe—and a pleasure to read. The magazine that you hold or see on your screen carries reported—or meditative—essays, apart from well-researched features, that take you on an exploration, lead you to fascinating destinations. In the following pages you'll read one of our essayists passing through the sacred texts—Hindu, Christian and Islamic—to reduce the distance between death and infinity: "God is synonymous with life, not death. In every religion an eternal God has promised eternity to his human creation." Another contributor, in a 7000-word essay, writes on "the passion and unrequited love of Covid-19." Drawing from philosophy, religion and literature, the essay makes sense of our fragmented lives in the time of a pandemic. And one of our staff writers argues that, in the end, it is a face-off between two variations of life: "as humans know it and as the virus knows it." We also carry, breaking convention in a regular issue, an original short story set in lockdown Rome, by an Italian writer living in India. We at *Open* believe that fine magazine journalism is also about good writing. We are not curating ideal lockdown reading; we are trying to do better what we are good at.

We remain hopeful, optimistic. In the human history spanning 200,000 years, every pause in the life cycle is followed by a new realisation of life itself. And behind every rupture, there's a bad story—of transgressions, violations, and callousness. The bad story will recur as long as there are deniers in power even as the world is threatened by our bad—and unscientific—habits. Isn't it a reminder that time is running out for some good stories? Here are some.



OPEN DIARY

Swapan Dasgupta

T N HINDSIGHT, the Janata Curfew on March 22nd and the 5 pm expression of public solidarity was a dress rehearsal for the drastic 21-day national lockdown that Narendra Modi announced on March 24th. The sheer scale of the lockdown is absolutely mindboggling. I don't think anyone, either in India or overseas, ever imagined that a democracy—once described as a 'functioning anarchy'—would have managed to put together such a project. If India is successful in flattening the curve and pushing back the advance of the coronavirus, it would have achieved the impossible.

Predictably, while there has been astonished support for the lockdown project, particularly from those who were aware of the magnitude of the threat confronting India, there has also been shrill attacks on Modi. This is also to be expected since the Prime Minister's style of communication and his methods of securing endorsement-a combination of hope, celebration and sacrifice—isn't everyone's cup of tea. The banging of thalis and blowing of conch shells was ridiculed by those who have a rarefied view of the 'scientific temper' that we are meant to imbibe. Others faulted the Prime Minister for not providing operational details of dos and prohibitions for the 21 days, quite forgetting that these are for local administrations to spell out. And finally, there were those who thought the economic consequences of the 21-day lockdown were too much for India's poor to digest.

I guess that it is undeniable that the lockdown—quite unprecedented in scale for a somewhat chaotic democracy—is a monumental gamble based on what the experts say is the only way to beat the pandemic. Frankly, no one can be certain that every Indian will



follow the curfew rules rigidly. It requires only a handful of entitled idiots or a few uninformed souls to do something spectacularly stupid and ruin everything. That danger is real and should not be discounted. Equally, some particularly cussed local official in a district may lack imagination and flexibility and cause so much local grief that there is social tension—which defeats the very purpose of social distancing.

On March 17th, for example, some citizens of Kolkata circulated a video of the street scene in a vast swathe of Rajabazar-a Muslimdominated locality. There, the notion of social distancing had been replaced by a business-as-usual approach that included street urchins playing cricket on the streets. It is reassuring that once the videos were brought to the notice of the Kolkata Police, there was some action and the roads and markets were cleared of those who imagined that a lockdown was not very different from a holiday.

Fortunately, these are exceptions to the rule. Yes, the cruel reality of rigid distancing isn't fully understood by many. I, for one, find it galling that I cannot go out and visit an ailing 80-year-old friend who lives by himself just 1.5 kilometres away. But there are some unpleasant things we have to do for a larger objective. If anything, this 21-day retreat into our fox holes will certainly imbibe the importance of civic virtues in our citizenry. As a garrulous and community-minded people, Indians don't naturally appreciate social distancing. Most Indians also have a very feeble notion of what constitutes privacy. The 21-day lockdown in that sense goes against our national character. If we manage to overcome these character traits, then it suggests that we are destined for bigger things.

The importance of leadership should not be underestimated. It required the bulldog approach of Winston Churchill to rally an isolated Britain to persist in the fight against a rampaging Hitler in 1940. I often wonder what would have happened to India if the pandemic had hit the world in the days when we had fragile coalition governments headed by individuals that lacked authority and mass following. It would have been disastrous. First, we would have lacked the will to take firm but unpleasant decisions; and, second, even if some outside pressure forced us to take as momentous a decision as a 21-day lockdown, would the country have adhered to the restrictions without chaos? I know these are hypothetical questions, but a 21day leisure period is appropriate to contemplate counterfactual history.

Also, for those interested in a spot of history, please try to get your hands on the early episodes of *Foyle's War*, centred on the experiences of a police officer in the coastal town of Hastings between 1939 and 1945. The early episodes are instructive and tells us that evaders, shirkers and even fifth columnists aren't something uniquely Indian. Decency and bravery always have to rub shoulders with ignominy.■



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QUARANTINE NOTEBOOK

WHATSAPP RESOLUTIONS

XX has added you, read the Whatsapp message. A group had just been formed for the first time of residents in our housing society. That it wasn't by the managing committee became apparent when a message soon arrived that the secretary had also been added. One man left, because there is always one man who has a thing against Whatsapp groups. One joke was forwarded. Then came the complaint. 'Water in one wing is over'. 'Here too no water'. 'It is becoming a frequent occurrence'. 'The workers (who are retiling the premises) must be taking it'. 'It is escalating' 'Can we stop the work until corona lockdown?' (Secretary: 'Work has been stopped. And when it begins again, water will be used from outside'). *Palms in obeisance emoji*. 'Since we have been asked to maintain three dustbins, can the man who takes the garbage use two drums?'

—Madhavankutty Pillai

SIREN'S ECHO

As spring gives way to summer, the whirr of the fan is a constant companion punctuated by beeping mobiles, the pinging of WhatsApp messages and familial and comforting voices. Working from home is a feast for the ears. The doorbells have become infrequent. That means no garbage disposal, no newspapers, no couriers—and no going out. I was rudely awakened by the hooting siren of an ambulance at high noon on March 22nd. Only the next day did I learn that a neighbour who had come in from the UK recently tested posi-



tive for coronavirus and had to be ferried along with his family to a Government-approved quarantine facility. We're all holed in, fearing infection from any surface the neighbour or his family may have touched. The sound of the siren is still echoing within. We're all ears. —**Moinak Mitra**

WHAT'S THE CELEBRATION?

The Prime Minister had asked for the clapping of hands (in applause) at 5pm on Sunday, March 22nd. He didn't call for a carnival. But at five minutes to the determined hour, the world exploded in noise. Drums, bells, kitchen utensils, car horns, the hooter (that announces Delhi Jal Board's evening water supply), whistles and conch shells. I realised soon enough this wasn't my residential society alone. Applauding heroes in the battle against Covid-19 had been interpreted as a celebration. And maybe some thought they could chase away the virus, perhaps even kill it like a mosquito, by slapping

their palms together. Maybe they thought the coronavirus' run ends when it encounters cosmic cacophony? Looking out the window, I had the same premonition that others have had—even if the State appears to understand, the people still hadn't got it. Whither social distancing if you mingle and jingle?

-Sudeep Paul

A MOMENT OF DIGNITY

When I told N to not come from the next day her face was a mass of confusion. Yes, she knew about the virus. Yes, she knew it was very potent but what did that have to do with her coming in everyday to clean my home? More importantly, I will pay her but what about the other homes she goes to? Rent, ration, school fees. All of this tumbled out in the span of ten seconds even as I spoke to other home owners where she goes. Every household paid N her monthly salary two weeks in advance with nearly everyone asking her to call





them if she needed more. I wish I could say that few amongst us take our home help for granted or treat them like professionals but if we like to think of ourselves, the white collar workers, as the driving force of the Indian economy, then it is these silent worker bees who are our backbone. They make it possible for us to go out in our clean cars without worrying about unmade beds, dusty corners, unclean utensils and overflowing garbage bins. To treat them with more compassion and accord them dignity is the one lesson that I hope, we learn from this.

-Nikita Doval

ACNE-GEDDON

I opened my toilet cabinet the other day to discover a devastating truth. I had run out of acne cream. All that lay instead was a tube, embarrassingly flattened and rolled many times over. A tube of cream is not an essential item, but it can still be found in that one store which can never be shutthe pharmacy. And so for the last few days-braving infection and curfew, the occasional policeman with a suspicious gaze and neighbourhood vigilantes glaring menacingly from grilled windows -I have been stepping out trying to procure for myself a tube of acnemoist. I've already foregone workouts and haircuts. Whatever piece of history we are living through, I'd rather do it without my face breaking out in an vulgar display of adolescence. But all I hear in that one kilometre radius of pharmacy stores I visit is that the supply chains are disrupted and there's no cream to be had. "Can't you put

in a special request? It's urgent," I say once. The faces of at least ten kerchiefed or masked faces come to inquire about masks and handsanitizers turn to me, their eyes dripping with judgement. I've still not gotten my cream.

—Lhendup G Bhutia

THE EMPTYING

When the work from home plan kicked in, it seemed like a temporary shutting in the house. It also seemed sensible. With two elders at home I could not take a chance. But within a week, the world seems to have changed drastically. It began slowly. First, the stock of essential items thinned. But a friendly neighbourhood grocer kept the supplies flowing even at risk to himself and his family. Then, the helpers had to be asked to go as it was too risky for everyone. Finally, three days ago, news filtered out that there were four houses that were in self-isolation with members who had come from different countries. Two days ago, lockdown took another meaning: no one could enter the society and even going out became impossible. The local market had shut down and transport had ground to a halt. Now there is more silence than noise. The road is empty except for the occasional ambulance or the police vehicle. The sounds of the birds, once drowned in human and vehicular sounds, is clear.

-Siddharth Singh

AN EQUAL MUSIC

How do you overcome a crippling fear of confrontation and tell the neighbours to keep it down? Especially in the midst of a thoughtful communitarian response to a disease outbreak, and when your neighbours are six construction workers from Bihar stranded in the ghastly apartment building they finished putting up just before the Karnataka government pulled the switch. Social distancing, with their four-inch-thin walls and a compound wall separating us, offers little defence against the wave after monotonous wave of **Bhojpuri** music emanating from a seemingly innocuous

Bluetooth speaker. Two young men in lungi-banian smile sheepishly when I walk towards the south wall of my terrace. The music stops. I have interrupted a party, the first of many to come. Epidemics are not kind to migrants, and these men are glad to have a roof over their heads, enough food, and one another-we can't get paid for work we are not doing, they tell me. Ten minutes later, I find myself Shazaming Khesari Lal Yadav. When the apocalypse is over, the Bhojpuri earworm will remain. And so will Chhapra Mein Chhath Manayenge, automatically added to my Apple Music library, where it will rub shoulders with Ella Fitzgerald's bebop, saunter past Lalgudi Jayaraman's thillanas and possibly pip some of the greatest blues guitar solos to the top of the playlist.

-V Shoba

OPENINGS

NOTEBOOK

Baby Doll Interrupted

UMBAI HIGH SOCIETY had perfected the art of social distancing even before coronavirus made it mandatory. Whether it was diamantaire Nirav Modi or the HDIL's Sunny and Anu Dewan, they were quick to drop them, at least publicly, once the troubles began. The emojis and exclamation marks on Instagram posts disappeared almost as quickly as friendships did in the real world. Kanika Kapoor, who first made an impact in Bollywood as the voice of Sunny Leone in the hit song Baby Dollin 2014, is the latest in a long line of luxe ladies who finds herself socially ostracised in the literal and metaphorical sense. With a complaint against her for allegedly evading a coronavirus test on landing in India from London, and evidence of attending at least four parties in two days while the virus was incubating, she has become the embodiment of entitlement. It's not helped by her demands for gluten-free food, among other things, while in quarantine at Lucknow's Sanjay Gandhi PGIMS, causing the administration to admonish her for starry tantrums.

But she of the alabaster skin and the perfectly sculpted pout is a story of a makeover interrupted. Born into one of Lucknow's established families, her father Rajeev Kapoor,

alumnus of Scindia School, is a low-profile but well-networked manufacturer of electrical equipment. Growing up in a Mahanagar mansion in a conservative joint family, she was sent to Loreto Convent and studied music with Pandit Ganesh Prasad Mishra of the Banaras Gharana. A child artiste with All India Radio, she also performed with bhajan singer Anup Jalota. Married at 18 to Raj Chandok, the general practitioner son of two doctors who had set up a thriving business of clinics in northwest London, Kanika spent much of the next 15 years being mother (to three children), arm candy to Chandok at diaspora parties, and high spender on luxury labels that got her gigs as hostess for a party at the Pucci store in London.

Kanika beecame part of the Mumbai-London set that included fellow party pretties Nandita Mahtani, Anusuya Mahtani Hinduja, Prerna Goel and Natasha Poonawalla, with occasional invites from Simran Kanwar, whose husband Neeraj runs Apollo Tyres, and Lebanese model Daniella Semaan, whose husband is football star Cesc Fàbregas

"I've been that girl, spent a lot of time lunching and bitching 10 years ago, being judgemental about people, and maybe, going through some jealousy," she has said.

But a messy divorce followed, after which she reinvented herself as a singer, single mother and survivor of an abusive marriage. Dropping the surname as she segued into a career singing songs for movies such as *Happy New Year* (2014), *Dilwale* (2015) and *Udta Punjab* (2016), she also became part of the Mumbai-London set that included fellow party pretties Nandita Mahtani, Anusuya Mahtani Hinduja, Prerna Goel and Natasha Poonawalla, with occasional invites from Simran Kanwar, whose husband Neeraj runs Apollo Tyres, and Lebanese model Daniella Semaan, whose husband is football star Cesc Fàbregas. If that is a closed circle, the Lucknow elite she belongs to is an even tinier world, and includes politicians, bureaucrats, judges, royals and socialites.

Nowhere was it more in evidence than in the four functions she attended on March 15th and 16th. She accompanied her father to a Holi meet of Scindia School Old Boys' Association hosted by the sitting Lok Ayukta of Uttar Pradesh Justice Sanjay Misra. She went to another party hosted by Adil Ahmad, an interior designer favoured by royals and nephew of former

Congress/BSP/SP MP Akbar Ahmed, which had a cross-section of the interconnected world of India's bold face names—Vasundhara Raje Scindia and her son, her niece's sister-in-law, two princesses from the erstwhile royal house of Rampur, a former journalist who wrote a book which included their cuisine and her husband, former Congress MP Jitin Prasada, as well Uttar Pradesh Health Minister Jai Pratap Singh.

Gaurav Prakash, who comes from a similarly privileged family of Lucknow, that runs the well-regarded Universal Booksellers, has known Kanika and her family for three decades and seen her transformation from schoolgirl to celebrity. "She has gone through a lot of ups and downs, but has always been very respectful



Kanika Kapoor

and careful. Do you think she would knowingly infect her family and friends, and her 92-year-old grandmother she is so close to? Yes, she should have self-quarantined but to make it a criminal case is out of proportion," he adds. He was at one of the parties and is now in self-quarantine as well.

There was another function held by Rajya Sabha MP and Lucknow's top builder Sanjay Seth. On March 13th, there was an event by Kanika's maternal uncle in Kanpur. Lucknowbased veteran journalist Sharat Pradhan says it is easy to put the blame on her and charge her for spreading the disease, but what needs to be questioned is the failure of airport authorities in Mumbai and Lucknow to check on her upon entry.

Like many in the glamour industry, Kanika was in the process of remaking herself as a brand. She had hired a premier public relations agency in Mumbai which was always proposing her name for glossy magazine covers and award nights. She had also started a House of Chikankari designer brand, which she often modelled herself. In the age of social media, her communication was on point. Photos with designers Christian Louboutin and the late Karl Lagerfeld, tagging other famous women (a great way to multiply followers and become an 'influencer') and short Instagram videos receiving gifts like the latest Apple phone or wearing an especially designed Manisha Malhotra sari. Oh, and yes, lots of picture perfect shots of the playgrounds of the rich and famous like St Tropez and Clarence House (for the 2019 Animal Ball where she met Prince Charles wearing an Anita Dongre elephant mask). Prince Charles was quite a favourite photo-op subject for Kanika, whose pictures with him at another Clarence House party in 2015 have gone viral in the truest sense, now that both have tested positive for coronavirus. The caption? Who infected whom?

Kanika has called herself a "hardworking girl." Indeed, she is. She sang at the Wembley Stadium at the reception for Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2015. She was a judge in Star Plus' reality show *The Voice* in 2019. In between, she has sung many chartbusters with a particular bent towards what can only be described as techno-Punjabi and indulged in some exaggerated self-promotion, including the claim that she was muse for designers Emilio Pucci and Franco Moschino—difficult since the former died in 1992, and the latter in 1994.

Reinventions are brutal but none is more exacting than in the Mumbai film industry where women have to work that much harder to retain their marketability. Kanika has often spoken of "vicious rumours" about her single status and loose talk about a "sugar daddy" but has endured them as the price for her dreams coming true. The words to Kanika's *Baby Doll* may well describe the life she has lived so far: *Yeh duniya pittal di*, *Baby Doll main sone di*(roughly translated: as this world is made of brass but Baby Doll is all gold).

By KAVEREE BAMZAI

PORTRAIT • SHIVRAJ SINGH CHOUHAN

THE COMMON TOUCH

Behind his amiable personality is a sharp political mind that patiently waits for the right opportunity

F CHIEF MINISTER Shivraj Singh Chouhan and Bollywood star Salman Khan go to an interior district of Madhya Pradesh together, there may be more people going after the politician, says one of his former aides. Whether this is an exaggeration could be a matter of speculation. The BJP leader's popularity in the state stems not from any semblance to the flamboyant actor's personality, but the stark contrast to it.

It was a Salman Khan film that Chouhan cited while trying to raise the dampened spirits of his supporters and party workers in Budhni, his Assembly seat, after the BJP lost the state elections in December 2018. "Nobody should worry what will happen. I am there...Tiger *abhi zinda hai* (tiger is still alive)." At that time, neither Chouhan nor his audience may have known that he would return as chief minister in 15 months.

After his three successive terms, when the BJP lost the state Assembly election in 2018 by a whisker (but with more votes than the Congress), Chouhan, exhibiting his characteristic humility, took sole responsibility for it. He immediately changed his Twitter tag line from Chief Minister to 'The Common Man of Madhya Pradesh', a description that he cherishes, knowing well that it endears him to the people of the state, his political turf. He made it very clear that his political ambitions were limited to the state.

At Kamal Nath's swearing-in ceremony, Chouhan stole the show, his smile masking indignation, if any, at the Congress, which had managed to deny him a fourth term by a margin of just five seats in a 230-strong Assembly. He held up his rival's hands on his left and those of Jyotiraditya Scindia, then a Congress leader who had lost the race for the chief minister's post, on his right. Today, with Scindia by his side along with 22 of his supporters who have switched sides from the Congress to the BJP, 61-year-

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH



old Chouhan is back in the saddle, after a low-profile oath-taking at the Raj Bhavan, amidst staff wearing masks, and most of the country shut down in the fight against the spread of the coronavirus. It is also one of the first challenges he faces, as he braces for the crucial by-elections in the state, where every seat counts in the fragile number game. In his earlier three terms, Chouhan has enjoyed a comfortable majority in the Assembly.

The day Scindia joined the BJP in Delhi, Chouhan tweeted: 'Swagat hai Maharaj, Sath hai Shivraj.' The rhyming tweet refers to Scindia's royal family background, juxtaposing his own modest background. For Chouhan, patience, another of his traits, has always paid off. After the BIP lost, winning 109 seats against the Congress' 114, Chouhan, a party general secretary over 15 years ago, was appointed national vice president. He accepted his new role but continued to focus on state politics. His aide recalls the days of the Vajpayee regime in 1999, when Chouhan, by then a four-time MP, was told that he would be part of the council of ministers but a day later got a call from Pramod Mahajan, then a highprofile BJP leader, that he would not be part of the Government. He accepted it.

When the BJP swept the state in 2003, Chouhan lost the Assembly election from Raghogarh to Congress' Digvijaya Singh, the then Chief Minister. In November 2005, when he was the party's state chief, he contested a by-election from Budhni and won, and became Chief Minister. His popularity grew with each state election. An OBC face, he reached out to all, cutting across caste, class and religious identities. He focused on the uplift of women, a section forming about 50 per cent of the population, rolling out schemes to benefit girl students and women. He came to be known as *'mamaji*' (maternal uncle).

Those who have worked with him say he has an eye for detail and a sharp memory. An astute politician, his simple, soft-spoken demeanour makes people trust him. Even allegations of his links with the multi-crore Vyapam scam, involving entrance exams, hardly dented his popularity. The anti-incumbency and disillusionment with his government were too faint to give the Congress an invincible majority. It's his ability to maintain cordial relations with everyone that Chouhan will need most now, with the new foes-turned-friends likely to have high expectations. But the immediate task is containing the coronavirus in the state, where the number of cases had touched 14 by March 26th.

By AMITA SHAH

ANGLE



LETTER OVER SPIRIT

What the first day blocking of deliveries says about decision-making during emergencies

By MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI

HE FIRST DAY after the lockdown, the police were beating up online delivery personnel. In Mumbai, where the curfew had already been in force for a couple of days, the chief minister himself had come on television to announce that these services were permitted. Government notifications that went to all its departments reaffirmed it. And yet, in every city that did likewise, enforcement of the curfew was brutal and total without regard to the exemptions. The police were made to temper themselves later but the question remains of the glitch in the process that added to the panic. Why should it have taken a few days extra to understand simple instructions spelled in black and white?

One reason is that when curfew is imposed, there is a standard template for the police and they only followed their conditioning. Having usually only been in this mode for law and order situations like riots, they didn't know how else to behave. But there is another element at play, which spills over to many different sections of government in times like these. Emergencies make everything simple. Up to the point where it becomes clear that a lockdown is necessary, there is doubt on fallouts and consequences. But once the decision is taken, then all that remains is action and that leads to efficiency. India only gets a taste of it in extreme circumstances. It was not by coincidence that Indira Gandhi's Emergency is still being remembered for trains running

on time for the first time and it was not by coercion alone.

Emergencies, especially one related to a pandemic like the present one, are in one sense Darwinian, the most unfit are the first to pay the price. It is the lives of the old and the ailing that are now being claimed by the disease. When the lockdown ends, this will be the norm for businesses. Those that are weakest, burdened by loans whose interests they cannot pay, will be the first to fold. Those with plenty of reserve cash or who have had a line of investment will survive. Some excesses that should have always been trimmed will be also done because there is no option. For example, Tihar jail is planning to release 1,500 convicts and 1,500 undertrials because it is overcrowded. These prisoners will be the ones least deserving of being in prison. If jails are overcrowded beyond capacity, wouldn't it make sense to do it even otherwise too? Emergencies make it easier for lazy bureaucracies to take decisions.

The first day after the lockdown, police guarding the borders between states had either of two decisions to take when trucks loaded with essential supplies arrived. One, to appreciate the underlying idea of the lockdown which is to stop transmission, a lorry carrying a driver and his helper shouldn't pose a hazard is common sense. Their second alternative was to stop the lorry because they didn't have *specific* orders to let one particular lorry through. They chose that option. Emergencies make it easier to take decisions but often not the right ones. IDEAS



RACISM

As the number of Covid-19 cases rise across the country, there appears to have been a marked increase in the number of attacks and insults heaped on individuals from the Northeastern states living in metro cities. There are several photos and videos of many of them online being spat upon, attacked and being called names. Some have reportedly been told to vacate their homes by their landlords. These attacks don't really have much to do with the ignorance of believing those from the Northeast hail from China as is commonly believed, or that they are somehow carriers of the virus. Many of the recent encounters have occurred in Delhi and Kolkata, cities which have always had (compared to other cities) fairly large numbers of people from the Northeast. As the fear of the 'outsider' grows with the spread of the pandemic, it is just that many individuals find a more social nod to vent out deep-seated prejudices and racist attitudes towards others.

WORD'S WORTH

Racism is a physical experience TA-NEHISI COATES AMERICAN WRITER



By Bibek Debroy

The Useful Foe A learned enemy is superior to an ignorant friend

N THE COURSE of instructing Yudhishthira, this is a story Bhishma told him. This is a story from the *Mahabharata*, although it sounds like one from *Panchatantra* or *Hitopadesha*.

In a great forest, there was an extremely large banyan tree. It was covered with creepers and was frequented by large numbers of diverse birds. Its trunks were like clouds and it offered cool and pleasant shade. Many predatory animals lived there, with enmity towards each other. There was a hole at the root of the tree and an immensely wise rat named Palita lived there. A cat named Lomasha happily dwelt in the branches, destroying the lives of the birds. Every day, when the sun went down, a Chandala arrived there. He would spread out nets made of sinews there. Having done this, he would return cheerfully to his home and sleep, waiting for night to be over and for it to be morning. Every night, a large number of animals were always killed there. On one occasion, the cat was careless and got trapped. At that time, the immensely wise Palita got to know that the enemy, who was always trying to kill it, had got trapped. It wandered around, without any fear at all. As it roamed around in that forest, it looked for some food and saw the meat left by the Chandala as bait. It climbed up there and began to devour the meat. It laughed, as it stood above the enemy who had got trapped. While it was engaged with the meat, it happened to look up and saw that another enemy had arrived, terrible in appearance. This was an agile mongoose named Harika and its eyes were coppery red. Having smelt the rat, it had swiftly arrived there. It stood on the ground and raised its face upwards, licking its lips at the prospect of a meal. The rat saw another enemy on a branch, one that lived in a hole in the trunk. This was an owl named Chandraka. Its beak was sharp and it roamed around during the night. It was within the reach of both the mongoose and the owl.

In that situation, confronted with that great danger, Palita began to think. 'Death has presented itself and this is a catastrophe. There is danger from every side. What should I do? There are many difficulties and there is one chance in one hundred of my remaining alive. There is no doubt that disaster confronts me from every direction. If I descend on the ground, the mongoose will violently seize me. If I remain here, the owl will get me, or the cat, after it has severed the noose. However, a person who is wise should not be confused. As long as I breathe, I must try to remain alive. Those who are intelligent and wise are not scared when they face a danger or a great destruction of prosperity. At the moment, I do not see any means of attaining the objective other than the cat. That animal confronts a disaster and I can do him great service. How else can I remain alive now? There are three enemies who are after me. Therefore, I must resort to my enemy, the cat. I have already made up my mind about how I am going to deceive these enemies. The worst of my enemies now faces this worst of hardships. If it is possible, perhaps this fool can be made to understand where his best interests lie. Given this difficulty, perhaps it may be made to have an alliance with me. If one is beset by enemies and if one wishes to save one's life in the midst of a hardship, the preceptors have said that one must have an alliance with a stronger person. A learned enemy is superior to a stupid friend. The prospect of my remaining alive is based on my enemy, the cat. Let me explain to it the means whereby it can save itself. Perhaps this enemy of mine is intelligent.'

The rat spoke these conciliatory words to the cat. 'O cat! Are you still alive? I am speaking these affectionate words to you. I wish that you should remain alive. That is best for both of us. O amiable one! You will remain alive, as you used to do earlier. I will save you and even give up my life for your sake. A way to save ourselves completely has presented itself before me. Through that, I am capable of saving you and also ensuring the best for me. Use your intelligence to reflect about the means I will suggest. This is good for you, good for me, and best for both of us. The mongoose and the owl are wicked in their intelligence. O cat! As long as they do not attack me, I am fine. But the

mongoose and the owl with the darting eyes are both glancing towards me. As I am clinging to the branch of this tree, I am becoming extremely anxious. If one treads seven steps together, virtuous people become friends. You are learned. We have lived together. I will act so that you have no fear from death. O cat! Without me, you are incapable of severing this noose. If you do not injure me, I will sever this noose. You live at the top of the tree and I dwell at the root. Both of us have lived in this tree for a long time. All this is known to you. Someone who does not trust anyone and someone who trusts a person who should not be trusted—the learned say that these two are always anxious in their minds and should not be praised. Let the friendship between us increase and let this be an

agreement between two virtuous ones. The learned do not praise something that is done after the time for it is over. I desire that you should remain alive. You desire that I should remain alive. If someone wishes to cross a deep and great river with a piece of wood, the wood takes him across, and he takes the wood across too. If we act together in this way, our safety will be certain. I will save you and you will save me.'

Having said this, Palita was impatient because time was being lost and it looked on, hoping that the reasoning would be accepted. Hearing these words, the cat, the learned enemy. replied in words that were full of reasoning. It was intelligent and could speak well. Looking towards its own situation, it honoured

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH



If one is beset by enemies and if one wishes to save one's life in the midst of a hardship, one must have an alliance with a stronger person

the rat and applauded its speech. Its teeth and claws were sharp and its eyes were like lapis lazuli. Lomasha, the cat, gently looked towards the rat and said, 'O amiable one! I am delighted that you desire I should remain alive. If you know what is desirable, do it without any reflection. I am gravely afflicted, but you are in a situation that is direr still. Since both of us face difficulties, let us have an alliance.

There is no need to think. The time has come. Let us act so that we can ensure our success. If you free me from this difficulty, I will not forget what you have done. I have cast aside my pride and have become devoted to you. I will follow your instructions. I have sought refuge with you.'

When the cat said this, Palita spoke again. 'The generous words that you have spoken are not unusual for someone in your situation. You know my ways. Listen to my words, which are for your benefit. The mongoose is giving me great fear and I will crouch under your body. Save me and do not kill me. I am capable of saving you. Also save me from the owl. That inferior one is also seeking to get at me. O friend! I will sever your noose. I am swearing this truthfully.'

Welcoming Palita, the cat, tied to it by a bond of

friendship, thought about it patiently. Happily, it said, 'Come swiftly. You are a friend whom I love like mv own life. O wise one! Through your favours, I will quickly get my life back. I will do whatever I can for you. I will do whatever you order me to. O friend! We must have an alliance. Once I have been freed from this danger, with my large number of friends and relatives, I will do all the deeds that are for your benefit and bring you pleasure. Once I have been freed from this hardship, I will become yours. I will do whatever brings you pleasure. I am capable of paying you back.'

Having persuaded the cat that this was in its own interests, the rat was reassured that the objective could indeed be achieved. Reassured by the intelligent cat, the

rat fearlessly crouched under the cat's chest, as if it was in the lap of a father or a mother. The rat was curled up under the cat's body. On seeing this, the mongoose and the owl lost all hope and returned to their homes. Palita was curled up there.

In the next column, we will find out what happened to Lomasha and Palita.

IN THE ARENA Siddharth Singh Modi's Lockdown

TNDIAN PRIME MINISTERS L are not known for frivolity with air time. When Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressed the country for a second time in less than a week, anxiety was palpable in the hours before his address. In the event, some had anticipated his message. The volunteerism that is the hallmark of his public policy efforts from the Swachh Bharat campaign onward was flagging in spirit during the current viral outbreak crisis.

In the event, Modi announced a total lockdown for 21 days, one that was to be enforced strictly. His 'janata curfew' experiment, he said, had garnered widespread public support but there were many people who did not heed it. In a pandemic where the virus is spreading at terrific speed, even a handful of violators could undo the efforts of many millions.

Since then a vigorous debate has ensued on social media and in the press: were there options other than imposing a drastic lockdown? Will India end up saving its people but killing its economy? These are important questions that have plausible, and realistic, answers but ones that have been drowned under partisan squabble.

There is sufficient data from across the world now to show that the coronavirus spreads at a very rapid pace. Very often, the number of infected persons doubles in three days. In countries where this H speed has been brought down, exceptional measures have been necessary. China, where the virus originated, imposed a very severe

ations

lockdown after hiding the nature of the virus for months. Ultimately, the number of infected persons fell to near-zero. In South Korea, it was an extraordinary testing effort, involving more than 350,000 tests across the country, among the highest in per capita terms in the world.

India does not fall in either category: it lacks the political will to impose a Chinese solution and it does not have the means to ramp up testing along South Korean lines. Juxtaposed with the number of people living in India and the very high population density, a catastrophe was only a matter of time. In the event, Modi chose a compromise of sorts: a limitedperiod lockdown.

This has, for obvious reasons, not gone down well with a section of the intellectual class. The refrain now is that he could very well end up killing the OSEL Indian economy. Interestingly, just days before, the same class was hyperventilating about the absence of a lockdown. Goes without saying, this is an elite perspective where the 'economy' matters more than human lives. There will undoubtedly be a severe economic contraction in terms of consumption and investment. But that begs the question: what is an economy? If there are no people left, consumption and investment are meaningless.

> Modi has quietly reaffirmed a classic political science truth: the first duty of a state is protecting the life of its people. The liberal answer had upended this proposition by adding livelihood—food,

incomes, etcetera-to the matrix and Modi is being criticised from the latter perspective. But even as the lockdown was being announced, state governments were busy finishing details of a protective package for the poorest of the poor. Now a similar, India-wide, package is expected from the Union Government.

There remains the pressing question of civil liberties that many intellectuals have raised. The fear being that a crisis will be used to push through draconian legislation curbing these vital freedoms. A simple riposte is sufficient: Parliament is not in session and an ordinance to curb freedoms is hard to imagine. But if a difficult situation arises—say some kind of social unrest—then there are ample administrative powers available with governments.

Where there is ground for valid criticism it is in the rather poor initial coordination between different authorities to permit movement of essential goods and the provision of essential services. Planning for exigencies-an art the British colonial authorities had bequeathed to their democratic Indian successors—has been lost over time. The developmental streak of Indian governments never had any imagination for necessary action during situations like the current pandemic. Here is where the Prime Minister ought to put his energies: reinventing the administrative state that has withered away in India.

A Prime Minister is as efficient as his government machinery will allow him to be. In that sense, Modi picked a pragmatic option out of a rather thin slate of choices he had. That is hard for many to understand.



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WHISPERER Jayanta Ghosal

SETTING THE EXAMPLE

When some officials asked Prime Minister Narendra Modi if he would like to see the state of hospitals, something like an AIIMS' visit, his reply was an emphatic no. He felt that if he went, there would immediately be a crowd, which meant both danger and inconvenience. Modi himself is maintaining the lakshman rekha he asked the country to follow and is working mainly from his residence. He is talking to several heads of states, video conferencing with ministers and officials. Some chief ministers are continuing their visits to check on healthcare arrangements but Modi's advice to them is to stay at home and work.

NO

CAA



JAIL PANIC

The VIP prisoners are panicking. Yes Bank founder Rana Kapoor has requested both the Government and court that he be allowed self-isolation at home because of the threat of infection. But the problem for Kapoor and other such VIPs may be that in courts the judges won't be there for bail hearings. Meanwhile, the Government wants the VIPs to remain where they are.



The Shaheen Bagh protests were called off and now the venue is empty. The area has seen no traffic movement over the past few days. Ironically, many were demanding that the protest site be shifted because of the blocking of traffic. For the Modi Government, it is a relief that it could be stopped finally, given that the potestors were adamant about staying put. In any case, the last few days had seen barely three to four people there. All the old women who were at the forefront of the agitation had already left.

Working Together

The novel coronavirus has neutralised political rivalries between Mamata Banerjee and the BJP for the time being. The Centre-state coordination is going on rather well to meet the crisis. Banerjee had sent a letter to Railway Minister Piyush Goyal suggesting the stoppage of trains, which might have had an influence on his eventual decision. On the supply of medicines, too, there is no complaint from the state. While the CPM and the state Congress were criticising the Centre, Banerjee seemed clear about placing human lives above politics.

Talk Less

Some BJP and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh leaders coronavirus is said to have upset the Prime Minister. West Bengal BJP state president Dilip Ghosh was one of those making such claims. The buzz is that Home Minister Amit shah called and asked him to exercise restraint. Another BJP Lok Sabha Member of Parliament, actress Locket Chatterjee, started a counter-campaign that cow urine is no medicine for the disease.

Locked in Delhi

With the sudden lockdown, many MPs who could not return to their states, are now captive in Delhi. Trinamool Congress leader Derek O'Brien had been in Lucknow at the party where singer Kanika Kapoor, later discovered to be Covid-19 positive, was also present. Then O'Brien came to Delhi and the lockdown began. So he was stuck in his South Avenue bungalow. Congress leader Deepender Singh Hooda is also in Delhi. Haryana, his home state, isn't far but he can't go there. Some Maharashtra and Kerala MPs will also have to be in Delhi until the lockdown is over.

Plan Change

Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath cancelled the mega event to mark the beginning of the construction of the Ram temple in Ayodhya. The plan had been for hundreds and thousands of people to come to the banks of the river Sarayu on the eve of Navratri to participate. Instead, Adityanath performed a token puja in a temporary temple where his staff were asked to not accompany him so as to prevent crowding.

PATIENCE REWARDED

amal Nath has departed as Madhya Pradesh (MP) Chief Minister and Shivraj Singh Chouhan has returned without much fanfare. But that he has scored a huge political victory is not in doubt. After the BJP lost MP, there was a move to bring Chouhan to the national organisation in Delhi. But he declined. Then there were rumours that he may be made a Central minister but he was said not to be interested in that either. After 13 years as Chief Minister, he wanted to remain connected to his political roots. Then it was said he would be made a Rajya Sabha member. That was when this sudden development catapulted him to the Chief Minister's chair again. There were several names in contention but a majority of MLAs supported him. It had been a test of patience for Chouhan but he has no time to enjoy the moment. He is completely immersed in containing Covid-19.

Book Time

Social distancing has led to lifestyle changes for politicians. In West Bengal, education minister Partha Chatterjee has stopped watching news channels. He is enjoying having lunches with his mother and brother after a long time. He has also started writing a book on the history of Raj Bhavan, the residence of the West Bengal governor. He will touch upon the role of past governors in the book. Some wonder if the literary project is at the behest of his leader Mamata Banerjee, given her strained relationship with the present governor. Nothing like a book on governors to show him in poor light, perhaps?

YOU SHALL DWELL ALONE...

The passion and unrequited love of Covid-19



OPEN ESSAY



By VINAY LAL

HE SINGULAR INELUCTABLE fact about the worldwide political, social and cultural response to the coronavirus disease, officially designated as COVID-19 by the World Health Organization (WHO), is that *it is utterly without precedent in the experience of any living person.* Panic barely begins to describe the altogether extraordinary steps that states, local governments, municipal authorities, communities, corporations and other entities have been taking in nearly every country to halt the menacing global advance of the coronavirus and arrest the trainwreck it has left behind in bringing much of the machinery of the world to a grinding halt. Social history has often been written around 'panics', varying immensely with respect to their intensity, span of time, geographical spread and consequences. This would scarcely be the first time that, even in affluent countries such as the US, Britain and France, store shelves are being emptied out at a frenzied pace and that people are engaged in apocalyptic shopping. Nor is the coronavirus the first epidemic, or even pandemic, of modern times. It was in the

late 1980s that the world awoke to something called acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), a lethal health condition caused by infections resulting from the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). Over 32 million people worldwide have died from AIDS in the last 40 odd years: however, even as it induced something of a scare, the vast majority felt distant from the calamity as it appeared to afflict mainly gay men and others engaged in high-risk sexual behaviour. Indeed, among many stern adherents of religious beliefs, the prevalent view was that AIDS was merely a sign from God that the sinful could not be absolved of their wrongdoings.

There have been many other viral panics as well: some, such as Ebola, taking its name from the Ebola river in the Democratic Republic of Congo where the disease first surfaced in 1976, before reappearing in a more deadly form in 2013-2016 and taking on the proportions of an epidemic as it spread to several countries in West Africa, faded from the world's attention once it was firmly established that it was not going to jump continents. The toll of some 11,300 lives, all but one within Africa, was not going to unduly agitate a world that, deeply infested by racism, is habituated to the idea that Africa is largely a 'failed continent'. Then in 2003 there was SARS, or severe acute respiratory syndrome, a viral respiratory disease caused by a virus that was transmitted via civets from bats to humans. The present coronavirus is likewise of zoonotic origin, and its kinship to SARS is signified by the fact that it is also known to the medical world as SARS-CoV-2. Though the fatality rate of SARS at 9.8 per cent is much higher than that of COVID-19, which is in the neighborhood of 2.5-3.4 per cent, it remained confined largely to mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Vietnam and Singapore, besides affecting a cluster of people in Toronto. Only a little more than 8,000 people were infected and fewer than 800 died: it had become to most of the world, outside East and Southeast Asia, where SARS may well have actuated a higher level of preparedness as the success of Singapore and Taiwan in containing the COVID-19 seems to suggest, a faint memory shortly after it fizzled out six months after its first appearance.

There is nothing akin in living memory to the unfolding narrative of COVID-19 and it portends something substantially at variance from ordinary human experience. Humankind is accustomed to catastrophes of much greater dimensions: we have only to recall that about 40 million people were killed in World War I and at least twice as many in World War II. The 14,000 odd deaths that have been claimed by COVID-19 as of present are nothing more than a footnote in the statistical register of preternatural death, though one might perhaps argue that the lurid numbers now being mentioned as the likely infection rate and consequent fatality rate in various demographic constituencies around the world should be enough to warrant the view that COVID-19 is no laughing matter. In her characteristically sober manner, German Chancellor Angela Merkel warned her fellow Germans that 70 per cent of the country's 83 million people might get infected. Merkel may be disliked by some, but she is respected by many more, and her blunt assessment, along with an equally ominous advisory from the Imperial College London, was sufficient to awaken the US to the impending threat. The US federal agency, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), has since produced statistical models suggesting that if efforts at

mitigation are not immediately taken, 160-210 million Americans could contract COVID-19, and in the worst-case scenario 1.7 million Americans might succumb to the disease.

But it is still something else that makes COVID-19 singular, distinct, novel and quite possibly sinister in our experience of the last 100 years. COVID-19 was first reported from Wuhan, in China's Hubei Province, which has a population just short of 60 million, on December 31st, 2019. That report generated little or no alarm; the first death was announced 10 days later. Unbeknownst to the world, Wuhan was in the throes of an outbreak, and some more days would elapse before China sought to put into place stringent, and most would say draconian, measures to mitigate the spread of the virus. On January 23rd, the New York Times, while describing Wuhan as the 'epicenter for a viral outbreak that is worrying the world', nevertheless felt charitable enough to furnish a sketch of a city of 'steel, cars and spicy noodles' that embodied 'the country's surge from grinding poverty to industrial powerhouse'. That same morning, the Chinese authorities issued a notice in the early hours announcing the closure of all transport services in Wuhan, which with a population of 11 million is the largest city of Hubei province. By the end of the following day, nearly the entire province had been sealed off. Further orders on February 13th and 20th shut down all non-essential services, including schools, and a complete cordon sanitaire had been placed around a province with as many people as Italy, which has now acquired the unwelcome distinction of becoming the site of the largest outbreak.

What has transpired in Italy has perhaps been even more dramatic. At the end of January, only three cases had been detected in Italy, of which two were Chinese tourists. The patients were isolated and Italy moved to halt flights from China: Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte felt emboldened enough to declare to the world on January 31st, 'The system of prevention put into place by Italy is the most rigorous in Europe.' Nero fiddled while Rome burnt, it is said. The Italian Prime Minister's only crime may have been complacence: while he was waxing eloquent on the competence of Italian authorities, an attribute which sits on them as water on a duck, the disease was slowly working its way through the population—undetected, unheralded, unheeded. Until nearly the end of the third week of February there appeared to be only a handful of cases; then, within days, these skyrocketed. The Coen Brothers have earned a name for themselves with their neo-Western crime psychodrama, No Country for Old Men(2007); but Italy, notwithstanding all the romantic associations that it evokes, is, to exaggerate but moderately, only a country of old men (and women). It has a negative fertility rate and a declining population; 23 per cent of its population is 65 years or older and it has the second-oldest population in the world. So what, one might say, except that the coronavirus gorges on the elderly, even as it does not spare the young. Forty per cent of nearly 5,500 Italians who have been felled by COVID-19 are over 80 years old and around 60,000 people are infected; at least a few Italian doctors have been candid enough to admit, as desperation mounts and hospital beds become scarce, that they have

had to practice triage. If and when the dust from all this settles down, most societies will doubtless have to ask themselves if they were too quick to sacrifice the old to the young.

Grim as is this scenario of fatalities, Italy has come to present a still more forlorn picture in ways that presage the upheaval that the entire world is going through: first, the northern region of Lombardy was put under severe restrictions; then, on March oth, the entire country was placed under lockdown, shutting down everything except some essential services, pharmacies and select supermarkets. Italians are a garrulous, gregarious and gestural lot: as a commonly known joke has it, the Italian spy who was caught and survived brutal torture without squealing later explained he was unable to talk since his hands were tied behind his back. The timid pundits of political correctness are squeamish about such stereotypes, but Italy's citizens have now attempted to rise to the occasion by attempting to serenade each other behind the balconies where they endure their guarantine. (Our supposition should be that they can sing but not speak when their hands have been disabled.) Nevertheless, whatever the instinct of Italians to congregate and carouse, the country's streets and famous piazzas are now deserted, and the world's most popular tourist destination seems to have set the cue for the rest of the world. Over 50 countries, in recent days, have shut down universities, schools, amusement parks and museums and forbidden public gatherings-in many cases, for a month or longer. Most of Western Europe was headed in the direction of Italy 10 days ago; France and Spain quickly followed suit and imposed severe restrictions on the movement of people countrywide.



AP

In brief: all over the world, schools, universities and public and private institutions of every imaginable stripe—corporations, art galleries, government offices—have either ceased operations, or have, as in the case of schools and universities in affluent nations, moved to 'remote learning'. And therein lies the singularity of the global social response to COVID-19: at the height of wars, disasters and national emergencies, 'public life' never came to a standstill. Londoners descended into the Underground as their city was blitzed by the Luftwaffe, but they emerged into the sunlight—when there is sunlight in the city of drizzle—and headed straight for the pubs. The bars in Paris remained open at the height of the Nazi occupation. But the coronavirus has necessitated, or appears to require if the advice of scientists and epidemiologists is to be accepted, segregation and isolation *in extenso*.

'Segregation' and 'isolation': ugly words and scarcely conducive to furnishing anyone with hope. To soften the blow, the global mantra of the moment has been reduced to just this: social distancing. There is something bizarre in soccer or cricket games being played without fans, but even that charade was dismissed after a day or two; sporting events aside, there are more frequent public gatherings that in everyday life that are rather more unavoidable. Experts, as they are called, differed on the largest permissible size of a public gathering, some suggesting that no more than 50 people ought to be allowed to congregate while others capped it at as much as 500. But most of these discussions were in turn rendered obsolete by the pace with which the coronavirus has been stealthily advancing and devouring its prey: this too is one of the most exceptional fea-

A scene in Milan, Italy, March 12



SOCIAL ISOLATION MAY BE AN UNADULTERATED GOOD FROM THE STANDPOINT OF PUBLIC HEALTH OFFICIALS, BUT HOW DOES IT HELP TO PUT FOOD ON THE TABLE? THE CLOUD OF ECONOMIC INSECURITY HAS ALWAYS HUNG OVER THE POOR, AND IT WILL, WITH THE SPREAD OF THE CORONAVIRUS, ONLY GET DARKER AND LARGER tures of the contemporary discourse on the coronavirus, namely that most assessments of the day before seem as they were from yesteryears. The protocol has firmly moved to self-quarantine, mandated quarantine and social distancing. There may appear to be some precedence for all this in the protocols advocated by the WHO in 2009, when it designated the US-originated swine flu virus (HINI) outbreak a pandemic, but though 12,469 Americans were killed and some 285,000 people died worldwide from the virus, it never generated mass hysteria. Researchers established that it was no more severe than the seasonal flu in most countries; at its height, the European Union's health commissioner issued an advisory recommending that non-essential travel to the US and Mexico be postponed.

Indeed, for a precedent to the social response to COVID-19, we would have to turn to the influenza epidemic of 1918-1920. By dint of circumstances, it misleadingly came to be nicknamed the 'Spanish Flu': as it waxed and waned over the course of nearly three years, commencing in January 1918 in the midst of 'the Great War', Spain, which had remained neutral during the war, furnished the most reliable news to the rest of the world about the course of the epidemic. Oddly, in consequence, the flu became associated with Spain. The politics of how severe viral outbreaks are named is far from inconsequential, as the brazen attempt by American conservatives and most prominently Trump to designate COVID-19 as the 'Wuhan virus' or the 'China virus' amply demonstrates, but for the present 'the Spanish Flu'has a different tale to tell. Its death toll was staggering, somewhere, as recent research has established, in the vicinity of 50-100 million. Strangely, though this influenza pandemic killed more people worldwide than did World War I, it quickly became 'the forgotten pandemic'-and remains so. Norman Lowe's recent and widely used textbook that begins with World War I, weighing in at some 700 pages and unabashedly called Mastering Modern World History, has not as much as a mention of it. Nowhere did it strike as hard as in India, where poverty, disease, poor nutrition and the lack of preventive medical care rendered many-who can be differentiated along caste, class and gender lines-extremely vulnerable. Some 18 million Indians, about 7 per cent of the population of undivided India, are estimated to have died from this flu.

It is, thus far, not the mortality rate which makes the influenza pandemic of 1918-1920 the true predecessor of COVID-19. Modern medicine has doubtless progressed very far in the intervening century, but even then it was understood that the creeping invasion of the virus could only be halted by enforcing quarantine and social distancing. Holcombe Ingelby, Member of Parliament from Norfolk, UK, wrote to his son on October 26th, 1918: 'If any of your household get the 'flue', isolate the culprit & pass the food through the door! It is rather too deadly an edition of the scourge to treat it anything but seriously.' The Surgeon-General of the US, Rupert Blue, strongly advised local authorities to 'close all public gathering places if their community is threatened with the epidemic'. The mayor of Philadelphia, then the third largest city in the US, ignored the advice; the

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mayor of St Louis, then the fourth largest American city, shut down 'theaters, moving picture shows, schools, pool and billiard halls, Sunday schools, cabarets, lodges, societies, public funerals, open air meetings, dance halls and conventions until further notice'. The list of venues and institutions tells another worthy tale; what is more germane is that, at its peak, the fatality rate in Philadelphia was five times higher than in St Louis.

'Social distancing' may have been sound advice then as it is now, but ought we to leave the matter solely in the hands of epidemiologists, doctors and the politicians who are urging us to follow science wherever it takes us? There is some evidence that WHO may have been hasty in designating the H1N1 swine flu epidemic as a pandemic. In May 2009, four months into the outbreak of the virus, WHO was still considering whether it might elevate the epidemic to a pandemic. Its website noted that 'an enormous number of deaths and cases of the diseases' were critical to an understanding of what constitutes a 'pandemic', but when a reporter pointed out that the swine flu had also been described as mild strain of the H1N1 virus and that seasonal flus had often been deadlier, WHO removed the wording from its website. Subsequently, WHO was also criticised for being too receptive to the advice of experts who, it turned out, had ties with the pharmaceutical companies that had been working to produce a vaccine. In their reconstruction of how the swine flu outbreak came to be designated a pandemic, writers for the German magazine Der Spiegelobserved that 'influenza researchers' were 'elated' when WHO raised its warning about the epidemic to phase 5, the penultimate stage before it achieves the appellation of a pandemic. They quote the well-known scientific researcher, Markus Eickmann of the Phillips University of Marburg, "A pandemic—for virologists like us, it's like a solar eclipse in one's own country for astronomers."

Thomas Kuhn may have argued eloquently that scientists are overwhelmingly engaged in 'normal science' nearly all the time, but in the common imagination the history of science continues to be written mainly in the register of heroism, a narrative often swirling around intrepid and tireless researchers. But let us leave aside this strand of the argument and grant, following the evident success of China in containing COVID-19, that draconian measures, designed to achieve complete 'social distancing', are required to similarly halt the advance of the virus in the rest of the world. That China has this achievement to its credit is laudable, but every commentator is also alive to the fact that China is an authoritarian state where the writ of the party runs supreme. The state can commandeer resources at will and the penalties for defiance of the law are prohibitive for all but the human rights activist who is indifferent to his own fate or is willing to play the martyr. This is a country where a 1,000-bed hospital for those struck by the coronavirus in Wuhan was built from the ground up in 10 days—a matter of pride, no doubt, for every Chinese, just as the very idea is unfathomable to people in any other country, more particularly a liberal democracy where it may be months before even a green clearance permit is issued and where the state's right to eminent domain is constantly

challenged in courts. The implication, from the standpoint of mainstream public commentary, is unambiguously clear: 'social distancing' is more easily achievable in an authoritarian state than in a democracy, or where the notion of the collectivity prevails over the idea of the individual.

The exponential growth of cases, first in China, then in Italy and Spain and now in the US, would appear to warrant proportionately extreme remedies. That China appears to have succeeded in containing the coronavirus where Italy, with a population that is less than 5 per cent of the population of China and a death toll that is twice as much, has not would appear to vindicate the authoritarian state. The Chinese Communist Party's (CPC) main organ of opinion, People's Daily, unambiguously if not pompously endorsed this view with its declaration, quoted with fulsome approbation by no lesser a steward of capitalism than the Wall Street Journal, that 'China's battle against the epidemic showed that the CPC, as China's ruling party, is by far the political party with the strongest governance capability in human history.' Supposing that China, which no one would mistake for an open society, is now telling the truth, it is also the case that the self-congratulatory assessment by the CPC does not account for the various egregious errors committed by the CPC in the early days and its obfuscation of what was transpiring in the country until events compelled it to share some information with the world. The report by the WHO of February 28th, which details its joint mission with China to assess COVID-19's impact on the country, is more candid in suggesting that China's 'exceptional' success in 'containment measures has only been possible due to the deep commitment of the Chinese people to collective action in the face of this common threat'. Neither must one overlook the equally if not more exemplary illustration of the containment of COVID-19 by South Korea, which unlike China did not force tens of millions into guarantine and self-isolation and abduct or kill those reporting on COVID-19's rampage as it tore through Chinese society, but rather 'flattened the curve' by a sensible if rigorously conducted mix of education, mass testing, screening of airports at passengers, educational programmes and the mobilisation of the entire civil society.

H OWEVER, THE PROBABLE economic, sociocultural and political implications of the coronavirus, for democracies in particular, are critically important matters but require an extended treatment that is properly the subject for another essay. On the question of social distancing, it is also important to recognise that, as the essayist Rebecca Solnit has written in *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster* (2009), 'In the wake of an earthquake, a bombing or a major storm, most people are altruistic, urgently engaged in caring for themselves and those around them, strangers and neighbours as well as friends and loved ones.' Our instinct, in the face of emergencies and extreme trials of moral fortitude, is to band together, to seek and offer solidarity and forge communities of cohesion. One of the greater calamities of COVID-19 is that, con-

trary to what we are ordinarily called upon to do when confronted by a grave disaster, it demands of us that we isolate ourselves from others, build fences and forgo the often intimate and unspeakably beautiful pleasures of touch. The sick, moreover, revive with skilled and attentive medical care; they get even better when they are surrounded by family members and trusted friends. Most likely in every society known to us, the bond between grandparents and grandchildren resonates with sweetness and a love that is often more difficult for parents to lavish upon their children—more particularly when they are scrambling, as many people in the world are, to make ends meet or are merely frazzled by the often excruciatingly boring and numbing activities of everyday life. But the elderly have unequivocally been pronounced to be among those who are most vulnerable to COVID-19, and grandparents and grandchildren are being torn apart. The media is already full of surreal

THE POLITICS OF SELF-QUARANTINE IS THAT THE POOR, Recognising that They are wholly UNWANTED, HAVE Long been practised At Social Distancing. They are all but Invisible to most of Society and they Are generally QUARANTINED AT BIRTH

and morbid accounts of last rites of coronavirus victims where family members come clothed in full body suit and protective gear one by one to gaze upon the supine body of their loved one at a distance of six feet. Relationships that have endured the test of time will, one expects, survive the ordeal of 'social distancing', but any discussion of the phenomenon that fails to go beyond a clinical, medical or epidemiological view of the matter is woefully inadequate in its comprehension of human conduct and the burning need for sociality.

Once we are past this argument, the questions of self-quarantine, isolation and social distancing beg for further scrutiny. The practice of quarantine is first recorded in the Old Testament, in the Third Book of Moses called Leviticus: it allows us to think of Moses not only as the great lawgiver of the Jews, but as the community's first public health czar. The text describes in detail the social treatment of someone suffering from what the New English Bible renders as a 'malignant skin-disease' but the King James Version rather more plainly and appositely describes as leprosy. A person appearing with the symptoms associated with the disease is 'a leprous man, he is unclean: the priest shall pronounce him utterly unclean; his plague is in his head'. The leper is then enjoined to pronounce himself 'Unclean, unclean' and the text continues: 'All the days wherein the plague shall be in him he shall be defiled; he is unclean: he shall dwell alone; without the camp shall his habitation be'(14:44-46). The text is not without ambiguity: though the 'leprous man' is compelled to cry, 'Unclean, unclean', it is not altogether clear whether he was also forcibly removed or had to remove himself from the company of others—somewhat in the manner of what the US Citizenship and Immigration Service does, when, allowing

some to deport themselves from American shores rather than be forcibly deported, it gives all concerned parties the chimerical satisfaction of a democratic outcome by issuing an order of 'voluntary departure'.

The word 'quarantine', which is of mixed origins deriving both from Latin (quarentena) and French (quarenteine), itself lends further colour to the present practice: it signifies a place to which Jesus retreated and where he fasted for 40 days, as well as a period of 40 days set aside by Catholics for fasting or penance and, in later usage, a period of 40 days of isolation imposed on people to prevent the spread of contagious diseases. The idea of isolation and distancing is common to these multiple meanings: the collective and subliminal memory of the antecedents of guarantine, and its association with fasting, penance, and cleanliness, may explain the impulse, precipitated by the coronavirus and now on display everywhere in the Judeo-Christian West, to hoard food and toilet paper. What is also in-

dubitably the case is that we in India too have long been familiar with self-quarantine and social distancing: the Manusmriti and the other Dharmasastras stipulate that the Sudra must clearly announce his polluting presence to others and thereby facilitate their withdrawal from his presence; in South India the practice of requiring the Sudra to ring a bell before making his presence in public so that even his shadow might not defile the upper castes was all too common.

The notion of 'self-quarantine' has, in the wake of COVID-19, overnight become not just part of our daily vocabulary but also acquired a regal place in the lexicon of altruism. High-profile politicians and famous personalities have informed the world that they have gone into self-quarantine for the recommended period of two weeks on the mere suspicion that having had contact with a person who has tested positive for the coronavirus, they may have likewise become infected. Their gesture sounds, and doubtless is, unimpeachably altruistic: it is an assurance to those who are near and dear, to concerned communities, and sometimes to the world at large, that the person seeks to protect others more than protect oneself. What could be more noble than to place the welfare of others before one's own convenience and well-being? When contemporary political discourse revolves so overwhelmingly around rights and entitlements, it is refreshing to see that some are still sworn to upholding the notion of duty to oneself-since, in the view of every religion, we are called upon never to abandon our station in life, even in the face of utmost despair—and to one's family and the larger web of communities to which one may be obligated.

Self-quarantine would, then, appear to be both a model and admonitory instance of the exercise of moral responsibil-

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ity, cautioning would-be violators that their irresponsibility may spell dangers for others. The poor, the unemployed, the blue-collar working class and others who live at the margins of society do not, of course, announce to the world that they have gone into self-quarantine. There is a growing concern that the poor and those surviving on working-class wages may be disproportionately and severely affected if social distancing necessitates the shuttering of not only corporate houses, government offices, but shops, small businesses and various kinds of contract work. The number of daily-wage workers in India is huge, and loss of wages for even a few days can lead to a difference between one meal or two meals every day for family members. The vast majority of India's labouring class lives without any form of insurance-and by this I mean not merely medical insurance, but the insurance that can come only with a social safety net and the comfort that derives from having something in reserve for penniless times-and an extended period of 'social distancing' would be nothing short of ruination for many. That is also very much the case in the US, which, in spite of extraordinary levels of affluence, has 82 million people with little or no medical insurance and a large working-class that lives from one paycheck to another.

While these considerations are wholly legitimate, my point about the politics of self-quarantine is that the poor, recognising that they are wholly unwanted, have long been practised at social distancing. They are all but invisible to most of society and they are generally quarantined at birth: as they reach adulthood and fight their way into a gritty existence, they perfect the arts of self-quarantine. The social oddities of social distancing are doubtless transparent in every society: one would only have to question, besides the hundreds of millions of Dalits, Adivasis, many Muslims and the poor in India, African-Americans, native Americans, Australian Aboriginals, the Roma, the Japanese Burakumin or Eta (literally, 'pollution-abundant') or countless other groups who have been commanded to distance themselves from their alleged superiors to divine this gruesome social fact. As for the self-quarantine of the rich, the educated and those with a voice, it is, we may say, only an extension if not merely an instantiation of what the influential French philosopher Michel Foucault identified as a technique of the self-government that, structurally conjoined to the government of the state, he identified with the term 'governmentality'. The Zurich-based philosopher and historian Philipp Sarasin helps us understand why 'self-quarantine' is the logical outcome of the biopolitical governmentality whose contours Foucault explored in detail: as he points out, it is in the late 18th century and early 19th century that the belief emerged that 'it is largely to the individual him-or herself to determine health, illness or even the time of death.' Since that time, the liberal state has been spectacularly successful in inducing people to regulate and discipline themselves: not only does this free the state to exercise its coercive powers against those who are troublemongers and truly recalcitrant, but it helps the state to foster the illusion of being 'progressive', preserve the social



order and immunise capitalism against its dissenters.

There is yet another critical aspect to the question of social distancing. The 'whole of her sermon', EM Forster says of his character Margaret in his novel Howard's End, was 'Only connect!... Live in fragments no longer. Only connect, and the beast and the monk, robbed of the isolation that is life to either, will die'. It is very likely, indeed I should say that there can be little doubt, that modern society is hounded by the problems of loneliness and atomistic individualism. The public discussions on this question are prolific and there is reason to suppose that the difficulties are more acute in some societies, but there is everywhere a rather commonplace view that the decline of the family has contributed to severe atomism. Even in families that are not dysfunctional, the phenomenon of every member of the family glued to his or her cell phone is ubiquitous and requires no elaborate commentary though educators, psychologists, social workers, counsellors and other alleged experts have filled reams of pages with overwhelmingly mindless commentary on how to alleviate this 'problem'. It is really unnecessary to enterinto these debates, which on the whole can safely be left to pop psychologists and run-of-the-mill sociologists: the more sophisticated versions of these debates have alerted us to some of modernity's more salient features, such as the processes of secularisation and disenchantment which have given rise to possessive individualism, the split between cognition and feeling, the evisceration of (to use the language of EP Thompson) a 'moral economy', the evolution of technologies of the state-the census and the passport, to name just two-which had no purpose other than to produce differentiation, establish new hierarchies





EBOLA FADED FROM THE WORLD'S ATTENTION ONCE IT WAS ESTABLISHED THAT IT WAS NOT GOING TO JUMP CONTINENTS. THE TOLL OF SOME 11,300 LIVES WAS NOT GOING TO UNDULY AGITATE A WORLD HABITUATED TO THE IDEA THAT AFRICA IS LARGELY A 'FAILED CONTINENT'

and erect walls—and the myriad ways in which differences between self and other were sharpened. The effect of all this has been to produce intense loneliness in many societies, especially in the modern West, and this loneliness has been so acute that those who cherish their solitude are not left in peace. We choose our solitude, and those who are, if I may put it this way, versed in solitude can even find it in a crowd. But no one chooses to be lonely: it is the fate of those who must live in a society torn apart by anomie, estrangement and distancing—from one's self, community, and moral purpose. The gist of it is that, in the face of COVID-19, we are now being asked to 'only disconnect'—and this when 'distancing—has been the bane of modern society.

A fuller comprehension of the politics of 'distancing' that COVID-19 has brought to the fore would also require a detailed analysis, of which I can furnish only a few clues at this time, of the geopolitics of fencing borders: no one is predicting that COVID-19 will lead to the dissolution of the European Union, but it is striking that one country after another in Europe started sealing its borders from its neighbours. Nearly every country in the world has sealed its borders from others: friend and foe are all the same. Countries desire nothing more at this juncture of CO-VID-19's peregrinations than to distance themselves from one another. Globalisation was touted as making the world smaller, but the ease with which the coronavirus has moved from one territory to another, wholly indifferent to borders or variance in political regimes, is tempting even some of globalisation's vocal cheerleaders to question the wisdom of their enthusiasm. There was even a time, not so long ago, when commentators such as

Francis Fukuyama-moved by the crumbling of the Berlin Wall, the fall of the Soviet Union and the rush in the countries behind the Iron Curtain to embrace laissez-faire capitalismwere inspired to pontificate about the end of history. Western liberal democracy shored up by the free market evidently represented the apotheosis of universal human history: if the consumer could be given 'choice' at the supermarket, nirvana was at hand and it scarcely mattered whether the other worldly messiah was Jesus, Mohammad, Krishna, the Buddha or even the Communist Party. Other commentators of a different political persuasion were bold enough to suggest that supranational entities, such as the UN, the World Trade Organization and the European Union, had rendered the nation-state obsolete. The rise of ethnic nationalism and political authoritarianism in nearly every part of the world has in recent years greatly diminished all these arguments for globalisation; now, with the coronavirus on the loose, there is reason to suspect that some people are preparing to write globalisation's obituary.

There is a yet greater sense in which the coronavirus careens towards mostly unexpected outcomes and alerts us to the evergrowing arc of distancing that has upended the relationship of humans to nature. The COVID-19 cataclysm has a cosmic dimension with many implications for our understanding of climate change. It is scarcely surprising that the already massive reporting on COVID-19 has focused largely on either the measures-from washing hands and staying at home if one has a cough and fever to imposing quarantine and social distancingthat might be taken to diminish infections and halt the spread of the virus, or on the immense economic repercussions of its global spread. The economists, whether in India, the US, Britain or elsewhere are still debating whether their country's economy, and the global economy, has slid into a 'recession'. The economists long ago established their redundancy but, as the proverb goes, one can take the horse to a stream but one cannot make it drink. The corporate and business elites point to the precipitous decline of the stock market, with the Dow Jones sliding by 12.93 per cent on March 16th for its worst-ever loss on a single day since the Great Depression of 1929, the trillions of dollars wiped out with the market selloff over the last four weeks, the decimation of the airline industry, and billions lost here and there. Those at the middle end of the economy, whether in Europe, Asia or the Americas, have every reason to lament the closure of businesses, the decline in sales, the loss of profits and the slim prospects of a quick recovery. Their concerns hover around, for example, the implications of the economic fallout for the college education of their children or how the economic downturn might affect their plans for the purchase of a car or home renovation. Among the working-class, whether employed in low-paying if steady jobs or as daily-wage labourers, or slogging it out in the so-called gig economy, the economic concerns, to which I have alluded earlier, are more immediate and the fear is palpable. Who is to pay, for instance, for 14 days of quarantine? If infections rise in India, where testing has barely commenced, by the tens of thousands within days, will the poor be accommodated at all in a medical

system that is already overwhelmed? How will the poor pay for treatment over an extended period of time? Social isolation may be an unadulterated good from the standpoint of public health officials, but how does it help to put food on the table? The cloud of economic insecurity has always hung over the poor, and it will, with the spread of the coronavirus, only get darker and larger.

While the economic considerations that weigh so heavily with so many people are thus wholly understandable, it is nevertheless the brute fact, all the more ominous in view of what creeping climate change portends for humans (and indeed all other species), that we still remain utterly captive to ideas of growth, productivity and consumption. There have been at best feeble attempts to mitigate consumption, and it may even be argued that Amazon has singlehandedly played what can only be described as a monstrously criminal role in increasing

consumption levels worldwide. Thomas Carlyle was being much too kind when he described economics as a 'dismal science', but debatable as my proposition may be to some, it is incontrovertibly true that economists have a womb-like attachment to the idea of 'growth'. The economist who advocates for anything but growth-oh, yes, the 'kind' and 'sensitive' ones want less uneven growth, or development with a 'human face'—is nothing but a pariah to his or her profession: if one wants to learn 'social distancing', the group of troglodytes known as economists would have something to teach the epidemiologists, virologists and healthcare practitioners now struggling to contain and mitigate the coronavirus.

Airline travel has come to a virtual halt. Oil sales have plummeted. Factories have come to a standstill. Cars are no longer being rolled down assembly lines at a dizzying pace. A large number of containers are lying at ports around the world, with little or no prospects that the goods will find their way to the intended recipients before weeks or even months

elapse. The economy of every country has already taken a huge hit, and the global economy as a whole will register a steep decline in growth when the data becomes available in due course. Viral capitalism has, at least for the present, met its match in the viral pandemic. Why should all of this, however, be construed and mourned as an unadulterated evil? The Enlightenment philosophers grappled with the question of the presence of evil in a world made by God, occasioning a lively debate around a massive earthquake that struck the city of Lisbon on November 1st, 1755 and all but levelled the city. Nearly a fifth of Lisbon's population of 200,000 was at once wiped out, and no church of any significance remained: among a devoutly Catholic people,

ONE MIGHT HAVE THOUGHT THAT THOSE WHO ABIDE BY THE VIEW THAT REASON IS EVERYTHING WOULD HAVE PAUSED TO REFLECT THAT COVID-19 HAS PERHAPS APPEARED AS A WARNING TO HUMANS WHO THOUGHT THEY HAD ACHIEVED MASTERY OVER NATURE THAT THEY ARE STILL FAR FROM BEING ABLE TO EXERCISE CONTROL OVER THE COURSE OF EVENTS

that alone was sufficient to raise questions about the inscrutability of God's ways. However, as is the case with the present writer, one does not even have to believe in God, much less subscribe to theodicy, to arrive at the understanding that there are laws of compensation that govern the world. Since human beings have been so obdurate in clinging to their wasteful and destructive ways, and the political, corporate and managerial elites have, taken as a whole, been so wholly oblivious to the pressing questions of climate change, nature has had to find some other way of recompense. The earth needs rest as much as we do. The Puranic imagination in India has never been shy in pronouncing upon the fact that the earth needs to be relieved from time to time of the immense burdens placed upon it by humans. Perhaps we needed a microbe to jolt us from the anthropocentrism to which humans are shackled at their own peril.

The scientific-minded and slaves of reason will doubtless quiver and take umbrage at any interpretation of the emergence of the coronavirus, its passage around the world and the ways in which we might begin to comprehend what is unfolding before our eyes that is not bound to the evidence and the opinion of 'experts'. It is enough for us to wash our hands, no less than with soap for 20 seconds, as often as is necessary or possible: restrain ourselves from engaging in reflex actions that are second nature to us-touching our eyes, nose and face; observe a distance of six feet from any other person; refrain from patronising a business, restaurant, museum: only follow the guidelines and we as a people will be healed. A miraculous cure of sorts is on offer for a beleaguered humankind. One might have thought that those who abide by the view that reason is everything would have paused to reflect, howsoever slightly, that COVID-19 has perhaps appeared as a warning, not even a very much disguised one at that, to humans who thought that they had achieved mastery

over nature that they are still far from being able to exercise control over the course of events. Perhaps COVID-19 really loves us after all and its display of affection might manifest itself in our renewed ability to live in solitude, engage in face-to-face conversation, find pleasure in a book and, often most difficult of all, find common cause with family members. For now, at least, we won't have the luxury of being able to say that we don't have the time for all this, will we?

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A MEDITATION ON DEATH IN THE TIME OF VIRAL FEAR



NLY ATHEISTS BELIEVE IN DEATH. Theists belong to infinity. For them, a funeral is merely transition of the *atman*, *rooh* or soul from one manifestation to another; from existence on earth to a new natural beyond life.

God is synonymous with life, not death. In every religion an eternal God has promised eternity to his human creation. During the mortal phase of life, God is one dimension away from even the most faithful of believers, but in the hereafter the Almighty becomes an omnipotent executive presiding over whichever dwelling has been earned by the individual.

Clearly the spirit, once released from human bondage, finds a far more democratic ethos. There is no distinction of social, financial or



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X KATLGAH CEMETERY IN MASHHAD, IRAN, CREATED FROM A PHOTO IN THE KHANIKOF COLLECTION, 1861 political rank in heaven, or indeed hell. The only king or caliph in the Abrahamic faiths is God, Allah or Jehovah. In Hinduism, divinity becomes plural, but the human being cannot rise beyond the semi-divine. In Hinduism and Christianity, God can become man; man cannot become God. In Islam, the doctrine of *tauhid*—and its equivalent in Judaism—makes God unitary and indivisible.

The origins of Hinduism lie in the Vedas. The Rig Veda, an anthology of 1,028 Sanskrit hymns originating in the Indus Valley Civilisation that flourished some 4,000 years ago, is surely among the most profound, nuanced and stimulating enquiries into the fundamental mysteries of creation, life,

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DEATH IS AN EPISODIC FACT IN ISLAM, A NECESSARY PRELUDE TO THE JUDGMENT DAY WHENCE BEGINS THE ETERNAL EXISTENCE IN THE COSMOGRAPHY OF HEAVEN AND HELL: THERE ARE TRADITIONALLY SEVEN HEAVENS BUT ONLY ONE HELL. THIS LIFE IS A MERE PROBATION

death and divinity, a bridge between duty and destiny, time and infinity, experience and morality, individual and universe. It is a philosophy where death is a sadness, without terror.

In the Vedic beginning, there was neither existence nor non-existence, 'neither death nor immortality' [I have used the translation by Wendy Doniger, published by Penguin]; even the gods came after creation by an original progenitor, called Ka and then Prajapati, who later created man. Rita, the cosmic order, and *satya*, truth, were born from *tapas*, the heat of sacrifice.

Yama, elder son of the sun, was the first man to die. He became, thereby, pathfinder to the afterlife, as well as our collective creditor: every mortal is in his debt by virtue of birth. A hymn asks us to honour 'King Yama', son of Vivaswan, with *soma* and oblation rich in butter and honey, for 'Yama was the first to find a way for us'; his two four-eyed dogs may thirst for 'the breath of life' but they still lead us to heaven. [It was only in later traditions that Yama was re-imagined as a demon.]

'Go forth,' says a hymn to the dead, 'go forth on those ancient paths on which our ancient fathers passed beyond. There youshall see the two kings, Yama and Varuna, rejoicing in the sacrificial drink' [the Svadha, or Soma; the sacrificial call is Svaha]. The next verse is an exhortation: 'Unite with the fathers, with Yama, with the rewards of your sacrifices and good deeds, in the highest heaven. Leaving behind all imperfections, go back home again; merge with a glorious body.' And so, not only do the dead get a new life but they also get a glorious body to replace the one that was incarcerated. Death is a return, not a departure.

The Burial Hymn is even celebratory: 'Go away, death, by another path that is your own, different from the road of the gods...Those who are alive have now parted from those who are dead. Our invitation to the gods has become auspicious today. We have gone forward to dance and laugh, stretching farther our own lengthening span of life'. Soma, the plant of heaven, induces both ecstasy and immortality.

THE FUNERAL CHANT in Islam is a verse from the Quran: *Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji'oon* (From Allah we come, to Allah we go). Death is an episodic fact in Islam, a necessary prelude to the judgment day whence begins the eternal existence in the cosmography of heaven and hell: there are traditionally seven heavens but only one hell. This life is a mere probation, for 'Every soul shall have a taste of death; and only on judgment day shall you be paid your full recompense. Only he who is saved far from the fire and admitted to the garden will have attained the object [of life]. For the life of this world is but goods and chattels of deception' [Surah 3:185]. Allah tells mankind: 'We have decreed death to be your common lot, and we are not to be frustrated from changing your forms and creating you [again] in [forms] that you know not' [Surah 56: 60, 61; from the translation by Abdullah Yusuf Ali].

There are graphic descriptions of heaven and hell in the Quran; see Surah 76, among others. Heaven, the eternal home for those who have pleased Allah, is a garden of bliss, with fountains, mansions, rivers, fruits, carpets, chaste companions, abundance, joy and *tasnim*, a drink superior to the purest wine. There is no vain discourse, and therefore peace and security. There is no envy, worry, toil, sorrow.

Hell, in contrast, is the abode of arrogance for those who dismissed religion as an amusement. Their fate is to drink boiling, fetid water, burn in a furious fire and plead for an end that will never come. At the bottom of hell grows the cursed and pungent tree of Zaqqum, as bitter as the food. There is much more. The point, of course, is that it is up to the human being to choose his or her destiny in the next life. Lost indeed are they who treat it as a falsehood that they must meet Allah—until on a sudden the hour is on them, and they say: 'Ah! woe unto us that we took no thought of it', for they bear their burdens on their backs, and evil indeed are the burdens that they bear' [Surah 6:31].

There is no confusion in the relationship between this life and the next. As the powerful Surah on *qiyamah*, or resurrection, puts it: man will be evidence against himself.

The search for this evidence is constant; two guardian angels, one sitting to the right and the other to the left note every word spoken. According to tradition, the angels are called Munkar and Nakir [although they are not so named in the Quran]. The first question after death is about the deceased's conviction in Allah and His Prophet: if the answer is correct there is a pleasant wait till Paradise. This quiescent state is known as *barzakh*, when the deceased wait till judgment or 'till the day they are raised up' [Surah 23:100].

Perhaps the most powerful passage in the Quran about life and death is in Surah 50, Qaf, which contains the famous verse that Sufis cite to claim proximity to Allah: 'It was We who created man, and We know what dark suggestions his soul makes to him, for We are nearer to him than [his]jugular

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THE RIG VEDA IS SURELY AMONG THE MOST PROFOUND, NUANCED AND STIMULATING ENQUIRIES INTO THE FUNDAMENTAL MYSTERIES OF CREATION, LIFE, DEATH AND DIVINITY. IT IS A PHILOSOPHY WHERE DEATH IS A SADNESS, WITHOUT TERROR

vein'. Verse 19 says: 'And the stupor of death will bring truth'. Abdullah Yusuf Ali explains that the 'stupor or unconsciousness to this probationary life will be the opening of the eyes to the spiritual world for death is the gateway between the two'. Your destination will be determined when the trumpet of judgment is blown and an angel will drive each soul to bear witness. There is no escape from judgment: 'The word changes not before Me, and I do not the least injustice to My servants' [Surah 50:29].

The Persians have a term for death: Shahr-e-Khamoshiyan [City of Silence]. Allah breaks that silence with justice. n his first letter to the Corinthians, the apostle-intellectual Paul dwells at length on the ultimate existentialist question, the mystery of death. He is challenging the ancient exoneration of excess, and its inherent sins, encapsulated in the aphorism that remains a familiar call: 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.'

Paul answers: 'Lo! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory'.'

This is followed by the much-quoted lines: 'O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?'

There is eternal repose in heaven, a promise abundant through both the Old and New Testaments. In his second letter, St Peter tells the faithful to 'wait for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells' echoing the revelation of the apocalypse to St John: 'Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.'

Clearly, something to look forward to after an earthly life filled with misery, poverty, anxiety.

The God of the Bible is, in essence, precisely the same as the Almighty of all faiths: 'I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end'. Alpha is genesis, when heaven and earth were the first in the sequence of creation; and in the end is liberation, the return from earth to 'Our Father, who art in heaven'.

As the Bible putsit, the last enemy to be destroyed is death.

S OWHATTHEN of science, the buttress and rationale of those who dismiss God as a myth, a prop for the intellectually weak and perennially frightened? Science uses evidence and enquiry as the basis for a doctrine like the big bang theory of creation, which postulates that the universe began with a 'primeval atom' some 14 billion years ago, and sneers at those who accept truth as the mysterious outpouring from a mysterious, invisible, unfathomable eternal being installed in the sky.

Let us set aside the temptation to treat the religious model as a metaphor for the scientific; or suggest that 14 billion



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ANTONIO GIAROLA'S PAINTING OF VERONA PLEADING WITH THE HOLY TRINITY FOR AN END TO THE PLAGUE, 1630

years in the latest chapter of scientific chronology and a day in Genesis are merely different interpretations of our still evolving notions of time. This will merely displease votaries of both groups and persuade neither. But a book I have been reading sparked a counterintuitive question: Does the advance of science confirm that creation was a miracle?

Let us look at the product for a moment rather than the producer.

The author Bill Bryson erupted into the publishing universe as a big-bang travel writer, but has now emerged through a form of Darwinian literary evolution as a popular chronicler of serious science, with the unique ability to enliven facts with a gentle sense of humour. Here are a very few, randomly cherry-picked facts from his densely packed book with a self-explanatory title, The Body:

*Every day we breathe about 20,000 times, processing an average of 12,500 litres of air, taking over seven million breaths each year. Each time we breathe, we exhale 25 sextillion molecules of oxygen [even the thought of such a number is exhausting];

*In an urban environment, a person can inhale some 20 billion foreign particles each day including dust, pollutants, which are then cleaned out by our lungs or diverted by many millions of cilia to the stomach where they are dissolved by hydrochloric acid;

*The eye can distinguish between two and 7.5 million colours, and darts on an average of four times every second;

*Each person produces between five to ten ounces of tears every day which are drained through tiny holes known as puncta; the tears we see are an overflow during spasms of high emotion;

*We can detect up to a trillion odours [I still find it hard to believe that there are so many odours, but there you are];

*The heart beats more than 3.5 billion times during a normal lifespan;

*Every day the heart, which weighs less than a pound, dispenses 6,240 litres of blood;

 $*Nerve signals \, travel \, at \, {\tt 270} \, mph.$

*Why don't people get mumps twice? Because the body contains T-cells with a memory of previous invasions by pathogens, and create adaptive immunity even after six or seven decades. That is why many diseases attack only once;

*Sneeze droplets [the latest weapon of mass destruction] can travel a distance of eight metres, drifting in suspension like a sheet for up to ten minutes;

*Around 75 per cent of the brain is water, the rest fat and protein. Living in dark silence, the brain churns more information in 30 seconds than the Hubble Space Telescope can process in 30 years;

*One cubic millimetre of brain, equivalent to about grain of sand, can hold information equivalent to a billion copies of Bryson's book. An average brain has the capacity to contain the entire digital content of the world, as measured in 2019 [when *The Body* was published].

Let's not even go near neurons, or gape at the notion that the eyes send a hundred billion signals to the brain every second. My question is: could all this incredible machinery happen by sheer accident?

You have a signature brain. You be the judge.■

MJ Akbar is an MP and the author of, most recently, Gandhi's Hinduism: The Struggle Against Jinnah's Islam



BETWEEN LIFE & LIFE

As humans know it and as the virus knows it

By MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

N ARGUMENT THE American Conservative thinker and journalist Ben Shapiro makes against abortion is what if astronomers reached Mars for the first time and found a foetus? Would it be considered life or not? The answer, he says, is not in debate by anyone. A single

cell would be termed life anywhere outside earth. Ergo, killing of foetuses is murder and therefore abortion is wrong. The argument is not ironclad. What if astronomers went to Mars and discovered a chicken? Should it mean that no chicken should ever be consumed ever again? It is thus predicated on the idea that human life is sacred. But why should it be so? Shapiro does not believe in the sacredness of human life when it comes to the death penalty, which he is in favour of. His reasoning is that babies are innocent and someone who murders is not. That leads to a contradiction. If it is alright to kill in some circumstance despite the value we have placed on human lives, then all that is necessary is to extend a circumstance to the killing of foetuses, for example, danger to the mother's life or convenience. Finding a foetus on Mars should not then give an absolute illegitimacy to killing them. The value of human life is just what we make of it. Shapiro is an orthodox Jew and so that shapes his view. Rationalists will just as legitimately change the definition of life to make foetuses an outlier without absolute survival rights.

The question of what life is can get more confusing. Each human being is not just one life. The body is replete with trillions of bacteria. And, both these bacteria and us are relentlessly home to viruses. There is not a moment from birth to death that they are not part of us. How then do you say that it is not the body itself? If you can't get around to that view, then consider that the body, as you understand it, sheds almost all of itself many times over. Cells die, new ones take their place and it happens to every single cell. Who is the one alive? The value we give to our lives is merely a corollary of human consciousness. For all the rest of organic nature, it is instinctive; the fundamental line of the software—'survive, reproduce'—from which all
the other codes got written. For humans, it is both instinctive and reasoned. Otherwise, what is the choice facing humanity today—to save the lives of the aged and the unwell, versus undergoing massive losses to the general welfare of the species by not shutting the world down. It is ennobling that few governments have really had to think what decision to take. The lives of the weak have been given precedence over the comfort and security of the strong. Animals would not necessarily make the same decision, their instincts might guide them elsewhere. The value appropriated to human life by us is also forced onto everything else on earth with great success. Everything animate and inanimate on earth is now in our service.

Then comes a virus which really doesn't care for the diktat. The irony is that the virus is not even 'alive' as per human construct. In one YouTube clip, Vincent Racaniello, a doctor and professor at Columbia University, who is a populariser of virology, delves into the question. He first explains what it takes for something to be termed alive. It must be composed of one or more cells; must have homeostasis, the ability to regulate its inner environment, like temperature; must be able to generate energy; must grow; must adapt to new environments by evolution; must respond to stimuli, like a plant moving towards light; and finally, be able to reproduce. He then pulls a pock-marked, multi-coloured ball with a thread inside, a model of a protein shell protecting a strand of ribonucleic acid (RNA) inside of the polio virus. And he says, 'On its own, it doesn't have any of the properties listed above.' The virus by itself is thus not alive. On the other hand, it can suddenly develop properties of life after it enters a cell. It takes over the cell and turns it into a factory making copies of itself. The cell, which now belongs to the virus, is alive. Racaniello defines virus as an organism with two phases: the virus particle which is not alive, and then the infected cell which is clearly alive. The virus bequeaths life to itself through us.

Once the button of life is switched on, then like all beings, the code—continue by reproducing—becomes operational. Through great cunning, it makes those it infects a partner in this. Take rabies, a virus that has been conquered in the developed world even as India remains its epicentre. A rabies virus that infects a dog makes it change its behaviour so that the dog helps the virus in its transmission. It makes the dog more aggressive which leads it to bite others, thus passing on the virus through its saliva. It also makes the dog travel around in larger circlesso that the area the animal coversismore, increasing the probability of it biting others, and thereby transmitting the virus. In a study published in Scientific Reports in 2017, researchers looked into how this was done. Science Daily, reporting on the study, quoted its co-author as saying that the viruses collect in the spaces between brain cells during the early stages of infection. Brain cells communicate in these spaces. The researchers looked at how viruses bind to receptors there and change how brain cells normally communicate, thus changing the behaviour of the infected animal.

The report added: 'This change of behavior could work to

the advantage of the virus, changing the behavior of infected animals to increase the chances that infection will spread to other animals. In one of the experiments, Hueffer (lead author Karsten Hueffer of the University of Alaska, Fairbanks) and his colleagues injected a small piece of the rabies virus glycoprotein into the brains of mice. "When we injected this small piece of the virus glycoprotein into the brain of mice, the mice started running around much more than mice that got a control injection," he said. "Such a behavior can be seen in rabies infected animals as well." Man has still not developed a cure for rabies. But when Louis Pasteur discovered a vaccine as far back as 1885, we exercised domination over the disease even before we knew such a thing as virus existed. But these are always Sisyphean victories. The same virus mutates or new viruses are born and all that we can do is relentless opposition.

There is a fundamental difference between how the virus and the human approaches life. Human beings have become conditioned to give priority to individual life—first save yourself, then family, then friends, then tribe, then country. It is only through an act of collective will that this conditioning can be changed. And then too it is tenuous. That is why societies collapse in the face of a pandemic; once the illusion of control is broken, it is every man for himself.

• OR THE VIRUS, the individual is inconsequential. ▼ It starts as non-life, enters a cell and becomes life. But then it destroys itself, to let all its copies out. It is designed to die to keep the replication going. The advantage of that is exponential growth. It is what makes Covid-19, which started as one single virus just a few months back, being all over the world today in numbers so vast that it is impossible to compute. In a lecture, Vincent Racaniello presents a few slides to give an idea of the vastness of virus numbers at play in the world. In one slide, he talks about just one category of viruses that infect bacteria, called bacteriophage. They weigh a femtogram, which is 10 to the power of -15 (0.000 000 000 000 001). Even for so infinitesimal an organism, if all the bacteriophage in the waters of the earth were added up, it would amount to 10 to the power of 30. And that is about 1,000 times the biomass of all the elephants in the world put together. And string them end to end, it would span a 100 million light years. Just a litre of seawater has more viruses than all the people on earth.

The only thing that really saves human beings is that the virus has no interest in killing us. In fact, the more we stay alive it is good for them, because they get trillions of more lives in the bargain. At some point, even if human beings do nothing at all, Covid-19 will make an easy truce and turn more and more benign to become a seasonal flu. These terms of peace are unacceptable to humans. That is the price of every life having value. We might win this time too when a vaccine arrives, but only till one new virus suddenly finds itself at home in a human cell.

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Can We Forgive China?

If any other country had sparked such a mammoth international crisis, it would now be in the global doghouse

By BRAHMA CHELLANEY



HE INCALCULABLE HUMAN and economic toll exacted by the spread of the novel coronavirus from China promises to shake up global geopolitics, including China's position in the world. With the 21-day India lockdown—the largest national shutdown in history—nearly half of the global population is now under some form of lockdown, thanks to China's disastrous, initial missteps that allowed the deadly virus to spread far and wide.

After the global crisis is over, the West's relationship with China is unlikely to go back to normal. Efforts are expected to begin to loosen China's grip on global supply chains. Moves are already afoot in the US Congress to bring manufacture of essential medicines back to the US, which currently relies on China for 97 per cent of all its antibiotics.

Asian countries were the first to be affected by the transnational spread of Covid-19 from China. In fact, only after Covid-19 cases with Wuhan links were detected in Thailand and South Korea that China acknowledged its epidemic, when the *People's Daily* on January 21st admitted human-to-human spread and publicised Chinese President Xi Jinping's first comments. The bitterness over China's role in triggering the pandemic will likely linger in Asia. After all, the lives of many will never be the same.

As US President Donald Trump has said, "the world is paying a big price" for China's initial, weeks-long cover-up of the Covid-19 outbreak in Wuhan city and other parts of Hubei province. From November 17th onward, according to a *South China Morning Post* report based on Chinese government data, Wuhan doctors recorded one to five cases daily, before infection rates spiralled and a raging epidemic unfolded. However, China waited until January 21st to issue the first warning to its public. By then, the spread of the virus had gone beyond its control.

A study based on sophisticated modelling has indicated that if Chinese authorities had acted three weeks earlier than they did, the number of Covid-19 cases in China could have been reduced by 95 per cent and the global spread of the disease limited. The virus spread farther and wider because the Communist Party of China (CPC) cared more about its reputation than the Chinese people's suffering or the transnational impacts.

Make no mistake: China faces lasting damage to its image. The CPC not only engineered the pandemic, however inadvertently, but also has sought to save face by unleashing a sustained disinformation campaign aimed at creating doubts over the new disease's origin in China. Chinese diplomats, for example, have unabashedly sought to blame the US for the virus. But such outlandish propaganda has few takers.

The images the world has seen of markets in China selling wild animals for slaughter on the spot have served as a reminder of how Beijing ignored warnings from its own experts since the 2002-2003 Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) pandemic, which also originated on Chinese territory. Infectious-disease specialists based in Hong Kong, in a study published in 2007 in an American journal, said the presence of a large reservoir of SARS-like 'viruses in horseshoe bats, together with the culture of eating exotic mammals,' was a Chinese 'time bomb' that raised the 'possibility of the reemergence of SARS and other novel viruses from animals or laboratories.'

In fact, just months before the Covid-19 outbreak in China, a biomedical study by four Chinese presciently warned that a new coronavirus will emanate from bats, with 'an increased probability that this will occur in China.' The Chinese hunger for the rare, exotic and dubiously curative has fostered wildlife farming, provided a cover for poaching and threatened to drive endangered animals to extinction.



Videos showing Chinese wolfing down pangolins, wolf cubs, dogs, snakes, hedgehogs, civet cats or other animals not only contribute to China's image problem but also underline the dangers of another deadly disease originating in that country. The CPC wields the big stick to muzzle dissent at home but not to change tastes or attitudes that could give the world yet another pandemic after SARS and Covid-19.

Covid-19, meanwhile, has cast an unflattering light on the only institution tasked with providing global health leadership, the World Health Organization (WHO). Under Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO's first chief who is not a medical doctor, the institution's credibility has taken a severe beating.

Tedros, who served as Ethiopia's health minister and then foreign minister, has mismanaged WHO's efforts to contain Covid-19, declaring it a pandemic only on March 11th, weeks after the virus had spread across the world. This contrasts with the alacrity with which he has defended China's Covid-19 response at every stage.

In fact, before China came clean, Tedros actively aided CPC's efforts to 'play down the severity, prevalence and scope of the CO-VID-19 outbreak,' as two US-based scholars have pointed out. Health officials in Taiwan, which instituted Covid-19 preventive measures before any country, have said that they alerted the WHO on December 31st to human-to-human transmission by detailing how Wuhan medical staff were getting ill. Yet, based on Chinese inputs, the WHO declared on January 14th that there was 'no clear evidence' of such transmission. The WHO changed its position only after China belatedly admitted transmission between humans.

When countries like the US, Italy and India banned travel to or from China, Tedros publicly opposed such restrictions on February 4th, warning that they will have "the effect of increasing fear and stigma, with little public-health benefit." Tedros has further politicised WHO's role in the current crisis by lavishing praise on Xi, saying he has displayed "a very rare leadership," and paying tribute to Chinese "transparency," despite the CPC's intrinsic aversion to transparency.

Founded 71 years ago, the WHO remains overly bureaucratic and too dependent on some major donors to independently coordinate international health policy, which explains China's growing sway over that United Nations agency, including shutting the door to Taiwan's entry. After Tedros's overt politicisation of international health, the damage to WHO's credibility will not be easy to repair. Calls are already growing for him to resign.

The lesson from SARS—the first pandemic of the 21st century—was that state transparency and early and accurate public warning are essential to fight the major outbreak of any disease. But Beijing did the opposite during the Covid-19 outbreak, as underscored by a favourite social-media line, 'China lied and people died.' Beijing helped spawn a manmade calamity that has created an unparalleled global crisis.

In fact, China also covered up the SARS outbreak for more than a month, holding the doctor who blew the whistle on it in military custody for 45 days. And, in the past 19 months, secrecy



REUTERS

and under-reporting of African swine flu cases in China has created one of the worst livestock epidemics ever that has killed millions of pigs there. China's Covid-19 role, however, will rank as the most dangerous cover-up in modern history.

Had Beijing sought to confine the Covid-19 outbreak to its central Hubei province by suspending all travel from there as soon as it became aware of the gravity of the problem, the novel coronavirus might not have spread to other parts of China or to other countries. Instead, it put no restriction on international travel, including from Wuhan, thereby helping to spread the disease internationally.

HEN COUNTRIES LIKE the US, Italy and India blocked flights to and from China, Beijing expressed dismay, saying such bans went against the WHO recommendation not to restrict travel and trade. 'In disregard of WHO recommendation against travel restrictions, the US went the opposite way,' the Chinese foreign ministry's spokesman said on Twitter in response to America's January 3 Ist travel restrictions. 'Where is its empathy?' Beijing called for lifting the bans, while cajoling small, financially vulnerable countries to keep their borders open to Chinese travellers.

In Italian cities, individual travellers from China held placards at public intersections that read, 'Please hug me: I am a Chinese, not a virus.' And videos showing them receiving hugs from passersby were telecast in China by the state media to signal that the world still loved China.

Now, by spreading unfounded conspiracy theories, China is seeking to deflect criticism for its role in starting a pandemic by covering up the coronavirus outbreak at home. Indeed, the Chinese leadership is facing a credibility problem at home over its secretive initial response to the outbreak. It has sought to save itself from the people's wrath by spreading conspiracy theories on the origin of the virus and by patting itself on the back for supposedly bringing the spread of the disease under control. Xi has been portrayed as a hero who is leading the country to victory in



WHEN THE OUTBREAK OCCURRED IN WUHAN, CHINA Acted decisively Not Against The Virus But Against The Whistle-Blowers

a 'people's war' against Covid-19.

The Covid-19 crisis has not stopped the regime from going after anyone daring to expose its initial cover-up. Beijing property tycoon Ren Zhiqiang, who called Xi a 'clown-emperor with no clothes,' has been missing since mid-March. 'I see not an emperor standing there exhibiting his 'new clothes,' but a clown who stripped naked and insisted on continuing to be an emperor,' Ren had said in an essay that blamed Xi for silencing whistle-blowers and suppressing information on the outbreak.

Many Chinese are still seething over the regime's initial concealment and mismanagement of the crisis. The public anger at home, coupled with the damage to China's global image, has prompted Beijing to launch a public-relations blitzkrieg, including churning out conspiracy theories.

As if China's role in starting a global pandemic was not enough, Beijing is now unleashing a pandemic of lies. To be sure, fabrications and disinformation are integral to China's 'three wars' concept: public opinion warfare, psychological warfare and legal warfare. Consequently, the circulation of disinformation is an old Chinese tactic.

With its 'three wars' doctrine, Beijing has sought to send two messages to the rest of the world: 'we did everything to stop the outbreak; in fact, we bought you time;' and 'the virus probably didn't even originate in China.' The paradox is that the two messages, built on falsehoods, are contradictory. But that does not bother the regime, which has published a propaganda book in multiple languages, including English, Arabic, Spanish, French and Russian. The book, touting its handling of the disease, is titled, *A Battle Against Epidemic: China Combatting COVID-19 in 2020.*

China's combative public diplomacy involves the use of Twitter and other social-media platforms to influence the international narrative through misinformation and disinformation. Zhao Lijian, the new in-charge of the social-media propaganda machine, has recently used Twitter to push unfounded conspiracy theories, including that the novel coronavirus was brought by US Army officers who visited Wuhan in October 2019.

Before becoming the Chinese foreign ministry's spokesman

in Beijing earlier this year, Zhao was China's deputy chief of mission in Pakistan, where he honed his social-media propaganda skills. In Pakistan, Zhao peddled conspiracy theories on Twitter (which is banned in China) and added 'Muhammad' to his name (until Beijing outlawed the use of 'Muhammad' and other overtly Islamic names in Xinjiang and elsewhere). His appointment as a foreign ministry spokesman signalled that Beijing was moving from aggressive diplomacy to brazen diplomacy. Zhao's actions have helped validate that hypothesis.

More broadly, China is now seeking to aggressively rebrand itself as the global leader in combating a virus that spread internationally from its own territory. Its rebranding effort includes counter-pandemic aid to developing countries, a pledge to donate \$20 million to the WHO and a massive PR campaign, which extends from a claim to have fully contained the coronavirus in its worst-affected areas to disseminating plain disinformation so as to obscure its disastrous missteps that gifted the world a horrendous pandemic.

With the help of the CPC's propaganda organs, Beijing is trying to fashion a narrative that China is an example of how to control the spread of Covid-19. In fact, like the arsonist offering to extinguish the fire it started, China is now seeking to help other countries combat a dangerous pathogen after its own gross negligence led to that virus spreading across the globe.

The attempt clearly is to deflect liability for a global crisis whose costs continue to mount. After all, if any other country had sparked such a mammoth international crisis, it would now be in the global doghouse.

Beijing's proactive attempt to rewrite the history of the pandemic, even as much of the world grapples with its escalating consequences, highlights its well-oiled machine. Yet, when the Covid-19 outbreak occurred in Wuhan, China acted decisively not against the virus but against the whistle-blowing doctors, eight of whom were detained. This underscores that, for the world's strongest and richest dictatorship, power and control take precedence over everything else, including human lives.

Having spawned the global coronavirus crisis, China is now planning to exploit the financial and other disruptions that the pandemic has engendered. It is hoping to game the situation in order to gain greater technological and industrial advantage. But the international anger over its role in triggering the pandemic could frustrate its plans.

The pandemic's lesson for many countries is that, in an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world, China's secrecy and obfuscation are antithetical to globalisation and international security. Transparency is essential to make us all safer. China cannot have its cake and eat it too. It must fundamentally reform and abide by international norms.

If the pandemic upends the world order as we know it, China's role will be a key trigger.■

Brahma Chellaney is a geostrategist and the author of nine books, including the award-winning Water, Peace, and War: Confronting the Global Water Crisis

The Search

In the absence of new drugs and a vaccine, a race is underway to rediscover old drugs and repurpose them

By LHENDUP G BHUTIA

HEN A 59-YEAR-OLD lecturer in Aurangabad came to know she had tested positive for Covid-19, her first thoughts turned to her family and students. She had returned from a holiday in Russia via Kazakhstan, the two places she is suspected of having picked up the infection, over 10 days earlier, and had mingled

freely with others, including even taking classes for her students. "When I was isolated in the hospital, I was constantly praying, 'Oh god, nothing should happen to [my family and students]'," she says, requesting she not be identified by name.

Apart from her family members who were put under quarantine, around 20 students who had come in contact with her and begun to display flu-like symptoms were also quarantined. Since she was the first confirmed case of infection in Aurangabad, the city went into panic. Within a day's time, a photograph of her and her husband, taken from their Facebook accounts, claiming they had died was doing the rounds on WhatsApp. "It was just a very bad time for us," her son says, recounting the ordeal.

The lecturer had been feeling ill for a few days before she had

got admitted, popping antibiotics to keep a slight fever and shivers down. In a few days, she began feeling breathlesstoo. "[At the hospital] the drugs they gave me were very strong and I would be very exhausted," she says.

And then she recovered.

Just four days after she had first tested positive, two tests conducted 24 hours apart found her free of infection. By the ninth day, she was home. None of her students or her family members were found infected either.

"It's something even we [doctors in the hospital] are discussing—how she recovered so quickly," says Dr Himanshu Gupta, the doctor who treated her in Aurangabad's Dhoot Hospital. There

were many things, according to Dr Gupta, that worked in her favour, from her underlying good health to an early diagnosis. "All this means we could start ART[anti-retroviral therapy]quite early. Unlike other cases, where patients are diagnosed late and the infection has progressed to a severe form," he says.

Anti-retroviral therapy—or as it is in this case, a fixed dose combination of lopinavir/ritonavir that is sold under the brand name of Kaletra and used to treat HIV patients—is one of several drugs that was originally designed for some other ailment but is now being repurposed to fight the COVID-19 pandemic. We don't know how well it works, or which among them is better or even if it really works. A few anecdotal accounts from doctors and non-peer reviewed studies with small sample sizes seem to suggest that some of them are working.

The traditional way of developing drugs for new infections takes years. But this new strain of the coronavirus isn't giving us that leisure. In the middle of a full-blown pandemic, when there is no time to invent new drugs or conduct comprehensive foolproof studies, a vaccine still a year or more away and vast swathes of the world currently in lockdown, a race is underway in labs across the world to rediscover old and approved drugs that can be repurposed for this infection. Until the end of last month, according to an article in the Economist, China's Clinical Trial Registry has listed 105 trials of drugs and vaccines intended to combat this pandemic. By March 11th, the National Library of Medicine, its American equivalent, had listed 84. Very few patients among those infected will progress to severe forms of the disease, but at a time where healthcare services are coming under a huge strain, the purpose will be served if any of these drugs even shortens the duration of recovery time.

Dr Om Shrivastav, a top infectious disease expert in Mumbai who is currently treating some of the patients suffering from CO-VID-19, points out that, apart from anti-HIV drugs, some other drugs such as those traditionally found to be working against H1N1 (swine flu), such as oseltamivir, also seem to show encouraging results in India. "So it's a combination of a number of these

FROM ANTI-HIV TO ANTI-MALARIAL MEDICINES, SEVERAL OLD DRUGS ARE BEING REPURPOSED TO FIGHT THE VIRUS. WE DON'T KNOW HOW WELL THEY WORK, OR WHICH AMONG THEM IS BETTER OR EVEN IF THEY REALLY WORK drugs that have shown some encouraging results. But that is still not mainline, because you will need any of these to go through scientific scrutiny. It's encouraging, but it is still early," he says. "We are in a state where there is going to be evidence that may appear good today but fall by the wayside tomorrow. So it's a work-in-process. You have to remember that this is a brand new virus. We only know it for the last three or three-and-ahalf months. It's not enough time to say we know everything about it."

This virus, various studies show, essentially looks like a ball with spikes. Our first point of infection is when these spikes stick to a protein which is found on the surface of our cells called ACE2.

It enters our cells using its proteins—and since viruses cannot reproduce on their own—they effectively turn our bodies against ourselves, hijacking our cells making it produce more and more of these viruses.

Scientists are currently trying to use the roster of pre-existing drugs to do one of two things. They are looking at drugs that can attack the virus' own proteins and prevent it from doing things like entering human cells and making our cells into coronavirus factories. Or they are trying to find which proteins in our cells are required by the virus to infect and multiply and then find drugs that are already available which might stop such an interaction from taking place. According to Nevan Krogan, a researcher from the University of California, San Francisco, writing on the portal *The Conversation*, they have managed to find 332 human proteins that the coronavirus co-opts, and so far they have found around 69 drugs (27 FDA-approved and 42 in clinical or pre-clinical trials) that seem to interact with 66 of those proteins.

DON'T WANT TO make a single rupee on this," says Omkar Herlekar, the chairman of the Mumbai-based company Lasa Supergenerics, which is working towards manufacturing favipiravir, an old anti-viral drug that some studies show is effective in the treatment of patients suffering from a COVID-19 infection. "I don't even mind if I have to put Rs 20 crore from my own pocket—and I find that the infection doesn't take off and there is no mass outbreak [in India]."

Herlekar is a colourful figure, whose company otherwise manufactures raw ingredients required in the production of drugs. He had been following the news of this new strain of coronavirus ever since it first broke out in Wuhan and the various studies that show which of the old drugs hold promise against it. "Once this outbreak was prominent, we thought of doing research on which [old] drug might work. Then we came to know favipiravir is a drug of interest. So we thought, why not conduct trials? What's worse that can happen?" Favipiravir is an old drug, originally owned by the Japanese company Toyama Chemical and now off-patent, which is used to treat influenza. Listed by the World Health Organization as part of its experimental protocol for treating the disease, recent clinical trials in Wuhan and Shenzhen in China involving 340 patients, according to *The Guardian*, show that those given the medicine recover more quickly than others (they turned negative for the virus after a median of four days after becoming positive, compared with a median of 11 days for those who didn't get the drug). There are, however, suggestions that the drug isn't as effective in people with more severe symptoms.

"There are many old drugs like this which haven't been looked into for decades, which are not taken seriously anymore. But then an epidemic happens and there's panic and a forgotten drug shows promise," Herlekar says.

Herlekar's Lasa Supergenerics is currently working on an incredibly strained timeline. He has already applied to the Drug Controller General of India for a licence of this product (he expects permissions to come through within a day or two), while he is simultaneously developing the drug along with the Mumbaibased Institute of Chemical Technology. "Time is of the essence now," he says, and if it all goes according to plan, he plans to have the drugs ready for use in between four and six weeks. "You won't find one gramme of this drug right now [in India]. So mine will be the first one out."

Lasa Supergenerics isn't the only manufacturer interested in the drug. The Indian pharma giant, Cipla, is working along with CSIR-IICT in Hyderabad—to manufacture favipiravir, along with two other drugs, remidesivir and bolaxavir.

IICT director S Chandrasekhar and Cipla representatives did not respond to queries for an interview, but in a press conference a few days ago, Chandrasekhar said: "Favipiravir and remidesivir have already undergone clinical trials and, hence, we will not require much time to make them as the raw materials are readily available. It could take about six to 10 weeks to make

them. Process to start bolaxavir molecule will begin now."

Remdesivir, originally developed by the American biotechnology firm Gilead Sciences for use against Ebola fever, is currently one of the most talked-about drugs in dealing with the current pandemic. It was never, ultimately, used for Ebola fever, but lab tests have shown it works against a range of other RNA-based viruses, including the SARS coronavirus of 2003. According to early lab tests, it appears that it can block the replication of this current coronavirus too. There are various trials studying remdesivir's efficacy in COVID-19 patients underway, including two in Asia that will altogether involve around 1,000 infected people, whose results will probably show up sometime in late April.

Cipla also produces a range of other medicines either currently being used or in consideration for use against the virus, from the anti-HIV drug combination lopinavir/ritonavir, the antiviral oseltamivir, the antibiotic azithromycin to the other much talkedabout anti-malarial drug hydroxychloroquine.

Even if any of these drugs prove to be highly effective, in the event of a largescale outbreak, the issue will be whether drug production can be quickly scaled up. "My problem is, suppose coronavirus gets out of hand, how do we cope? I can only make a particular amount. I can't make for a million patients. But 5,000-10,000 patients we can cope," Cipla's Chairman YK Hamied told

The Hindu Business Line.

One much-anticipated drug, both very familiar in India and produced quite widely, is the anti-malarial drug hydroxychloroquine. Donald Trump has called it a "gamechanger", and although some small studies have suggested it is quite effective, larger studies are still required. "Anecdotal reports may be true, but they are anecdotal," Anthony Fauci, an immunologist who is a member of the Coronavirus Task Force set up by Trump and who routinely addresses the media, said recently. Another such drug is camostat mesylate, meant for pancreatic inflammation.

In India, some doctors report to have been able to treat COVID-19 patients with anti-HIV drugs. These include, apart from the Aurangabad patient, cases in Kerala and Rajasthan. However, according to a recent study in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, the lopinavir/ ritonavir combination didn't deliver any observed benefits above the standard care protocol in a randomised controlled trial of 199 COVID-19-infected patients.

One doctor currently treating some COVID-19 patients in India who is using the anti-malaria drug hydroxychloroquine along with the antiviral oseltami-

vir, usually used against H1N1, claims it is currently very difficult to say, because of the absence of rigorous scientific studies, which of the drug is better than the other. "Right now, there is evidence of the use of chloroquine. But [which drug is to be used by doctors in India] is meant to be recommended on an individual perception of what might work," he says.

The Aurangabad patient, now recovering at home, does not dwell much on the drugs she was given. "I think God was very kind to me," she says. ■



SCIENTISTS ARE USING OLD DRUGS THAT CAN EITHER PREVENT THE VIRUS FROM MAKING OUR CELLS INTO CORONAVIRUS FACTORIES OR STOP IT FROM USING THE PROTEINS IN OUR CELLS



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All Quiet in the Arena

There is nobility in defeat, but no grace in the death of sport By SUDEEP PAUL



HAT IS SPORT? What is it that man puts into sport? Himself, his world. Sport is intended as a statement of the human contract.'

-Roland Barthes

Following the decision to suspend the Premier League, Liverpool manager Jürgen Klopp issued a statement to the club's fans: "First and foremost, all of us have to do whatever we can to protect one another...This should be the case all the time in life, but in this moment I think it matters more than ever. I've said before that football always seems the most important of the least important things. Today, football and football matches really aren't important at all." For a German speaking on English soil, the irony, pathos and stoicism of his words would be self-evident.

For Liverpool, 25 points ahead of Pep Guardiola's all-recordssmashing Manchester City at the top of the table, two wins away from their first league title in 30 years—and their first in the Premier League era—the gods and fate seem to have come together to take it all away, again. For Liverpool, too, the not-guilty ruling last November in the 1989 Hillsborough Disaster had shut the last window for closure for the families of the 96 killed.

The global sport market was valued at \$489 billion in 2018. The coronavirus pandemic has laid that world to waste. Initially,

as UEFA and Europe's domestic leagues, fumbled with their responses, there was the spectacle of the absent spectacle. Matches were being played in empty stadiums, even in devastated Italy's Serie A. In the beginning, some leagues thought it could still be business-as-usual. Others moved their matches behind closed doors. Finally, everything was stopped. When UEFA announced the postponement of Euro 2020 by a year, it was giving up more than \$2.5 billion the tournament was estimated to have generated this year. Conmebol followed, announcing the postponement of the Copa América. And, for the first time in its 124-year modern history, the Olympics have been postponed. They had been suspended for the World Wars, but never postponed.

Long before (days and weeks are longer now) the governing bodies of the world's most popular sport, in its two

powerhouse continents, made up their minds, the Indian Premier League (IPL) had been postponed, the Australia-New Zealand ODI and T20 series had been called off, and the multiverse of American leagues had been shut down. The National Basketball Association alone rakes in \$9 billion in revenue, about half that amount from media contracts. Spanning TV deals and ticket sales, the losses bite not just organisers, teams and clubs but also players, the more so, the lower down the food chain they happen to be. That's why UEFA decided it was best to first allow the domestic leagues to finish their season, however late in the year.

'Death lies in our cots:/in the lazy mattresses, the black blankets,/lives a full stretch and then suddenly blows' —Pablo Neruda

Italians are singing from their balconies in the evening. Death isn't stalking their empty streets but their homes and hospitals. A 21st century pandemic, even in the land of Boccaccio, is more amenable to Breaking Bad, which is not a bad thing, Vince Gilligan having created perhaps the closest approximation to a novel for television 12 years ago, and presumably more aesthetically, intellectually and emotionally fulfilling, or purging if you will, than free subscriptions to online pornography Italians have reportedly been offered. Everybody can't sit around telling stories and Andrea Camilleri died last July. Everybody doesn't have people to tell stories to. Or, people to tell them stories. The death of sport, notwithstanding the promise of resurrection later in the year, is the silence at the heart of the void. When Neymar gave PSG something to celebrate against Borussia Dortmund before empty stands in the second-leg of the Champions League Round of 16, the fans were still roaring outside. Now, the arena has closed itself off completely. Everything has changed-or little has, if you happen to be a gamer or a subterranean nerd or both.

'Sport is a great modern institution cloaked in the ancestral form of the spectacle. Why is this? Why do men love sport?' French se-

Men', translated by Scott MacKenzie) had asked, and answered: 'First of all we must bear in mind that everything that is hap-THE ANCIENT AND THE pening to the player is also happening to ANCESTRAL TURNED INTO the spectator. But whereas in the theatre the spectator is only a voyeur, in sport A LIVED—AND SHARED he is also one of the actors ... Here, watch-SPECTACLE. THE BURDEN ing is not only living, suffering, hoping, understanding, it is also saying it ... it is to communicate.' The ancient and the ancestral turned into a lived—and shared—spectacle.

The burden of history and religion that sport carries within it is the cause. The spectacle, often ritualised, is the effect. Thus, this removal of sport from the lives of women and men is loss of a magnitude the individual fan or spectator, or participant by extension, cannot yet gauge even if they feel it. Because, when we watch, and communicate what we

miotician Roland Barthes ('Of Sport and

make of what we watch, we unconsciously hark back to that history. No two performances of a play or an opera are the same. But it follows the same script and we don't buy tickets to tomorrow's performance, if we've watched it today. Sport, unlike theatre, never repeats itself.

The scripted ritual ends each time the ball is kicked or bowled or pitched or thrown. Beyond that, the script is unwritten—including whether the pass will be completed or find the net, whether the bat will connect with the ball. Patterns of play and patterns of inspiration, close approximations and attempts at

OF HISTORY AND RELIGION THAT SPORT CARRIES IS THE CAUSE. THE SPECTACLE IS THE EFFECT. THE REMOVAL OF SPORT FROM LIFE IS A LOSS WE CANNOT GAUGE YET emulation, may be witnessed but football or cricket, like most sport, never repeats itself. Therefore, it is easy to forget the truism that sport is a 'struggle for survival', albeit 'reduced to the form of a spectacle...its dangers and humiliation removed.'

The bullfighter who terrifies the public with his bravery in the ring is not fighting bulls, but has lowered himself to a ridiculous level, to doing what anyone can do, by playing with his life: but the toreador who is bitten by the duende gives a lesson in Pythagorean music and makes us forget that his is constantly throwing his heart at the horns.' —Federico García Lorca

Bullfighting, barbaric and beautiful, is not a sport but a ritual. And yet, it is in many ways the ur-sport. And spectacle. Not every form of bullfighting—and it has existed across the world—has death scripted into its endgame. Jallikattu, for instance, is not meant to end with the death of either the bull or the youth hanging on to its hump. Many more human participants have died over the years from their injuries than bulls, although that doesn't

preclude the debate on cruelty to the animal. But Spanish bullfighting, especially the Corrida, cannot exist without death.

Singling out the Spanish bullfight, the Corrida to be precise although he doesn't make the distinction, Barthes says: 'All our modern sport can be found in this spectacle from another age, inherited from ancient religious sacrifices. But this theatre is not true theatre, for here the deaths staged are real.' And the death or deaths can't be repeated. Hemingway's Death in the Afternoon, exploring the aesthetics and metaphysics of the bullfight, makes that connection too. Barthes sees in it something more: 'The bull now appearing on the scene is going to die, and it is because this death is fatal that bullfighting is a tragedy-a tragedy in four acts, with death the epilogue.'

Eversince, thanks to Francisco Romero, commoners on foot replaced noblemen on horseback, this fatal finality of the bull's death has been contrasted against

the greater tragedy of the matador (or even a picador or one of the *banderilleros*) dying. For, when that happens—and if they happen to have a great poet as their friend—they are immortalised, as Ignacio Sánchez Mejías was by Federico García Lorca. The hierarchy makes a difference. Among the toreros, the matador is the real deal—and matadors die the most among toreros. But the bull's death is the expected climax of a ritual which varies because of the bullfighter's style. It is that style of displaying courage and enacting a real death that people go to see, that matadors earn their names for. That's the heart of the spectacle. Lorca saw the bullfight as a struggle with death on the one hand and with geometry on the other: 'The bull has its own orbit: the toreador

his, and between orbit and orbit lies the point of danger, where the vertex of terrible play exists' ("Theory and Play of the *Duende*", translated by AS Kline).

Perhaps the closest equivalent of the now mostly proscribed Corrida, when it comes to the aesthetics of danger and the play with death, is motorsports, Formula 1 racing in particular. F1 is a spectacle but death is not part of its official script. And yet, the sport keeps a window open for precisely that. When Ayrton Senna died in 1994, it wasn't just Brazil and the world losing one of the greatest sporting heroes of all time. Senna's death too be came part of the spectacle—the fatal, final act that was tragic (the sport learnt a few lessons) and made a legend of the hero-victim and his death.

'And what does the crowd see in the great racing driver? The conqueror of a far more subtle enemy: time. Here all of man's courage and knowledge is brought to bear on one thing: the machine. Through the machine man will conquer—perhaps also through this same machine, he will die.' Barthes was uttering an-

> other truism, known to all but expressed by few. Death is part of motor-racing. Yet, applied to Senna, Barthes' words were almost a premonition of this particular death, which came to frame the horror threatening to break free of the spectacle. So share my glory, so share my coffin.

I see, when alone at times,/ coffins under sail —Pablo Neruda

Death is a lonely matter, not least when you lie dead among the dead, without burial or cremation. Facing their worst crisis since World War II, Italians have been refamiliarised with this reality. Living can be lonely too. Being alone is not the same as being lonely. But the absence of weekend football, the breaking of the promise of a summer continental gala second only to the World Cup—the greatest show on the planet—is Coleridgian Life-in-Death. All the more so because in the street, there's death. If you step out, death may follow you back home. Denied the shared arena,

you may watch old games. But since sport never repeats itself, the old spectacle cannot be relieved, its original emotion can't be felt again in degree and expanse, just as it cannot be re-enacted.

Sport and death share a close bond, and that has nothing to do with the rituals of bloodsport, or with death in the arena. It is because sport is about the living, about reaffirming their faith in their own state of being alive, about winning the struggle for survival and then beginning all over again, the next time. There is nobility in defeat and in death. But there is no grace in the death of sport. It is, as Lorca saw after the fall of Ignacio Sánchez Mejías: 'Lodemásera muertey sólomuerte' ('The rest was death and death alone', translated by JM Gili). Thus sport, in the time of plague.

A CLOSE BOND THAT HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH THE RITUALS OF BLOODSPORT. IT IS BECAUSE SPORT IS About the living, About Reaffirming their faith in their own state of Being Alive, About Winning the struggle For Survival and then Beginning All over Again, The Next Time

SPORT AND DEATH SHARE





SEER STROKES

Sujith SN's rarely peopled landscapes prove oddly comforting in the time of lockdown

HE TEXTUAL PRELUDE to Sujith SN's solo Seer-Seenat Vadehra Art Gallery involves a brief but dense excerpt from an essay by art critic Prajna Desai. You wonder if you should just sidestep the text and proceed, but you can't contain your curiosity about the source of this new body of Sujith's work. What sets it apart? What new revelations has he stumbled upon in his avid deployment of watercolour as a medium?

Having followed the painter's practice before he won the FICA Emerging Artist award back in 2011, which he shared with Charmi Gada Shah, I was eager for an immersion into his visual universe. Desai made a mention of the act of looking implicit in the title. 'It is impossible to locate where boredom begins and contemplation ends, where the creative contagion of falling into a brown study as someone makes a work becomes a space of intensity that could reshape viewing. How much, before finally turning away, do you end up seeing of the sea?' she writes. That was as much as I was able to absorb while containing my enthusiasm

By Rosalyn D'Mello

for seeing the show and managing my conscience, which was punishing me for stepping out on a Saturday morning to view art when I should have been socialdistancing at home.

Luckily, Sujith's landscapes are rarely ever peopled, which was oddly comforting in a time of the coronavirus lockdown. They are frequently vacant and feature structures that seem desolate, abandoned, but that acquire an eerie presence through his deftly delineated lines. You, the viewer, are tasked with bridging the ontological categories of seer and



seen through the act of looking. There's a sense of familiarity to every scene that Sujith presents us with. There are recognisable elements: a stretch of wall, a seascape, granary-like structures that dot the countryside, fields. Yet, each painting has been composed as if it were an event, which feels uncanny, considering there is little information to suggest a happening, or a spectacle. You realise they must



There is a point when the surface will tell you that I have become an entity. It tells you 'I can live'. If you go further, you cross a safe zone, and it surprises you"

SUJITH SN artist



each be the consequence of 'hap': a kind of chance encounter, a moment when the artist chose to embody the position of a viewer. We are exposed to traces of the artist as a seer.

Over a phone conversation with Sujith, who was safely quarantined in his studio in Mumbai, in the suburb of Borivali, in Kadarpada, I learn I wasn't so off the mark in my observations. Not only does the 40-year-old artist spend more than an hour as a flâneur, walking the city's streets, his practice avowedly involves what we decided to refer to as 'notetaking'. It is an elaborate set of internalisations, involving photography and sketching, which then become part of what he calls his 'reference library'.

Suiith. whose studio is located within his apartment, starts with a scribble. Over the course of our hour-long exchange, I find he repeats this word often, using it as a shorthand for a space that is in between a textual stage direction and drawing. It doesn't sound like markmaking, but seems to closely resemble drafting. Sujith doesn't draw or paint. When he begins, he scribbles, and part of his initial artistic anxiety stems from trying to ascertain the fate of his scribbling in terms of scale. This is a significant part of his initial decisionmaking process. Should the format be largescale or small? He tries to translate this visual strategising into literary terms, for my better comprehension. "Do you want to write a novel or short story?" Calibrating how to expand upon a scribbled composition is the first quandary he must resolve.

Learning about his dilemma with scale offers an insight into the new works on the gallery's ground floor whose measurements linger between 28.5 x 47.5 inches, 41 x 70 inches, 34 x 80 inches and 34.5 x 82 inches. Besides scale, there are many recurring motifs: a crescent moon presenced by glow worm-like stars, walls with illegible text and singularly cast structures, slightly off-centre. Each is marked by a liquid luminosity that confers each painting with texture, substance and theatricality. You have to often remind yourself that Sujith is working with watercolour, and when you do, you





RIVER WITHOUT A BEND

are able to see swatches of great ease with the medium, and moments of reluctance, inhibition. Each painting is layered, but not necessarily intuitively, nor even calculatingly. The artist's vulnerability in confronting the medium head-on is deliciously obvious if you look past the surface, which is always 'set' as if the Arches paper upon which Sujith draws had enthusiastically consented to the collaboration.

He tells me he begins, usually, with a rust-coloured wash and builds on top of that. Sometimes he goes up to 15 washes. Sometimes he is sure a wash was a mistake, and that knowledge pleases him. It is what makes the process feel theatrical. "That is the beauty of watercolour, that is the complication of watercolour," he says. He perceives oil as a medium in which it's possible to hide your mistake beneath a coat of paint, while with charcoal, one can simply rub over, but with watercolour, the error is not as easy to erase, which he is sure lends to the medium an element of performativity. What we encounter as the surface is built through these layers of interventions and in this way his paintings seem to emerge from within themselves as organic sequences, their eerie imagery endowing them with a narrative dyslexia. "There is a point when the surface will tell you that I have become an entity. It tells you 'I can live'," he says. Sujith doesn't interpret this point as a potential finish line. "If you go further, you cross a safe zone, and it surprises you." He maintains, however, that you must be vigilant "not to abuse the paper". It is "the clock inside you" that tells you when to

surrender authorial agency. This clock is subject to many factors, both internal and external; metered as it is not solely by intuition or your own artistic temperament but the temperature outside and the humidity in the air. With watercolour, you don't exactly get a second chance, he reiterates.

Sujith presages the accident, incorporating it as portentous of an inherent knowledge that helps him extend his artistic intuition. He allows himself to be subject to 'drying time' and to elaborately 'make', not just 'portray', landscapes that don't quite seem worthy of being visually rendered as art. He sees the structures within his paintings as akin to objects from the past while also being signboards for the future. "It's about the now," he tells me.

When I ask him about his colour palette in the hope of unlocking some of the mysteries that lie at the heart of what makes his work uniquely his and so individuated from other kinds of landscapes, he suggests it has perhaps to do with how he plays with the transparency that watercolour allows you to achieve. He is apprehensive to speak more about it, for fear that I might dwell too much on his technical competence and understate its consequence. But it is, really, his subjective handling of the medium that makes his work so alluring. It is all the complex layering and the imbibing of accidental happenstance that draws you, the viewer, to become seer to his seen. A green hue is never just the result of the application of green; it is the result of at least four colours that have intermingled to evolve a fifth,

which is not green as much as it is the idea of a green-hued tonality. The work is an accrual of these depositions of washes and the continuous drawing out of shapes and figures and the relating of earth to sky while configuring the boundaries of the horizon.

I am still unsure where boredom and contemplation fit in within this universe of seeing, and perhaps I am still trying to synthesise my experience of the work with Desai's suggestion of optical complexity. And yet, I empathise with Desai's dilemma in having to articulate what it means to encounter Sujith's landscapes, because he conscientiously resists narrativising what he paints, and he isn't interested in informing you of the provenance of his image-references. He seems invested in using watercolour to articulate a feeling, and his works, while still rooted in the representational, acquire a fantastical dimension that is un-self-consciously theatrical.

One large painting, And River without a Bend, best substantiates this tendency. Thirteen figures stand at uneven distances from each other. But there is little to suggest they are in a purposeful queue. They just are. And while each one's face is cast in a halo-like glow, there is no clear source of luminosity. Their reflections meld into the river's liquid skin whose depiction Sujith has privileged by sectioning off the sky. Unseen within this scene but presaged, is the viewer, who activates the painting through their access of it, thus performing the optical complexity of seeing and being seen, bridging the categories through an embodied hyphen.





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OU MUST WEAR YOUR MASK!' SAID THE ANGRY MAN. HE was standing exactly one metre from Franco, as mandated by the latest government decree.

'But I don't have one,' Franco answered, as he tried to keep the dog under control. 'Stay put, Rocco, wait!' the boy said.

The guy didn't budge and stared at him, blocking his way.

Franco was so happy that the downstairs neighbour had asked him to walk their old golden retriever. And twice a day. Because of the lockdown, the boy who had stolen Franco's dog-walking job was now confined to his apartment across town. That meant \in_5 a walk or \in_{10} a day for Franco, a sum that came in handy since his parents had stopped giving him an allowance, now that he had turned 16. He had to find ways to fund his weekends. Although no one had weekends anymore.

Since the average age of people dying had begun to lower, he had become more and more nervous about walking Rocco. When he did go out, he stayed away from people as much as possible. Mostly, during the first days of the epidemic, before it was upgraded to a pandemic, he had seen only homeless people on the streets. One of them looked like a cave man—he had rolled a chicken bone into his oily fringe. Another bum had yelled at Franco, out of the blue, from 100 metres across Piazza Santa Maria in Trastevere:

'Ciaooo! How are youuu?! All good?!'

Franco had screamed back: 'I'm fine, thank you! How are you?'

Then a doctor from the shelter had tested positive and Franco started to keep even further away from the homeless. He used to dread going out, preferring to stay in his blue painted room playing videogames, just like all his friends. But during the first week he began to get restless and, now, he could hardly wait to take Rocco out. But... he was conflicted between needing some air and the fear of virus-carrying droplets sprayed in the air by asymptomatic carriers, the worst enemies.

The guy with the mask didn't look like a bum. He was one of those fifty-something men who had slowly begun to come out in the open more often, with the excuse of buying cigarettes or medicines.

'You must put your mask on!' he insisted.

'Look, I don't even have a mask.'

'You must wear a mask!'

'I'm sorry, I don't have one. Masks now cost €36. I don't have €36 to spend on a mask you must change every eight hours, ok? But even if I did, there are no masks in the shops right now, don't you know?'

'You have to wear a mask!' the man screamed.

Holding Rocco tightly on the leash, Franco looked at the man straight in the eyes and began to cough steadily towards him. Slowly, continuously. The man jumped back, nervously, yelling: 'Hey, watch it!' then turned around and walked away quickly.

The encounter had made Franco irritated, and tense. There was no law forcing people to wear masks. Besides, only the infected were supposed to wear them. There was so much confusing information swirling around. Some said wearing masks was worse, some swore that only sick people should wear them, others, like that guy, thought everyone should always wear one.

Life had changed overnight. No, that's not true. Life had changed slowly. At first, no one believed it would reach Rome. People were forwarding WhatsApp jokes: 'Can't get a table at a crowded restaurant? We can rent you a Chinese with the cough so everybody will leave!' said a Neapolitan voice in a recorded message, coughing.

When the virus started killing eight people a day in Lombardy, the same joke was used with people from Milan. When more than 300 people started dying every day, in all of Italy, no one, except the French, kept joking about it. They had made a video of an old Italian man sliding a pizza out of a brick oven and coughing a green pesto-like glob of saliva on it. The French ambassador had to be photographed eating pizza with the Italian foreign minister to calm the situation.

FICTION

Nevertheless, they each kept a metre apart from the other. The Germans blocked the borders to keep their ventilators in and infected Italians out. Someone in England said the self-isolation was just a sorry excuse for those lazy Italians to stay home from work. Europe was crumbling.

When the French started dying, too, that stopped the jokes altogether.

Franco was still looking for masks for himself and his mother, but these had completely sold out within two days, across the entire country. The black market was filled with fakes or with masks otherwise used only for DIY and gardening—not for medical use. The Carabinieri arrested dozens of people peddling them at high prices. His mother had written to his father, who was stuck in quarantine in Qatar, where he had been on a business trip, to ask him to send some. None to be found there, either. Finally, Franco's aunt in Los Angeles was able to send some, as the pandemic had yet to fully reach them.

The one positive thing out of all this, Franco thought, was that even though in the first week of lockdown his friends, his mother and the neighbours had started to become more nervous, like the man in the mask in Piazza San Callisto, by the third week people started to sing songs at the same time of day. At 6 PM, 8 PM and 10 PM, there would be these synchronic balcony and courtyard concerts all over Italy. Before, he'd rarely met the neighbours in the building across from his. He had seen them regularly and for years, of course. They were the familiar faces you sometimes say hello to, when your gazes lock and you're too close to avoid them, but whose names you'd never know. Or care to know.

Now they were all singing the same songs, at the same times, every day. The balcony songs, they were called.

One evening, as he quietly sang and watched everyone else sing together, it seemed to him as if they had overcome the virus, rather than being afraid of catching one. What kind of virus had kept them away from all this, away from such communal joy, found simply by opening their windows and singing with those who had been strangers before? He knew they must have had a virus: the virus of ambition, of busy-ness, of the constant need for entertainment and the desire for useless things. Perhaps... It was just that... they somehow looked... healed, as if they finally had let go of something they did not need, something, or many things, that had been weighing them down.

A friend on Insta had asked: 'How many of you are having nightmares every night? I keep dreaming of things falling out of my hands, of losing control of everything.'

Maybe it was that people were secretly relieved and glad of the chance to lose control, yet all the while balanced by tension, by the fear of dying.

Luca, a friend of his parents, had posted this: 'We both have nightmares, every night, Sara and I, but when we wake up, we realise reality is worse.'

But was it? Yes, it was, yet something strange was happen-

THERE WAS SO MUCH CONFUSING INFORMATION SWIRLING AROUND. SOME SAID WEARING MASKS WAS WORSE, SOME SWORE THAT ONLY SICK PEOPLE SHOULD WEAR THEM, OTHERS, LIKE THAT GUY, THOUGHT EVERYONE SHOULD ALWAYS WEAR ONE

ing to people, something good, despite the bad.

Franco felt stronger than the nightmares. He did pullups and pushups every morning and every afternoon. Online classes, which at first felt like a joke, became a moment to look forward to, a moment of connection. All those faces together on the screen... and, on the plus side, there was so much more time to play videogames online with his friends.

His father played the stock market and had told Franco, on a recent Skype chat from Doha, that he must think proactively, stay strong and positive. His father was like that, boringly encouraging, constantly, untiringly. Franco was fed up with all this encouragement, all the time.

'You need even more strength than normal,' his father insisted. 'Think of how the world will change. Who will go down? But, also, who will benefit? There's always someone benefitting. Which stocks would you bet on right now, for example? What is your intuition on this? You've always been good at it.'

Well, easy, he said, dump airlines and tourism. Buy cannabis and alcohol stocks. Companies making condoms and diapers. People will be having a lot more sex, that's for sure. Not that Franco had any experience of it. Not yet, at least. He didn't like to talk about that. He was waiting for the right person, although, now... But it made sense. People will want to celebrate and screw their way out of this. Like those singers on the balcony. Buy pharmaceuticals. Not just for vaccines. Once everyone is immunised that's a lost bet. Nor for tests, it won't play long unless you're shorting it. But tranquilisers. The world was undergoing a massive trauma and would need to be sedated.

As usual, when he was talking to someone on Skype, instead of looking at the other person's face, in this case his father's, he was studying his own. He realised he was, again, adjusting obsessively his unruly head of hair. It was always too puffy. But he couldn't cut it shorter because it would expose his forehead, which was objectively impressive. Franco also realised, studying himself on the screen while his father talked from a time zone where it was already dusk, that he still looked too much like Harry Potter. It had never been cute. He'd always hated that sanctimonious Harry Potter that everyone else seemed to love. Changing eyeglasses hadn't help. When his father had taken him on a trip to Japan, that's what everyone in the streets called him. 'Haru Potteru!' they would say, pointing at him.

When would they be able to take another trip like that? Would the world ever go back to that normal?

Franco had been surprised there hadn't been more violence and anarchy, like in the dystopian movies they had watched gleefully over the last few years. How long would the balcony songs last? Two, three weeks, a month perhaps. Then? Would it turn ugly? What about spring, when the sun comes out? How would they keep people home, inside?

And what about all the frail people and those who were already slightly neurotic, like his mother, who was showing signs of more instability? Or his cousin, for example, who was convinced he had the virus? He had been to the ER so often that when he walked in, they would say: 'Hey, there's Sandro again!'

This happened before they closed ER to walk-ins like him. Sandro then started to check his temperature every two hours. But no fever. Yet he felt he had this weird pain in his chest. Franco explained via WhatsApp that these were not the right symptoms. Sounded more like panic attacks.

Then Franco lost his patience: 'We're all being asked to just take a fucking break, Sandro, how hard could that be? Just reevaluate and rest. That's all!'

As he said this, he wondered how true it was. Was that all? Of course not.

One afternoon, Franco's mother, when they went out to shop for food with the proper printed permit, asked him if they could take a short walk by the river. She always walked briskly, as if chased by some invisible ghost. In public, she often keep a fixed grin, but you couldn't see it now, as they were both wearing the black masks sent by Franco's aunt. He had started to wear his all the time, his face disappearing under the cloud of hair, the big eyeglasses and the dark band across his chin. Sometimes, when he was alone in his room, he got so anxious that he put it on, even though there was no need, just to feel reassured and to calm his breathing down.

As they were walking along the Tiber, the sound of the waters below sounded crisper than usual, the smell of the fresh March air felt even fresher and, as he lowered the mask for an instant to breathe freely, the trees seemed to rejoice in the wind. The disappearance of the persistent flow of traffic that had flanked Rome's ancient river made it all so quiet now.

His mother suddenly yanked his elbow and begged him to cross the street.

'Quick, quick, quick!'

'What's wrong?'

'I've never told you this, but I'm terrified of... those...' she pointed to a row of trees lining up on the side of the Lungotevere.

'Pine trees?'

'Yes. Sorry. I've had this fear since I was a child but...' They shuffled over to the other sidewalk, turned right at Piazza Trilussa, eerily devoid of its crowd of pot smokers, drunkards and musicians who cheered up the evenings. No more *trattoria*, their outdoor tables busy with customers sitting in front of deep dishes filled with linguine. Even the busy Piazza della Malva was empty and, most painful of all, now even the La Boccaccia white pizza-to-go counter had shut. This was one of the things that hurt the most, not having his daily focaccia-like delicacy on the way back from Virgilio High, just over the bridge.

The person who seemed least disturbed by all this was the one at higher risk—his 78-year-old grandmother who lived in a city up north, smack in the heart of the Red Zone. They Skyped every day after lunch, when she would be drinking her coffee on her sunlit balcony, laughing, in good spirits. She said she'd been used to self-isolation since her husband died 25 years ago. Nonna practised yoga, watched her TV soaps, re-read some classics and went for short walks with her neighbour (keeping a metre between themselves) and her little Boston terrier. 'So far, so good,' she would say.

B UT THEN HOSPITALS started filling up, crossing their capacity. 'Patient number 1', a 38-year-old semipro runner, was hospitalised without diagnosing the virus and hospitals in Lombardy were the first to register dozens of deaths among staff as well as patients. Doctors and nurses had to be tubed up to ventilators and took precedence over the elderly. It was just protocol. Unless of course the elderly were doctors or nurses. And even medical staff who had tested positive were called back to work, as long as they had less than 38°C fever. They had to turn 10,000 young medical students into practising doctors, overnight. Then people in their sixties and fifties started to lose the privilege of using lifesaving machines. As the numbers went up, the new death tally was announced every day at 6 PM—the exact time the chorus of national anthems could be heard from balconies.

During the first week Franco kept playing football with his friends. Everyone was more edgy, and a good game helped shave away the tension. It was thought the virus was killing only older people. At least, that's what younger people wanted to believe. Then someone said it won't kill in hot weather. Then tropical countries proved also to be vulnerable, and then teenagers began to be hospitalised. Pneumonia, and... gone. And no more football games.

This is when Franco started to feel a little discomfort in his throat. First, he thought it was his ear. Just an infection returning from three months ago, when the doctor had prescribed antibiotic drops. He was not going to go paranoid like his cousin Sandro. He felt a nasty discomfort as he swallowed. The day after, a slight feeling of asphyxia. His forehead was hot. The new decree made it mandatory to report these symptoms

FICTION

to the emergency number. After two days with 37.5 fever, his mother dialled the number. She had chewed her lip over it but decided to go ahead after a sleepless night. This was a dangerous move. Franco knew of kids his age who had called the number, had gone in for a test and never came out. You couldn't even have their ashes back. How could he tell if the feeling of shortness of breath was the virus or if it was just... panic?

He started to cry quietly in his room, with the door locked. He just wanted to be with his friends. This is what he missed the most. To be able to hang out, as he had done only a few weeks before. That's all. If only everyone could sing together every day, but also still be able to see each other for a stroll or at Bar Settimiano, where everyone had known him since he

S

HOW LONG WOULD THE BALCONY SONGS LAST? TWO, THREE WEEKS, A MONTH PERHAPS. THEN? WOULD IT TURN UGLY? WHAT ABOUT SPRING, WHEN THE SUN COMES OUT? HOW WOULD THEY KEEP PEOPLE HOME, INSIDE?

was a child...

He was asked to go to a testing centre. Immediately. And told not to take anything special, to just show up, alone. It was nearby, in that hospital in Piazza San Cosimato where he played football with his friends, before Rome and every other city had turned into deserts and before every balcony sported a tricoloured Italian flag, in the largest show of patriotism since Fascism 100 years ago, and before the waters in the Venice canal looked clean and pristine, as all the world's media reported, trying to find something positive to divulge. Everyone talked of Italian excellence yet Franco thought: *If we're so excellent, how come we have more dead people than all the other countries*?

Franco pressed the buzzer of the small gate. A lady in full protective gear came out, opened it and led him to a large room filled with empty rows of beds where a few other patients were waiting. They were all keeping themselves at least one metre away from each other. When the nurse came back, she called out his name and took him to an examination room where they stuck a cotton swab up his nose.

'It might feel like your eyes want to pop out,' the nurse said, through her mask and goggles. 'But be patient, it'll only take five seconds, even though it'll feel like an hour of torture.'

He squirmed. 'Be still, please... There, done...' Another nurse walked him back to the room, taking him through an enchanted cloister filled with olive and fir trees. This little Eden led to a wing of the building called '*Malattie Infettive*'. Once back in the large room, the nurse gave him two pills to swallow and a paper cup filled with water.

'We should know the results in about 24 hours, if not sooner,' she said.

'OK. So, I have to come back tomorrow?'

'No, no. You have to stay here with the others until we have the results.'

'But... I don't have anything to sleep in, toothbrush, nothing...'

'Someone can bring it in. You have a phone, right?'

An hour later, his mother arrived with his package—but she had to stay outside. She was not allowed to see him, not even through a window. Franco lay in bed trying not to think, or to cry again—he didn't want to embarrass himself.

He felt someone standing close to his bed.

'I told you,' a voice, coming from about a meter away. 'You should've worn a mask,'

He looked up. The eyes looked familiar. But he couldn't tell who this person was. Perhaps a friend of his father, he thought, hinting a smile which died on his face as soon as he realised who it was. The angry guy, of course. He was also a patient there, waiting for results.

'It doesn't seem to have helped you much,' Franco said, through his own black mask.

'I only hope I haven't caught it from you. If I did...'

'I guess we'll find out tomorrow.'

Then the main lights went off. Franco checked his phone. It was already 10 PM. Yet how could anyone sleep at a moment like this? He certainly couldn't, especially after that veiled threat. He could hear the others fidgeting, tossing and turning, all of them one metre—or more—apart.

At 11 the lights came back on, suddenly. Everyone's eyes took a second to adjust as the main door opened and the female nurse walked in, followed by four muscled-up male nurses in protective gear.

'We have the results,' she said. 'All the negatives can leave; all the positives have to follow me. Negatives, you're asked to self-quarantine in your own rooms, if you have one at home, or, if you don't, to stay at least one metre away from everyone else for another two weeks. If you have symptoms again, come back here for a second test.'

Then she called their names and ha-nded them a piece of paper. The man from Piazza San Callisto looked at the note, then immediately glanced at him. Franco clutched his paper but was afraid to look. ■



Carlo Pizzati is a journalist and author. His most recent book is Bending Over Backwards: A Journey to the End of the World to Cure a Chronic Backache

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BOOKS

Nowhere Man

In his novel about a Sri Lankan migrant in Australia, Aravind Adiga makes the reader care with his well-earned facts By Suhrith Parthasarathy

S'ILLEGAL' IMMIGRANTS go, Danny-short for Dhananjaya Rajaratnam the protagonist in Aravind Adiga's new novel, Amnesty, stands on a lintel of minor privilege. Tortured for being a Tamil, Danny quickly realises that there's little point in continuing to live in Sri Lanka. So off he goes to Australia, not on a boat, like so many others, but on a student visa, brimming with hope of starting a new life. But days into college, he realises he has been ripped off. His prospective degree, he finds, will not only be worthless, in that he'll be left with no job at the end of it, but he'll also be forced to return to Sri Lanka. Only this time, he'll also be depleted of all of his and his father's savings.

Perhaps he ought to have taken the boat, like his cousin who fled to Canada and won himself freedom. But what choice does Danny have now? Surely, he cannot head back home. So, he drops out of college. But to now seek asylum is to risk deportation. The very thought brings to him a flood of memories: prime among them, memories of a Sri Lankan officer holding a burning cigarette to his forearm. To them, being Tamil was crime enough.

Danny begins, therefore, a new life. He works two jobs. He shelves things at a grocery store, in whose storage room he also sleeps, and he cleans houses freelance for the rich. This life, though, is a life of ceaseless scrutiny—every moment is an exercise in the practice of mimesis. He wonders how in a city like Sydney one tells who a foreigner is. He makes a chart. He searches for the 'magic keys to Australianness'. He mimics 'a man with an Australian spine'. He grows out his hair, which he had kept immaculately groomed for two years. He spends nearly 50 Australian dollars on reddish-brown highlights. He wears shorts in public. And, more than anything else, he works on his language, to grow 'the tongue of an Australian', as Adiga puts it. 'Never say *receipt* with the *P*. Be generous with *I reckon*. Add a loud *Look*—at the start of the sentence, and *ridiculous* at the end. If you are happy, talk about rugby... if you are unhappy, talk about rugby... And do not *ever call* it rugby.'

This tale of Danny flitting from illegal immigrant into an ostensible Australian Adiga tells with customary elegance and humour. The prose is crisp and unfussy, and it never strains to be noticed. But Adiga also discerns what many others do not. That he does so on a subject of such complexity is to his great credit. Other recent novels of migration—and there are arguably few issues as morally pressing as the quandary of a refugee—have proved particu-



larly controversial. Some, like Jeanine Cummins' American Dirt, have gone horribly wrong. They feel like works of an inattentive interloper. In her scathing critique of American Dirt, the New York Times' Parul Sehgal invokes the journalist Katherine Boo's hypothesis: that when we imagine lives that are not our own, when a novel seeks to replicate reality, the 'earned fact' attains special significance. And earning facts takes research. Bald assertions tend to unravel quickly. 'Getting it right,' as Boo says, 'matters way more than whether you can make people care.'

Adiga not only seems to have earned his facts, but he also makes us care. *Amnesty* might only be a slender novel, but it is a book for all times, and especially one for the times that we live in. At its best, it does what fiction is meant to do. It asks of us questions of deep moral purport. What would we have done had we been in Danny's place? In this case, the answer, as we consider a day in his, partakes a complicated ethical predicament. For the day that Adiga gives us is no ordinary day. It is a day of a murder.

Danny is driving his vacuum nozzle through the rugs at House Number 4 in Erskineville—which is in that part of Sydney 'where the fit and young people ate salads and jogged a lot but almost never cleaned their homes'—when he learns of the killing. Radha Thomas whose home he used to clean, House Number Five to Danny—was found floating on a creek. She had been stabbed to death, and the police were describing the injuries, to her neck and head, committed by a knife, as horrific. Peering from House Number Four,

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH



The prose is crisp and unfussy, and it never strains to be noticed. Aravind Adiga discerns what many others do not. That he does so on a subject of such complexity is to his great credit

Danny can see a White man standing at the window of House Number 5. It is Mark, Radha's husband, his face red and distraught. Danny is certain he knows who the killer is: it is, he's sure, Prakash, Radha's lover, House Number Six to him. Danny knows their every secret. He knows of their illicit ways, their affair, their addiction to gambling. Radha and Prakash had taken a pathological liking to Danny. They mocked his diligence, by calling him different names: 'Legendary cleaner', 'Gandhi', and 'Nelson' after Mandela. But their neurotic ways, their frequent fights, their drinking and their impetuous

and often dangerous wagering had all become too much for Danny to take. So, he quit cleaning their homes.

But what should he do now? Should he go to the police with what he knows? Would he not be deported if he reported what he knew? 'If I tell the law what I know about Prakash,' Danny thinks, 'I tell the law what I know about myself.' But, at the same time, stay quiet and there was every chance of a murderer escaping the clutches of the law and, who knew, perhaps even committing another killing.

As the plot begins to unravel, with Danny's phone buzzing with messages

from 'House Number Six', his dilemma is complicated by what Prakash knows about him: the fragility of his stay in Australia, his status as an illegal. But Aussies, Danny repeatedly tells himself, 'are a logical people, a methodical people'. This is a country where mistakes can be undone. He often pictures himself standing before an audience of 'logical, sensible Australians', pleading his case. Telling them that for four years his only family in the country had been the gun which stared at Danny at the heart of the city, an ancient naval cannon, a trophy of the *Emden*, 'that had shelled Chennai in World War I, becoming a byword for terror even down in Tamil-speaking Sri Lanka'. Anything, he thinks, can happen in Australia, 'because the world's upside down here'.

TOW DANNY CONFRONTS his position is at the heart of the novel. And not everything that unfolds sounds wholly tenable. But even as Adiga builds up Danny's character, even as he tells us about Prakash and Radha, their curiously eccentric relationship and their problems with the dice, and even as he allows the plot to unwind, he gives us a picture of Sydney—which, to Danny, represents an allegory of his own life, a 'labyrinth of remembered er-and uneven distribution of power. It is here, in drawing this picture, by fleshing out the paradox of the rule of law, that Adiga is at his dazzling best.

When Danny imagines himself in front of a judge, stating his case, he thinks to himself, for a moment, that the lion and the unicorn, which represented the law are not nearly as menacing as 'any symbol connected to the government of Sri Lanka was'. But in Sri Lanka too, no one ever seemed bad, whether they were Tamil or Sinhala or Muslim. But evil existed. 'A man puts on a uniform, and becomes the uniform,' Adiga writes. This, Danny realises, is perhaps as true in Sri Lanka as it is in Australia.

The Subcontinent at Ease

A history of a brief window of cooperation casts an interesting light on India's relations with Pakistan

T IS HARD TO describe the feelings of persons frozen in a photograph clicked in New Delhi on April 8th, 1950. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and his Pakistani counterpart Liaquat Ali Khan are engrossed in signing something even as officials from the two countries look on solemnly, giving away no emotions. But for millions of Muslims and Hindus trapped as minorities in the two countries, the agreement was a hope for security. In the months preceding the agreement, a second exodus on the Subcontinent had begun, no less violent than the one in 1947. Hindus from East Bengal poured into Indian territory while Muslims desperately left for Pakistan. Lives, livelihoods and property were lost. The agreement, against the backdrop of the first war waged by Pakistan to wrest Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) in 1947-1948, was nothing less than pure will on the part of the leaders in the two countries.

Pallavi Raghavan's Animosity At Bay: An Alternative History of the India-Pakistan Relationship, 1947-1952 is truly the stuff of alternative history. For one, it recovers the idea of cooperation between India and Pakistan that is now known to either specialists in relations between the two countries or very few historically inclined readers. Then, it casts this cooperation in a realist light and not the fog of some'aman ki aasha'. The truth of the matter is that each aspect of cooperation-from division of assets between the two countries, the Nehru-Liaguat Pact, the dense meetings over valuing and sorting evacuee property and, finally, the Indus Water Treaty of 1960-were all part of state-building on both sides. They were the products of hard-fought negotiations and not altruistic give-and-take.

All this was necessitated by the sundering of the organic unity of India imposed by the British over the past two centuries. When India was divided, the division posed vexed questions: how could roads, canal networks and immoveable assets be divided? The movement of people was violent and confirmed the historical pattern that whenever mass movements of populations take place on the Subcontinent,



By Siddharth Singh

violence is the inevitable byproduct. Yet, in the face of these odds, political leaders and civil servants calmly went about fashioning solutions to problems that had not been seen before. For a period, it worked.

It is interesting to note that Raghavan's period begins in 1947, when within weeks of Partition the two countries went to war. But almost at the same time, solutions to division of assets. the innumerable problems associated with people moving from one country to another and a host of other issues were sorted by people sitting across a table. But it is equally interesting to see that she ends her account in 1952. By that vear, forces were in motion that would ultimately throttle democracy in Pakistan. The Indus Waters Treaty, whose 'prehistory' Raghavan sketches in her book, was signed when Pakistan was ruled by a military dictator.

This process of cooperation had a hard upper limit. In late 1949, some months after the Karachi Agreement was signed, cementing the ceasefire line in J&K, Prime Minister Nehru hinted at a framework under which the two countries would resolve outstanding issues peacefully. A declaration jointly made with Pakistan that neither country would declare war on each other was considered as an option. Modelled on the Kellogg-Briand pact of 1928 that abjured war among European powers, the potential India-Pakistan declaration came at a fraught moment. The idea was mooted before the Nehru-Liaguat Pact was signed in April 1950. It was a particularly tense moment in relations between the two neighbours and, for a time, it seemed war was imminent. India had concentrated troops and war materials at key military locations in Punjab and there was great uncertainty in the air.

Ultimately, after a huge volume of correspondence between the two Prime Ministers, the idea died. By late 1950, the sense of urgency that had driven the two sides to think of the no-war agreement that option had waned. But it was not just changed circumstances that killed the possibility. By that time, the two countries had sketched out their approaches to settling disputes, a pattern that continues till today. India wanted a agreement. India, which held much of what it wanted, saw no reason to agree to a detailed listing for arbitration.

Raghavan notes this: 'The reasons that the correspondence failed in 1950 were not, in the end, particularly surprising—indeed, they were structural: for Pakistan, signing such a declaration would have implied its formal acquiescence to the status quo in Kashmir. In India, Nehru's bureaucracy cautioned

Pallavi Raghavan's book is on an interesting period of fleeting cooperation between the two countries at a very difficult time in their history



(L-R) Lord Mountbatten, Jawaharlal Nehru, Liaquat Ali Khan and Field-Marshal Sir Claude Auchinleck in New Delhi, March 1947

general declaration that would commit the two countries against aggression on each other. In contrast, Pakistan wanted a detailed agreement listing options for arbitration and third-party mediation on issues like J&K, Junagadh and the status of evacuee properties in the two countries. This was not a mere historical accident but was built into the logic of the situation. Pakistan, a weaker country, wanted to pursue its claims using any opportunity and option, even a no-war implacably against the future risks of committing to the correspondence.' In fact, the Indian position was quite clear even before Nehru had uttered the first public word hinting at the no-war option in late 1949: in a note on January 3rd, 1949 where he listed India's position on contested issues like J&K, evacuee property, Junagadh and canal waters. But in the same note he said, 'All these questions should not come in the way of the declaration... It is in order to ease the situation between the two countries... that we have made our proposal.'

This was not the end of cooperative agreements between the two countries. In September 1960, a treaty on sharing of river waters in the Indus system was signed. That agreement has stood the test of time. Even in moments of heightened tension, the meeting of the Indus commissioners of the two countries have continued. In the 21st century, Pakistan has sought to interpret the treaty to its advantage by claiming Indian violations in river water projects in J&K. That came to nothing and, contrary to noises in India, the treaty has remained unscathed.

Raghavan's book is on an interesting period of fleeting cooperation between the two countries at a very difficult time in their history. Pakistan, an ideological state in its very conception, did not let that idea come in the way of cooperation with India. India, in turn, did what it could to ease the dislocation of Partition. For both countries, this was the path to consolidation of statehood. Defence of 'ideological frontiers' would come later. The book is a useful addition to the literature of cooperation among estranged countries that have been divided along ethnic and religious lines.

Is there hope for cooperation now, given this history? Liberals on both sides will be delighted to read the book and use it to project their fantasies further. They have every right to do so. But a dose of realism is in order. For Pakistan, getting J&K 'back' is essential for the ideological glue that lies at the heart of its nationhood. In India, even with a dramatically altered conception of nationalism, territory remains at the heart of its nationalist project. Even in its primordial definition, 'India' is the territory from 'Mount Meru to the Sea'. If anything, the history of J&K from 1947 until 2020 is one of increasing territorial unification with the rest of the country. Pakistan, with its disorganised economy and dysfunctional politics, is unlikely to give up and equally unlikely to get hold of the prize it seeks. Peace is a busybody in this process.

Pandemic Diets

Will the coronavirus change what we eat and how we eat?



By Shylashri Shankar

A CCORDING TO my mother, there are three things that are of interest to everyone: food, sports and health. With the COVID-19 pandemic on us, food and health have never been more viscerally linked than now. We are all being asked to self-quarantine and stop our social activities; meeting friends in pubs and restaurants and clubs are

on the 'avoid' list. In Britain, those above 70 are being asked to stay at home for the next four months. My English friend who has elderly parents, both of whom have had several stints at the hospital for serious ailments, has spent much of this week ensuring that they have everything they need.

How did people survive (or not) the Black Death in the 16th century? In the TV series *Dining with Death*, a scholar points out: "Since emotions also affected health, physicians advised that melancholy should be avoided. Plague regimens advised people to: 'Keep good company, drink good wine, and eat good meat." Others spoke of avoiding melancholy. Eating together also provided the psychological reassurance found in social ritual. Such reassuring rituals were visible all over Europe.

Fast-forward to present-day Italy: Scenes of serenades and concerts from the balconies of quarantined Italians have been streaming on the internet. Social distancing, they have rightly realised, does not mean human distancing. In fact, it is the reverse: the more time one spends at home, the more social one can be in engaging with neighbours and friends through chats between balconies, and via Zoom and Skype, and in block or street parties where everyone eats and drinks in their own homes but in full view of the others. This week an apartment complex in Gurugram had a balcony-block party.

Social distancing need not produce melancholy and depression, especially in those who live alone. We are luckier than those in the earlier centuries who did not have access to virtual communications. It is possible to eat with others virtually pour out a glass of wine or beer or juice, put your laptop on the dining table (after sanitising it, of course) and log into Zoom or Skype or something else, and converse with your friends or loved ones. It will stave off loneliness and depression; a healthy mind is, after all, very important in fighting off any ailment. My mother, for instance, has tea in New Delhi while listening to her granddaughter play the piano in Dallas via Skype. She has lived in the same apartment complex for 30 years, but has connected with her neighbours only now, during her morning walks.

Laura Spinney, the author of *Pale Rider: The Spanish Flu of* 1918 and How It Changed the World, says that whenever contagion is a threat humans have practised 'social distancing' understanding instinctively that steering clear of infected individuals increases the chance of staying healthy. In 1918, the spread of the Spanish Flu resulted in social distancing that took the form of quarantine zones, isolation wards and prohibitions on mass gatherings—where they were properly enforced, these measures slowed the spread. As many as 18 million Indians died in the pandemic—the greatest loss in absolute numbers of any country in the world. British colonialists did not bother to enforce these measures, fuelling resentment among Indian nationalists and increasing the calls for independence.

With the booming transport system—planes, trains, buses, cars—contagion is much faster for us now than it was during the Spanish flu in 1918 or the earlier pandemics.

Here are some facts we do know about SARS -CoV:

1) The virus stayed stable at 4°C and at room temperature (20°C) for at least two hours on a range of surfaces and in water.

2) SARS-CoV was inactivated by heat treatments of 90 minutes at 56°C, 60 minutes at 67°C or 30 minutes at 75°C. UV irradiation for 60 minutes of the virus in culture inactivated it.

3) Any food not cooked to a significant degree are more at risk; this is even the case for food processed with a 'Listeriacook' of 72°C for two minutes. Also, chilling and most likely freezing is not readily going to destroy this virus and therefore chilled and frozen food sourced from major outbreak zones should be risk-assessed.

4) Ethanol is very effective in killing the virus (so washing hands with ethanol-infused soaps is very important before touching food—and in general too).

This means that logically one should eat food cooked well (either slow-cooked or at high temperatures)—so salads may not be ideal. We can only kill the virus in food by thoroughly heating it during cooking.

Historically, the origins of food taboos appear to be linked to infectious diseases. These include prohibitions on drinking raw animal blood, on sharing cooking and eating utensils and plates between meat and other food, and on eating pork in Judaism and Islam (most likely concerned about dangerous pig tapeworms). Even today, the consumption of raw milk is illegal in many countries, to prevent spread of bovine (cow) tuberculosis.



HISTORICALLY, THE ORIGINS OF FOOD TABOOS APPEAR TO BE LINKED TO INFECTIOUS DISEASES. THESE INCLUDE PROHIBITIONS ON DRINKING RAW ANIMAL BLOOD, ON SHARING COOKING AND EATING UTENSILS AND PLATES BETWEEN MEAT AND OTHER FOOD

While it is not clear what taboos COVID-19 going to create (will the custom of Middle Easterners eating from the same plate die out?), the reliance on traditional remedies seems to have gained more adherents worldwide. A rumour in India that the virus is linked to the poultry industry has led to the collapse in the price of chicken and an increase in the prices of potatoes and vegetables. The sales of raw turmeric have shot up, with an over 300 per cent increase in demand for turmeric from the UK and Germany, but the cancellation of flights means that merchants have not been able to take advantage of the demand. Ayurveda says having raw turmeric in hot milk keeps the respiratory system clear.

During the plague in the 17th century in England, a band of

thieves routinely broke into the houses of plague victims and looted the corpses without ever falling ill with the disease themselves. It transpired that they were a family of perfumers who coated their bodies with oil containing lavender essential oil which they knew protected them from the deadly bacteria. They seemed to have used a combination of lavender, rosemary, camphor, nutmeg, sage and cinnamon in a suspension of vinegar and garlic.

If nothing else, COVID-19 may bring back the habit of washing one's hands even if one is eating with a spoon.

What about ordering in food? Is it safe to consume it? There is no evidence as yet that the virus can be transmitted through food but there is growing evidence that you can ingest the virus shed in faeces through poor handwashing. So do be certain of the restaurant's food-handling standards before ordering in. Domino's Pizza has introduced 'zero contact delivery' across its all 1,325 restaurants applicable on prepaid deliveries. This means that the delivery person will place the carry bag in front of the customer's door and step back a safe distance after ringing the bell. Oh, and do double the tip think of how much danger the delivery person faces in going from house to house.

The bubonic plague (1348-1350), also known as the Black Death, temporarily reversed the power imbalance by making elites suffer while peasants and serfs benefited from the increased demand for labour. Wages rose, a fact that was recorded quite resentfully by the monks of Rochester in 1348. 'An inversion of the natural order, [and] those who were accustomed to have plenty and those accustomed to suffer want, fell into need on the one hand and into abundance on the other.'The diet of the lower orders improved substantially. Before 1348, the diet of an English peasant was bread and oatmeal pottage, a few scraps of meat washed down with some thin ale. After the Black Death, they ate beef and mutton instead of bacon, wheat bread instead of barley and

fresh fish instead of salted herring. Here is a grumble from an English landowner: '... Because such a man is hired as a member of your household, he scorns all ordinary food... he grumbles... and he will not return tomorrow unless you provide something better.'

This, alas, is not going to be true for the poor today after COVID-19. The economic hardship that awaits us this year will impact those lower down in the economic strata more disproportionately than the wealthy. If anything, their diets may worsen as businesses downsize and cut jobs. There is a crying need for governments (especially ours) to immediately come to the aid of the indigent and the needy, especially those working in the informal sector.

NOT PEOPLE LIKE US



RAJEEV MASAND

Breakup? Rubbish!

Stories about **Ranbir Kapoor** and **Alia Bhatt**'s breakup are not true; never mind what the tabloids insist. Rumours that it's over between the couple gained momentum last week after Ranbir could not be spotted in any of the photographs from Alia's birthday celebrations. Alia put up pictures hanging out with her girlfriends and from what appeared to be a gathering with her family. But Ranbir was nowhere in sight in either set of photos. That prompted the breakup narrative. A source close to the pair reveals that Ranbir did see her on her big day; she just didn't put up any pictures he was in.

The speculation around their relationship and the stories about the breakup began appearing in so many entertainment publications (one paper suggested that he was caught fooling around with a married socialite at her out-of-town farmhouse), it prompted the usually reticent actress to pointedly rubbish them. No, she didn't come out and address the rumours, but she did respond to an Instagram video that Ranbir's mother **Neetu Singh** put up of her husband **Rishi Kapoor** following a yoga tutorial that he was streaming from his phone to his television while self-isolating. In the comments section, Alia posted a seemingly innocuous 'Superb'.

Two days later, she posted a photograph of herself staring at the sunset, accompanied by a postscript to her caption that read: '[photo] credit to my all time fav photographer RK' and followed it up with a pink heart emoji. Those that know her agree that it's very uncharacteristic of Alia to flaunt her relationship, but they also seem to be convinced it's a direct shutdown of the breakup rumours. Remember you read it here first (weeks ago to be fair), marriage is still scheduled for December. Unless the coronavirus throws plans into disarray.

Self-Help

The boredom and frustration owing to being locked indoors along with no house help have inspired movie stars to show off their domestic side in Instagram posts and live videos—the equivalent of being in a Bigg Boss house.

Earlier this week, **Katrina Kaif** put out a 'tutorial video' of her rinsing her dishes. **Deepika Padukone** showed off a chocolate dessert she whipped up for **Ranveer Singh** and *Soni* actress **Geetika Vidya Ohlyan** posted a video of her scrubbing the floors to inspire others to do their own housework while their help also self-isolate.

From gym regulars like **Ishaan Khatter**, we got workout videos from home. Others like **Anushka Sharma** posted on the importance of washing one's hands regularly with videos demonstrating just how precise and careful one needs to be.

For a change, regular Joes are discovering that when it comes to social distancing and isolation, glamorous film stars aren't all that different or special. Bigger homes, better cameras, perhaps. But the boredom and the need to stay connected (even virtually will do!) are clearly universal.

Is It Over Finally?

For some time now there have been whispers that a prominent film studio may be folding up its local production businesses. But given that the studio has had a steady

roster of releases over the last few years, those rumours have remained just that: gossip. However, that eventuality began to loom large last year when the studio was swallowed by a global conglomerate. Plus the fact that their recent Hindi films have failed to make the cut does not bode well for its future.

With the studio head recently stepping down after a long run, the chatter has started again. There's

also the added blow of coronavirus quashing the business of that one new release from the studio that was performing promisingly at the box office.

According to the industry grapevine, the creative head of the studio has begun talks with other outfits. Most insiders expect that the person will land on their feet given their reputation for sniffing out quality material. But there is also the matter of the dozens of employees (many who've been around since the start) who could lose their jobs in an already vulnerable market.





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