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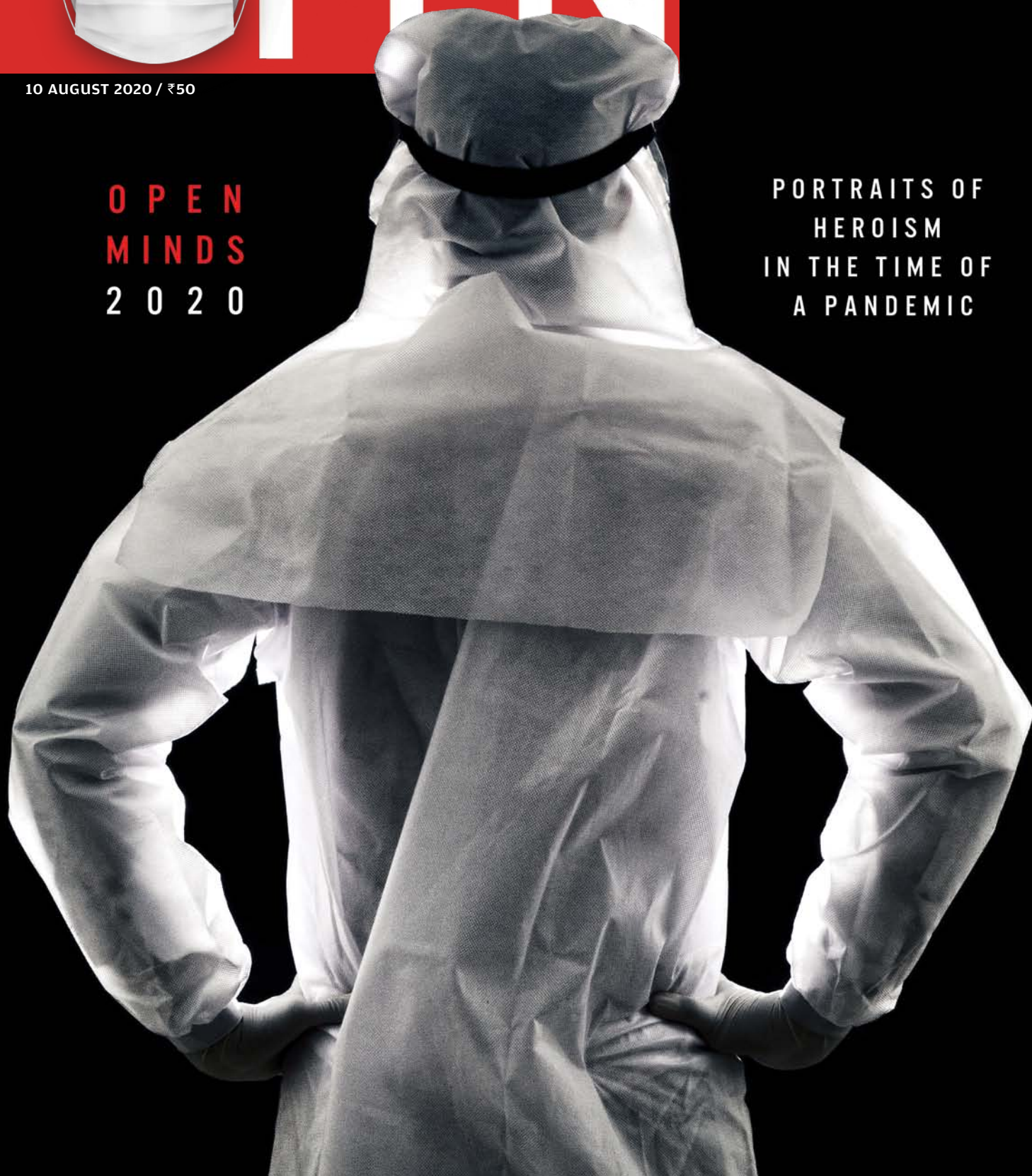
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PORTRAITS OF  
HEROISM  
IN THE TIME OF  
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**S PRASANNARAJAN**

# Ideas and Idealism

**W**e haven't overcome yet. We are still in the midst of a pandemic that has, apart from making us poorer and fearful, changed the many comforting certainties of life. It's been a little more than four months now, and we are still learning how to be reborn in a world we can no longer afford to take for granted. We have come a long way, as if we have already crossed eternities, from the first curious days when the coronavirus was so distant from us, when it was someone else's hell. Then the Chinese city of Wuhan was an isolated horror, and we thought geography would save us, and that was before the city became a story of information blockage and totalitarian temptations, for behind the much-touted Chinese

containment of the virus lay the simulated reality of a regime that feared facts, and feared the citizen who dared to speak the truth. The unsolicited martyrdom of Li Wenliang, the Wuhan doctor who was harassed by the state for spreading rumours—Chinesespeak for unpleasant news—and eventually killed by the virus he had warned about, would continue to remind us what we could have done, and what we should not have done, while faced with the first signs of a pandemic ('A Requiem for Li Wenliang', *Open*, April 20th). The original story in Chinese was about suppression and evasion, and it would soon be followed elsewhere by denials, dismissals and cynicism—and even libertarian machismo. The virus would prove to be more determined than the politician, and it would take collapsing healthcare systems and a mounting death count to make the politician receptive to science and expertise, to discard the false morality of life versus livelihood, and to realise that there was only one choice: acknowledge and act. Everyone didn't do that.

India did respond with a greater sense of urgency, and an early lockdown of the country brought out the enormity of the crisis, and clarified how much, for how long, we need to give up larger portions of our liberty to survive. In disruption and isolation, we accepted the inevitability of suffering and the humility of being alive. Courtesy the extended lockdown, we were in the right mindset of fear and responsibility as the virus multiplied, breached barriers and waited. Unlike some of his counterparts in some other democracies, Prime Minister Narendra Modi didn't downplay the threat; he didn't promise anything he was not sure about fulfilling. His lockdown addresses were more motivational talk than matter-of-factness, and they were intended to introduce India to the coming phases of austerity and hardship. The experts would do the talking separately, dealing with data and details, and that would only mean more bad news. India is now the world's third most infected country, and it once again tells a story we have been avoiding for so long: the





who insisted that knowledge was the best resistance till a vaccine came along. When fear clouded perceptions and conditioned our social relationship, there was someone with the authority to clarify and emphasise, to reassure without exaggeration. The expert, usually a hate figure for populists and demagogues, reclaimed his space as the virus spawned a series of crazy remedies and comforting lies. And for researchers and vaccine developers, a pandemic was a once-in-a-lifetime challenge to explore the farthest frontiers of science. When most of us stayed at home, and when thousands of the uprooted labourers could not afford that luxury, and most horrifyingly, when the infected became the stigmatised, there were a small number of Indians who displayed kindness and courage in abundance.

Social decencies of a few restored the dignities of many.

nature of our political inheritance and how we manage it. It takes a human crisis of this magnitude to reveal the inequalities of a country aspiring to be at the higher tables of global power. So many salvation theories—all variations of socialism—were played out by the previous redeemers, but, glitz apart, we remained more *Pather Panchali* than *Crazy Rich Asians*. If there is one constant in Indian political life, it's the socialist model by any other name. When we are instinctively indebted to a bad past, we are increasingly incapable of escaping its worst legacies. At the peak of the pandemic, our healthcare system could not cope. We could not mask the systemic failure.

That said, it was not social distancing and self-isolation alone that made the pandemic bearable. Individual empathy and enterprise made a big difference. If there were any number of politicians out there decrying information, there were individuals—experts, scientists, researchers, policy analysts, community leaders, and ordinary citizens—

This is our sixth edition of *Open Minds*, which began as a listing of India's thought leaders, an assessment of arguments that make the national conversation, to mark our anniversary. This year we have deviated: The magazine you are reading now is a celebration of these exceptional men and women—and a few organisations—whose actions, ideas and examples have made life during a pandemic less painful for the infected, the economically affected, and the most vulnerable. Maybe it's not a departure from the tradition at all; it is a renewal necessitated by history. After all, ideas are the ultimate catalysts, for better or worse. The following pages are populated by discreet heroes of a difficult time, armed with both ideas and idealism. We call them Open Minds because they refuse to abandon hope—or an informed argument. This magazine shares the sentiment. ■

# OPEN DIARY

Swapan Dasgupta



IF THE PRESENT poll ratings are anything to go by, it would seem that President Donald Trump has already lost his bid for re-election in November. His Democratic challenger Joe Biden, hardly a charismatic individual in the mould of Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, has established a double-digit lead over Trump and pundits believe that the gap is too large for the incumbent to claim his way back to a lead.

Needless to say, opinion polls are different from the actual votes cast on polling day. Beginning with the Brexit referendum in the UK and Trump's own election victory over Hilary Clinton in 2016, analysts recognise that polls tend to underestimate candidates who bank on the support of the proverbial 'silent majority'. By this is meant those whose instincts are at variance with the views of those who control political discourse. These people often reply 'don't know' if asked by pollsters and often stay at home on polling day out of sheer disgust. The trick is to motivate them sufficiently to come out and vote, if only to show their disdain for the chattering classes. Trump did that successfully in 2016 and secured votes from those who had earlier not even bothered to register as voters. The anti-Brexiteers also did that during the referendum whose outcome threw the globalised establishment into a complete tizzy. However, this time it will not be all that easy for Trump because, far from being a voice in opposition, he happens to sit in the White House.

I don't know which way the American voters will finally decide. As an election junkie, I can only hope for a nail-biting finish. A battle between an unabashed populist who

invokes American patriotism and is passionately opposed to all the tenets of the new Woke culture and his Democratic rival whose activist base is unbelievably leftwing in its orientation should be quite fascinating. Of course, not being in the US, I won't get the real flavour of the elections. The US media is so viscerally anti-Trump that it is likely to see the election as nothing short of a holy war against the right.

If Trump is indeed defeated, we are likely to see a spate of articles and books celebrating the rolling back of the populist tide. Every election in the US is invariably followed by pundits jumping to instant analysis of how the mentality of the people has changed and how the populist tide has receded. They will point to demographic changes—the erosion of the Judaeo-Christian civilisation that once defined America—and, of course, the seminal impact of the Black Lives Matter and the Cancel culture that is the rage in liberal circles.

This is precisely what happened in the UK during the years when Tony Blair won election after election. Short of saying that the old conservatism was dead and buried, the pundits went overboard in talking about the new London-centric 'cool Britannia' that had redefined popular culture in the UK. Now, after four consecutive defeats of the Labour

Party—including the most recent one where Labour's traditional voters in the north of England broke ranks, sometimes for the first time since 1918—the pundits shifted their gaze to a new English nationalism and the imminent breakaway of Scotland from the Union.

I refer to this pattern of see-saw analysis in the context of ongoing discussions around a new book, *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism*, by Anne Applebaum. Let me confess that I have not read the book and, given the Covid-19 disruptions, am unlikely to get my hands on it for some months—I am not inclined to get the Kindle version. Judging from reviews, the book is a lament on lost friendships with those who were comrades in the fight against communism but who, subsequently, have jettisoned what she regards as authentic conservatism.

The argument isn't unfamiliar. There are those who pursue template politics and are unable to digest deviations. This is as true of the left as it is of the right. The important question, as I see it, is not the quantum of deviation—or attaching an aura of permanence to it—but the context of change. Viktor Orbán of Hungary was an iconic figure in the battle against communism. Today, he is hated by both the liberals and conservatives such as Applebaum on the ground that he is authoritarian. From my perspective, what is interesting is not so much his disdain for liberals but his fierce Hungarian nationalism. Equally interesting is the fact that it appeals to Hungarians today. That is what is worth analysing, not lamenting that an entire nation has turned regressive. ■

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# OPENINGS

NOTEBOOK

## Back to School

**O**N PAPER, THE New Education Policy (NEP) ticks all the right boxes. From universalising access to Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) to reforming university education, NEP 2020 goes the whole hog. That's not all. The hand of experienced education administrators who know where to tinker and ensure better outcomes is visible in the document.

The new policy is ambitious. The last time such a thoroughgoing reform was made—in 1986—India was a highly resource-constrained economy. It is sad to recall that the list of 'essential' items at the primary school stage included blackboards, toilets for children, mats and furniture, chalk and duster. An unconscionably high number of schools could not even provide these basic facilities. Many still can't. But times change and India now is a huge economy and can afford to dream big.

If one were to pick three areas that stand out in terms of reforms in the new policy, they would be doing away with the 10+2 system and bringing in the 5+3+3+4 formula to ensure that kids start their learning process at three years and spend the next five years getting geared for the actual task. Education workers in *anganwadis*—the backbone of the pre-school system—are now formally part of this schooling plan. Instead of the final two years in the school system (Classes XI and XII), now the secondary stage will involve four classes—from Class IX to XII. Importantly, the disciplinary walls that rigidly compartmentalised the final years of school have been torn down.

For example, if a student wants to learn mathematics and music, the new system enables it. The earlier system of separating arts, commerce and science had become counterproductive. Instead of furthering learning and creativity, it created a class system whereby only science students were considered 'meritorious' while the others were tagged as also ran. The deleterious effect this system had on Indian social life will be a fascinating topic for future historians.

The third outstanding feature of the system is the possibility of multiple entry and exit points as one proceeds to higher education.

Suppose one wants to take a break for some reason. Under the present system, re-joining a university is cumbersome to the point that it is discouraged. In the new policy, an academic credit bank is proposed that will enable the student to pick up from where he left.

A host of other reforms include 'devaluation' of the school board system and establishing a national-level performance assessment system (along with state-level counterparts). The school board system was effectively a continuation of a colonial pattern of learning and evaluation that had long outlived its utility. It has been known for a long time that this system encouraged rote learning. The present-day crisis of unemployment of graduates from engineering schools has its roots in this system. In case of 'normal degrees', the outcome is just a waste of money: most of these graduates cannot even write straight sentences leave alone engage in critical thinking necessary for any knowledge-intensive work.

NEP 2020 rightly puts emphasis on mathematical training, probably the weakest link in learning in Indian schools. From engineering to economics, this weakness is visible at the higher end of the educational system. It may sound controversial but for any mathematics-intensive education at the doctoral level in any discipline, the first option for Indian students is Western universities. India boasts excellent centres of mathematics learning—for example, the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (Mumbai) and The Institute of Mathematical Sciences (Chennai), among others. But these are oases in a vast desert. The weaknesses that originate in the school system magnify manifold by the time one reaches the doctoral level.

This hankering after mathematics may sound abstruse and obscure. But there is a real world example that illustrates the grave disadvantage India has been put at due to this lopsided system. Some years ago, the outlook for Indian information technology companies darkened all of a sudden. It was not the US government's changed visa regime but something more fundamental.

**NEP 2020 rightly puts emphasis on mathematical training, the weakest link in learning in Indian schools. From engineering to economics, this weakness is visible at the higher end of the educational system. India boasts excellent centres of mathematics learning, but these are oases in a vast desert**



PORTRAIT • GURDWARA SHAHEED GANJ BHAI TARU SINGH

# CONVERSION TERROR

The move to turn a gurdwara into a mosque further reveals Pakistan's suppression of minorities

A RECENT SOCIAL MEDIA video shared by a man in Lahore went viral and then transformed into a campaign to convert a Sikh gurdwara erected in the memory of a martyred 18th century legend, Bhai Taru Singh, into a mosque. The video claimed that the Sikh place of worship was, over two centuries ago, a mosque, which was allegedly confiscated by the Sikhs. Taru Singh was, according to some historians, a devout Sikh who chose death over being converted into Islam by the Mughals.

With the Sikh community in the subcontinent and elsewhere lambasting the attempt to turn Gurdwara Shaheed Ganj Bhai Taru Singh at Naulakha Bazar of Lahore into a mosque, what actually goes up in smoke is Pakistan founder Muhammad Ali Jinnah's dream of a 'secular' Pakistan that he envisaged in his August 11th, 1947, address to the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan. Jinnah, who would die from cancer just over a year later, had expressed hope in his famous speech that religion would take a backseat in Pakistan. It was the secular character of this speech that BJP leader LK Advani had praised while on a tour of Pakistan in 2005, only to incur the wrath of hardline Hindutva fanatics.

What comes to the fore is not just the death of Jinnah's dream, but the monstrous religious intolerance in Pakistan towards minorities that the country's leaders have been trying to camouflage through a massive PR campaign. With the spotlight now on the Sikh temple named after Taru Singh, who was executed on the orders of the Mughal governor of Lahore on July 1st, 1745, at the age of 25, the discrepancies between the Islamic nation's clergy and the Pakistani deep state's bid to warm up to the Sikh community to appease the latter to revive the secessionist Khalistan movement in Punjab have resurfaced.

The paradox is inescapable: while members of the Sikh minority, along with others such as Hindus, Christians and Zoroastrians, are routinely kidnapped, girls of these communities either raped or married off to Muslim boys, non-Muslims forcibly converted into Islam and their temples constantly plundered and attacked, Pakistani authorities have been bending over backwards to flaunt its visa-free corridor—the Kartarpur Corridor—linking Gurdwara Darbar Sahib in Kartarpur, Pakistan, to the border with India through which Sikh devotees from India can visit the gurdwara, close to 5 km inside Pakistan from its border with India. Interestingly, the Kartarpur Corridor was not

closed when India said it launched military strikes inside Pakistan, in Balakot.

Pakistan-based nuclear physicist and activist Pervez Hoodbhoy talks to *Open* in an interview about this contradiction. "Even if Imran Khan's government wants to show a tolerant face to the world for political reasons, the fact is that Pakistan's public—particularly that in Punjab—has been so religiously hyped up that some people will act independently. By definition, fanatics are those who have lost judgement and don't wait for instructions from elsewhere." As a result, over time, the number of religious minorities in Pakistan has dwindled and those who stuck to their faith, persecuted.

India's Ministry of External Affairs and Sikh religious bodies have expressed concern about the latest whimsical call in Pakistan, stating that Taru Singh was a historical figure and the gurdwara an iconic one.

Michael Kugelman, Deputy Director of the Asia Program and Senior Associate for South Asia at the Wilson Center, tells *Open* that he thinks "PR considerations explain the apparent discrepancy". Pakistan remains an often intolerant and inhospitable place for religious minorities, he avers, adding, "The decision to open Kartarpur and keep it open should be seen less as an effort to promote religious tolerance, and more as an effort to project Pakistan as the responsible, conciliatory player relative to India and its increasingly intolerant and intransigent ways. The messaging is meant to be: Look, India is doing terrible things to its Muslim population, but we're going out of our way to help and welcome Indian Sikh pilgrims.

It is essentially an attempt by Pakistan to draw support and sympathy from the world."

In this particular case, the comparison with Hagia Sophia in Turkey is immediate and natural. But the levels of religious intolerance in Pakistan are apparently more noxious and the victims include not just non-Muslim minorities, but non-Sunni Muslims as well. It looks as if centuries coexist and Taru Singh's name is hogging the headlines long after his martyrdom for all the wrong reasons. ■

By ULLEKH NP



Gurdwara Shaheed Ganj Bhai Taru Singh, Naulakha Bazar, Lahore



## ANGLE



# DESPERATELY SEEKING BLAME

If the police want to solve Rajput's suicide, they should file an FIR against clinical depression

By MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI

IT IS SOMETHING ICU doctors are familiar with. When a patient dies, the family decides that the doctor was responsible for any number of reasons—not giving the right medication, over-medicating in order to fleece the patient or just not picking up signs of the death early enough. There is no mystery here. It is just the nature of grief. When someone close passes away, it is psychologically comforting to have someone to blame. In extreme cases, there are assaults on doctors but that is not the norm. Families bear the bad memories and move on. The same phenomenon is on display with suicides. The overwhelming majority happen because of clinical depression, a medical condition. The ailing mind searches for a trigger and when one is found, depression manifests and then the suicide happens. To hold the trigger as the cause of the suicide is just a convenient truth for upset family and friends. Otherwise, every trigger must result in the same consequence. Only a fraction of a fraction of relationships that break or failed examinations or removals from jobs lead to people killing themselves. Families might find their solace in blame and they must be welcome to do so but society has no reason to coopt itself into the process.

This week, the police registered First Information Reports against actress Rhea Chakraborty, who was in a relationship with the late Sushant Singh Rajput, and five others, for abetment in his suicide. This was at the complaint

of his father. The Mumbai Police were already conducting an inquiry over his death. There have been demands for a CBI inquiry by political leaders and some Bollywood personalities. Even Chakraborty herself, some days before the FIR against her, put up a social media post asking for the CBI to take over. That Rajput committed suicide is not disputed. The allegations are all related to what led to him doing so. Why that should be a matter in the realm of the criminal is not spelt out?

Rajput was a star with a career going well. He had wealth, adulation, networks and everything else that an enormously successful person could have. The only way you would see him falling short on anything is when compared to even more successful stars, but how does that make him a helpless victim? One of the reasons said to have driven him to death were unattributed slander by gossip columnists. If that could kill, then there would be no stars alive in Bollywood. And the exact thing can now be seen in all the 'sources'-driven rumours in the media on how Chakraborty harassed him. Such a reaction to a celebrity suicide is not even a departure, as with actress Jiah Khan, some years back. The time of the police is wasted when they have real crimes to solve. If criminal cases are going to be filed against everyone who upset Rajput's mental balance, the police might as well file an FIR against clinical depression or the Indian Government for imposing the lockdown. ■

## IDEAS



GETTY IMAGES

## PRUDENCE

Sometimes it takes a crisis to see things more clearly. India is filled with occupations that serve little or no real purpose, but which continue to exist simply because some such job existed before. But the economic woes brought by Covid-19 have forced heads of institutions to examine their operations more closely. One such occupation, the long-outdated role of the *dak* messenger has now been done away with. The *dak* messenger—a job probably created with the start of the railways during the Raj era—was tasked with the role of carrying confidential messages and documents between various departments and zones. Modern forms of communication have long come to India, even privatisation looms close for the railways, but this relic from the Raj era continued. The new order suggests employees switch to videoconferencing instead. ■

## WORD'S WORTH

**'The timid man calls himself cautious, the sordid man thrifty'**

PUBLILIUS SYRUS  
ROMAN WRITER



By Bibek Debroy

# The End of Desire

Indifference to both the good and the bad leads to liberation

**'G**ITA' IS ANYTHING that is sung. The Bhagavat Gita is the most famous among these Gita texts, widely read, widely translated and commented upon, in multiple languages. But as the adjective 'Bhagavat' itself indicates, the Bhagavat Gita isn't the only Gita. There are other Gitas too, though the Bhagavat Gita is the most famous and may very well have been the first. The number of texts in this corpus of Gita literature will be somewhere between 50 and 60. These other Gita texts are: (1) from the Mahabharata; (2) from the Puranas; (3) from Ramayana texts; or (4) stand-alone. From the Mahabharata, other than Bhagavat Gita, the most famous Gita is undoubtedly Anu Gita, followed by Vyadha Gita. In the Mahabharata, there is a section (*parva*) known as 'Ashvamedhika Parva'. Ashvamedha means a horse (*ashva*) sacrifice (*medha*) and the *parva* is so named because Vedavyasa and Krishna ask Yudhishtira to undertake a horse sacrifice. At that time, Arjuna asks Krishna to remind him about the lessons of the Bhagavat Gita, since he has forgotten everything, and Krishna is about to leave for Dvaraka. In the critical edition of the Mahabharata, the Anu Gita has 35 chapters. But sometimes, the first few chapters in this, the conversation between Kashyapa and a *siddha* Brāhmana, is referred to as the Anu Gita.

At the time of the horse sacrifice, Arjuna spoke to Krishna. 'O mighty-armed one! O son of Devaki! When the battle presented itself, I got to know about your greatness, the truth about your lordship and your form. O Keshava! Out of affection towards me, you spoke to me then. O tiger among men! However, my intelligence has been destroyed and I have forgotten everything.' Krishna was displeased and told Arjuna he couldn't repeat everything again. However, he repeated a conversation with a Brāhmana. There was a Brāhmana who was a *siddha*, that is, he had been freed from the cycle of *samsara*. In search of advice and instruction, the sage Kashyapa went to this *siddha* Brāhmana. In reply to Kashyapa's questions, the *siddha* Brāhmana said the following.

'Through different kinds of deeds and by resorting to auspicious yoga, those who are mortal can go to the world of *devas* and find a sojourn there. However, there is no happiness

that is ultimate. There is no sojourn that is eternal. When one is dislodged from a great position, one has to face misery again and again. Because I practised sin, I obtained inauspicious ends and suffered misery. I was overcome by desire, anger, thirst and delusion. I have gone through deaths again and again. I have gone through births again and again. I have eaten many kinds of food. I have suckled at many kinds of breasts. I have seen many kinds of mothers and fathers who are different from each other. I have faced diverse kinds of happiness and unhappiness. I have suffered disrespect and great hardships on account of relatives and those who are not related. I have suffered from extreme and terrible physical and mental pain. I have faced extreme dishonour and the terrible death of my relatives. I have descended into hell and endured hardships in Yama's abode. There has always been old age, disease and many kinds of hardship. In this world, I have experienced extreme opposite sentiments [like joy and misery, heat and cold]. After a time, I became indifferent, beyond the opposites and without a desire to do anything. Afflicted by great grief, I abandoned this world. Through satisfaction in the *atman*, I then obtained this success. I will not come to this world again, nor will I go to any other world. Amidst this creation of subjects, through this success, my *atman* has obtained an auspicious end. That is the reason I have experienced excellent success. From here, I will go to the supreme. From there, I will go to what is superior still. There is no doubt that I will obtain the foremost state of being merged with the *brahman*. I will not return to the mortal world again.'

Naturally, Kashyapa wasn't satisfied. He wanted to know more. Kashyapa asked, 'How does the body go away and how does one get another again? How is one freed from the hardships of roaming around in this cycle of life? Having freed oneself from the body, how is one united with the *atman*? Having been freed from this body, how does one obtain another one? How does a man enjoy the fruits of the good and bad deeds done by him? If one is freed from the body, what is the karma that one enjoys?'

The *siddha* Brāhmana replied, 'A body is adopted to perform acts that increase the lifespan and bring fame. However,

all of these eventually decay. When there is little of lifespan left, the *jivatman* begins to act in a contrary way. When destruction presents itself, his intelligence turns perverse. The *jivatman* knows his spirit, strength and the time. Yet, though this acts against the *jivatman*, he eats excessively and out of season. He serves everything that causes greater difficulties for him. He eats too much, or does not eat at all. He tastes rotten food and tainted food and other kinds that are perverse. He eats more food than he should. Or he eats before the earlier food has been digested. He indulges in excessive exercise or sexual intercourse. Though his natural speed has diminished, overcome by greed, he always engages in tasks. He eats

life ascends upwards and causing hardship, frees itself from the body. When it leaves the body, there is no longer any life to be seen. There is no heat. There is no breath. There is no beauty and the senses have left. When the *jivatman* abandons the body, a man is said to be dead. There are ducts through which a person with a body perceives the objects of the senses. However, the breath of life, which is sustained through food, can no longer see them. The eternal *jivatman* makes those ducts in the body work. When those inner organs are shattered, the *jivatman* rises up and enters the heart, thereby swiftly curtailing all spirit. In such a situation, despite being conscious, a creature cannot discern anything. The inner

organs are overwhelmed and knowledge is enveloped in darkness. The *jivatman* no longer has a place to reside and is agitated by the wind. At such a time, the being breathes deeply and breathes extremely painfully. The *jivatman* emerges swiftly, causing trembling. The body is bereft of sensation. The *jivatman* discards the body, but is still enveloped by its own deeds. It is marked by all its sacred and auspicious acts and also by all its wicked deeds. Even when it is dark, those with eyes can see fireflies appear and disappear. In that way, those who possess the sight of knowledge can see. Similarly, successful ones with divine sight can see the act of a creature abandoning the body and being born again, as it enters a womb. According to the sacred texts, a creature is seen to occupy three spots. There is *karm-*

*abhumi*, the arena of action. All creatures reap the fruits of their good and bad deeds there. Depending on the good deeds they have themselves performed in this world, they reap the fruits. Those with wicked deeds in this world go to hell, because of those deeds. A wicked man cannot speak and is severely cooked in hell. Since it is extremely difficult for the *atman* to be freed from such a state, one must do one's utmost to protect oneself against this. There are states obtained by creatures that ascend upwards. There are many like stars in the lunar disc and the solar disc. Through their own radiance, they shine in those worlds. Know that these, and others, are meant for men who are the performers of auspicious deeds. However, when these deeds are exhausted, they are repeatedly dislodged from there. Heaven is superior to these. But even there, the superior, the medium and the inferior exist. There is discontent there too.'

I will complete the conversation in the next column. ■



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food that is too juicy. Or he sleeps during the day. Even when the time has not come, these taints cause agitation that is brought on by the person himself. There is disease because of these taints and death comes as the end. Sometimes, one resorts to hanging and other methods of killing oneself. Else, though alive, the physical body of a creature decays because of such things. When the wind in the body is fierce and begins to blow violently, heat is generated. This reaches all parts of the body and constrains the breath of life. Know that when the heat in the body becomes excessive, strong and violent, it injures the inner organs and the place where the breath of life resides. In great pain, the physical body of the *jivatman* melts away. The inner organs are pierced and the creature gives up the physical body. Know that the *jivatman* suffers great pain. All creatures are always extremely anxious about birth and death. They are seen to abandon the physical bodies. The five elements are established in *prana* and *apana*. This breath of



## ON ANOTHER PLANE

Prior to India receiving five Rafale fighter aircraft from France at Ambala airbase on July 29th, there was talk whether Defence Minister Rajnath Singh would be present at the airbase to receive the planes. After all, last October, Singh received the first of the Rafale fighter jets at the Merignac airbase near the city of Bordeaux in France and even performed *shastra puja* (weapon worship) on site. However, this time round, Prime Minister Narendra Modi is learnt to have advised Singh not to go to Ambala as he doesn't want any warmongering at a time when a pandemic is ravaging the world. Rather, Modi advised Singh to attend a function to mark the final delivery of Rafale jets at Merignac in mid-August.



### State of De-Addiction

Punjab Chief Minister Amarinder Singh has informed Prime Minister Modi that owing to the non-availability of drugs during the lockdown, a few border districts of Punjab are now de-addicted zones. In Tarn Taran district's Havelian, Gurdaspur district's Naushera and Moga district's Dhalewala villages, people used to import drugs easily from Pakistan. Not any more. The youth here now want to join the army. The Prime Minister is learnt to be happy and ready to provide help for the youth in these areas.

### DELHI TURNAROUND

Delhi has seen a remarkable turnaround in Covid-19 cases and the credit, according to the BJP, goes to Home Minister Amit Shah. When Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal met Shah and sought his help, the latter promptly took charge and went to the hospital with the maximum number of cases. Under his instructions, the home secretary also became active and ensured doctors, Delhi Police and the health department worked on a war footing. Those close to Shah are already saying that if the state government is not in a confrontational mode, results can be achieved.

## Who's Driving?

In Maharashtra, Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray's main headache is the pandemic. But politically, Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) leaders Sharad and Ajit Pawar are keeping him on his toes. Recently, Thackeray visited Baramati with Ajit Pawar. A few days ago, on the Chief Minister's birthday, Ajit Pawar, also the state's Deputy Chief Minister, tweeted a photo in which he is driving a car with Thackeray in the backseat. Soon enough, there was speculation about who was in the driver's seat in the state. Now, Thackeray is worried if the Pawars will again side with the BJP and try to keep the Shiv Sena at bay. No wonder, he is keeping good equations with the Prime Minister, particularly on the Ayodhya issue.

## Going Nowhere

Recently, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader Mukul Roy was in Delhi but did not attend the meeting at West Bengal party president Dilip Ghosh's house. It is learnt that BJP president JP Nadda advised Ghosh and a few state leaders in Delhi to hold a three-day meeting where Roy—along with state general secretary (organisation) Subrata Chatterjee, national joint secretary (organisation) Shivprakash and BJP in-charge for West Bengal Kailash Vijayvargiya—was invited. Though Chatterjee and Shivprakash were spotted at the meet, Roy and Vijayvargiya were conspicuous by their absence. Roy returned to Kolkata on the very first day of the meet and informed the party that he had an eye operation, although the grapevine suggests that he actually received a notice from the Enforcement Directorate. Besides, Roy has often complained in the past how the state BJP was ignoring him. All this has led to rumours that Roy might return to the Trinamool Congress which he quit in 2017 to join the BJP. For his part, Roy is firm that he is going nowhere and has even addressed a press conference to that effect.

## Home Run

Through the House Committee of Parliament, the BJP allotted Priyanka Gandhi Vadra's bungalow to the party's media head Anil Baluni. After getting Rajya Sabha membership, Baluni got a bungalow on Gurudwara Rakabganj Road but suddenly became ill. He underwent treatment in a Mumbai hospital and is now doing fine. In the BJP and the Government, everyone seems to like Baluni's low-profile, understated behavior and many suggested him to change the house in which he took ill. Both Prime Minister Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah seem to support this view. So, before being allotted Gandhi's bungalow, the party even did a *vastu* for him on the property.



## What Angers Mayawati

The Uttar Pradesh Assembly elections may be two years away but Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) chief Mayawati has singled out Congress leader Priyanka Gandhi Vadra as the object of her wrath. She seems to be miffed with the Congress as a whole, particularly after her six MLAs “unconstitutionally” merged with Ashok Gehlot's government in Rajasthan, and is now going to court on the issue. But the counterargument by the Congress is that in Goa, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur and Meghalaya, the BJP did similar horse-trading and broke the ruling Congress in these states.

## TOO MANY OR TOO FEW?

The Karnataka government has three Deputy Chief Ministers, one of whom, Laxman Savadi, has become hyperactive. Both Savadi and Chief Minister BS Yediyurappa are Lingayat leaders. Recently, Savadi was in Delhi to meet the governor and his prolonged meeting created a lot of gossip in the BJP camp that he wants to take over the mantle from Yediyurappa. After all, Savadi is a powerful minister in command of several party MLAs. It is learnt that Yediyurappa and the other deputy chief ministers, ST leader Govind Karjol and Vokkalika leader CN Ashwath Narayan, are unhappy with Savadi's new moves. Yediyurappa is said to be in favour of abolishing the deputy chief minister's post altogether. However, there is a counterproposal to have five deputy chief ministers so that none is too powerful.



By KEERTHIK SASIDHARAN

# THE RECKONING

*The shock of Covid-19 resulted from our cultural amnesia about past pandemics*

A COUPLE OF YEARS AGO, I was at the Strand bookstore in midtown Manhattan in New York to find a copy of Amitav Ghosh's then recently published book titled, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. It speaks to the inability of literary culture to engage with climate change, in parts because of aesthetic choices and historical contingencies over the last 50-60 years that had privileged an individual's 'search for authenticity' over all else. This had transmuted much of modern literary culture into 'journey[s] of self-discovery'. The pessimistic consequence of Ghosh's thesis is that when catastrophic, or even outsize, climatological events appear, as producers and consumers of cultural products that suffer from this climate blindness, we will have no meaningful ways to collectively speak of that experience. In absence of a common understanding regarding an emergent peril, vocabularies to diagnose it and an understanding that we are all in it together, the results could be devastating. The ongoing refusal-to-wear-masks, Covid-19 parties in defiance of health advisories and widespread politicisation of this still unfolding health emergency—all of this can be traced to an absence of a common understanding of how to interpret new perils and the nature of an individual's responsibility to the collective.

This reluctance to think intensively about climate and geography, disease and pandemics as critical factors that shape human societies has also worked its way through other disciplines which have substantial influence in our intellectual and cultural environs. From political writing to popular history books, at least since the 1970s, our intellectual climate has increasingly focused its attentions on chronicling the histories of institutions, transnational capital flows, ideas, empires, identities, mentalities, political consciousness, epistemic categories, globalisation and other subdisciplines as different waves of interest rise to the fore. In parts, this is understandable as global interconnectedness began to peak by the early 2000s. But more 'distant' phenomena like climate, geography, weather, disease—as entities and processes worthy of historical and cultural investigation—were often seen as of second-order importance, or at worst as the indulgent plaything of a few specialists. Most visible of these was the decline of geography as an academic discipline—with Harvard University leading the charge in 1948 by shutting down that department. Even as epidemiology as a discipline grew in complexity and deployed new techniques to combat non-infectious diseases like lung cancer as well as infectious diseases like Ebola or HIV, the study of diseases as world-historical phenomena with acute influence over human societies, including politically, often stopped in the 1950s. All subsequent epidemics or outbreaks were treated as technocratic or medical issues and, in turn, were steadily emptied of historical, cultural or geopolitical relevance. The associated shock due to the Covid-19 pandemic to our cognitive frameworks—'no one saw this coming' is Donald Trump's favourite refrain these days—can be traced to the lack of cultural memory about epidemics and pandemics which preceded our times. Names of medical historians like Erwin Ackerknecht, Georges Canguilhem, Mirko Grmek, Pierre Huard, George Rosen, Owsei Temkin, Jean Théodoridès are forgotten or, worse, almost entirely unknown





Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

EVEN AS EPIDEMIOLOGY AS A DISCIPLINE GREW IN COMPLEXITY AND DEPLOYED NEW TECHNIQUES TO COMBAT NON-INFECTIOUS AND INFECTIOUS DISEASES, THE STUDY OF DISEASES AS WORLD-HISTORICAL PHENOMENA WITH ACUTE INFLUENCE OVER HUMAN SOCIETIES, INCLUDING POLITICALLY, OFTEN STOPPED IN THE 1950S. ALL SUBSEQUENT OUTBREAKS WERE TREATED AS TECHNOCRATIC OR MEDICAL ISSUES AND WERE STEADILY EMPTIED OF HISTORICAL, CULTURAL OR GEOPOLITICAL RELEVANCE

to present-day historians, to say nothing of the wider public. In contrast, many of the same are no doubt intimately aware of and themselves prescribe the writings of figures like Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, Samuel Huntington and Francis Fukuyama as course material. This trend to privilege the textual over all else, in many ways, mimics the historiography of the 19th century when all of history was simply reduced to diplomatic history—the history of happenings between royal courts. This rise of political histories as the chief mode of approaching our understanding of the past is not new or unremarked either.

In a foreword to a collection of essays by the cultural and literary historian Velcheru Narayana Rao, the historian Sanjay Subrahmanyam asks, 'Who[then] is the rightful object of intellectual history in South Asia?' This rhetorical question follows his

observation regarding two books which discuss Indian thought, CA Bayly's *Recovering Liberties: Indian Thought in the Age of Liberalism and Empire* and Ramachandra Guha's *Makers of Modern India*, wherein the contents of these books are circumscribed by their focus on politics by English-speaking Indians. Those who make the list are deemed as having contributed to India's intellectual past, while the rest are implicitly assigned the rank of second-order importance. This is not a new diagnosis. At least since Amit Chaudhuri's marvellous anthology of Indian writing which sought to deflate Salman Rushdie's claims that India's best writing is in English, this tension between the Indian middle class' fidelity towards its creolised English and the reality of India, where English is merely the first among equals, has been commonly invoked as an analytical vantage point. All this said, there

remains the obvious question: why does this inequity persist? Subrahmanyam goes on to trace this to material conditions—English education, family wealth, urban backgrounds and other markers—which have allowed some Indians to function as ‘universal’ intellectuals, while the rest are consigned to roles as ‘organic’ or ‘traditional’ intellectuals or merely as translators of a non-English-speaking India. This ‘universality’ is bestowed and propped up by the political demands of the state, which in turn leads to politics being the central arena of discourse.

But there is also another, less sociologically motivated reason for the domination of political discourse as our understanding of the past: lack of expertise in a complex discipline. To be a historian of medicine or geographical dynamics or epidemics or technology means increasingly keeping oneself abreast of changes in areas of study that have dramatically changed since the 1950s. If the history of epidemiology in the 1950s was intimately tied to the 19th century European experiences of urban sanitation and infectious diseases that afflicted the colonial rulers, after World War II it meant learning to parse through the lineaments of first and second-order developments in two disciplines: medicine and history. No such demand of technical skill or knowledge is made of students of political history, except a passing familiarity with a ‘foreign’ language that serves as a requirement in highly rated PhD programmes and some commitment to archival work. In contrast, scholars like Mirko Grmek, the Croat-French historian who also had an MD, or closer to home, polymaths like Dr MS Valiathan, a cardiac surgeon and an extraordinary interpreter of Vagbhata, Susruta and others from the Indian medical past, offer up examples of transdisciplinary knowledge that are often difficult to foster in an institutional framework. In light of the fact that our intellectual class is dominated by those who have trained in humanities and social sciences and whose last exposure to the sciences and mathematics is often in high schools, it is of little surprise that political discourse dominates the commons of our collective thought.

**O**VER THE PAST two decades, however, as climate change, geographical catastrophes and diseases have begun to creep back into our news cycles, more attention has been paid to these subjects that are often seen as lacking historical content. These include, among others, monumental surveys like Geoffrey Parker’s study of 17th century climate change, titled appropriately as *Global Crisis: War, Climate Change and Catastrophe in the Seventeenth Century*, Philippe Beaujard’s sweeping work titled *The Worlds of the Indian Ocean: A Global History* and most recently, David Abulafia’s magnificent and awe-inspiringly learned *The Boundless Sea: A Human History of the Oceans*. In contrast to these large epic studies and other smaller academic works like Sebastian Prange’s fascinating *Monsoon Islam: Trade and Faith on the Medieval Malabar Coast*, there has also been a flurry of books on the cultural experience of geological phenomena like rivers (the Ganga, the Nile, the Yangtze and so on). Even in academic economics, a younger generation of scholars like Nathan Nunn

at Harvard have sought to tease out historical conclusions using clever techniques that rely on geographical features as instrumental variables in econometric regressions.

As far as public discussions of medicine and diseases are concerned—which are often led by academic work—the focus has largely been ‘analytical’ in nature. This is tantamount to a chronological accounting of historical experiences of disease such as malaria, influenza, yellow fever, rabies and so on. This, of course, is interesting to learn and offers many valuable insights, especially when diseases spill over into the political realm such as during the Treaty of Versailles, when almost every major leader or their close relative was inflicted by the influenza pandemic. It also allows us to imagine counterfactuals and ask questions like how would Soviet Russia have evolved had Vladimir Lenin not suffered from fatal illness in the early 1920s. There

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IN LIGHT OF THE FACT THAT OUR INTELLECTUAL CLASS IS DOMINATED BY THOSE WHO HAVE TRAINED IN HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES AND WHOSE LAST EXPOSURE TO THE SCIENCES AND MATHEMATICS IS OFTEN IN HIGH SCHOOLS, IT IS OF LITTLE SURPRISE THAT POLITICAL DISCOURSE DOMINATES THE COMMONS OF OUR COLLECTIVE THOUGHT



An anti-mask protest in Indianapolis, US, July 19

are other studies as well, accessible to the wider public, where diseases, geography and history entangle in unexpected portraits of the past. This we see in the works of Roy Porter or the historian William H McNeil or the anthropologist Jared Diamond. But thinking about the history of diseases over a long historical period is more complex, often interconnected, methodologically fraught with issues and produces dynamics among pathogens and vectors that complement and conflict in ways that we don't still fully comprehend. For example, one of the fascinating mysteries of medical history is: why did leprosy and plague disappear from Western civilisation long before adequate treatments were developed? There is some evidence that being infected by tuberculosis is 'most probably followed by a relative immunity to leprosy'. The implied consequence is that as tuberculosis spread in the West, leprosy began to vanish. Better known, and well-documented, including in popular works like Charles Mann's wonderful book titled *1493: Uncovering the New World Columbus Created* is the antagonistic relationship between malaria and sickle-cell anaemia. Faced with such vast correlating forces that involve epidemiological and medical subtleties, the scholar who thinks about health

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and accompanying cultural paradigms ends up faced with various confounding aspects where causal linkages are harder to draw. As Grmek writes, 'The historian of medicine confronts a dilemma similar to that of an astronomer observing the movements of at least three bodies. It is known that such problems cannot have theoretical solutions. Solutions must be found in an empirical manner.'

This absence of 'theoretical solutions' has not prevented historians from proposing models of how historical dynamics ought to be framed. Close to home, the historian KN Chaudhuri has often sought to write histories that ostensibly comport to a model. He writes that his historical retelling emerges from a 'rigorous theory of the concept of unity and disunity, continuity and discontinuity, ruptures and thresholds'. This effort to 'model' broad swathes of time into manageable units of analysis or ontological categories is not limited to historical geography. Grmek writes, provocatively, 'Diseases only exist in the world of ideas',

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by which he means they are 'explanatory models'. We call a set of symptoms and pathologies by the name 'Covid-19' or 'leukaemia' but in itself Covid-19 or leukaemia exists only within a set containing concepts devised by man. In a similar vein, Chaudhuri asks in a fascinating and influential study, 'Is the 'Indian ocean' as a geographical space the same as Asia?'

What is remarkable, however, is that both Grmek and Chaudhuri, if one were to take them as representatives of medical and geographical histories, trace their influences and disagreements to one of the greats of 20th century history, Fernand Braudel, who sought to marry vast and slowmoving phenomena like climate and geography with the history of events at a scale and detail few have since attempted. But Braudel was a rarity.

As Chaudhuri writes, 'Braudel's work is incapable of direct imitation. It is the result of an inborn intuition, an understanding of the complex interplay of events and impersonal forces, which does not explicitly make clear its theoretical and rigorous logic.'

Fernand Braudel was born in 1902, in a French village, with less than 200 peasant-farmers, called Luméville-en-Ornois. Years later, when reflecting on his origins, Braudel wrote: 'I was at the beginning and I remain now an historian of peasant stock. I could name the plants and trees of this village of eastern France: I knew each of its inhabitants: I watched them at work: the blacksmith, the cartwright, the occasional woodcutters, the *bouquillons*.' From 1927 onwards, Braudel dedicated himself to a thesis tentatively titled 'Philip II, Spain and the Mediterranean in the 16th Century'. Part of Braudel's research on Philip II—thanks to the nature of his subject—led him to Spain, Portugal, Italy, Croatia and Algeria (where he was a school teacher). Alongside research in archives, Braudel also ended up buying a movie camera which allowed him to photograph thousands upon thousands of documents. With his research material beginning to overwhelm him, Braudel agonised on how to organise this material into an intelligible thesis. Eventually, his thesis advisor and later collaborator Lucien Febvre guided Braudel out of a cul-de-sac with a word of advice: 'Philip II and the Mediterranean is a fine subject. But why not the Mediterranean and Philip II? Isn't that an equally fine but different subject? For between the two protagonists, Philip and the interior ocean, the match is not equal.' This nudge from a more senior historian allowed young Braudel to find the intellectual courage to pivot his research from what would have otherwise been yet another thesis on the diplomatic histories on why Philip II pivoted his policy from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic in the 16th century. Instead, now Braudel reworked his focus towards the more difficult, vastly more interesting subject of the Mediterranean, that 'inner sea' which lay between Africa, Asia and Europe.



Nearly 16 years after he began his research—during which time he was jailed in Nazi POW camps—Braudel went back to his thesis to edit, factcheck and rewrite parts of it which culminated in a defence in 1947 and finally a 600,000-word publication in 1949 as *La Méditerranée et le Monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* (*The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*). Much as he did in his thesis, over the course of his life, Braudel's methodology relied on three forms of temporality: *longue durée*, *conjoncture* and *histoire événementielle* which were often translated as 'the long perspective', 'a modality of conjunction' and 'the history of events'. He argued—by stint of innumerable forays into labour, geology, market structure—that history can be understood as these three layers of time and processes which acted both separately and contemporaneously. Of the *longue durée* which encompasses the geohistories of a place—mountains, land, soil, waters, animals—are born the possibilities for formation of social relations captured by institu-

deconstruct or portray Braudel as entirely dated. In parts, this eclipsing of his reputation has been because Braudel had the singular misfortune of being followed by a brilliant generation of intellectuals—Michel Foucault, Georges Duby, Jacques Derrida, Carlo Ginzburg—who successfully transfigured our understanding of the past into studies of power dynamics, mental attitudes, interpretations of the text and ultimately the study of an individual itself. The structuralist flavour of Braudel was overshadowed by the rise of the individual and his mind as an object of study itself. These new ways of reading the past were juxtaposed and contrasted with Braudel's largely ambivalent attitudes towards features of the present that ostensibly influenced the history of events: religious revivalism, fundamentalism, discontents of identity, contestations of representation. In contrast, Braudel had a decidedly more conservative view of how much humans could do or change over a lifetime. He writes, 'When I think of the individual, I am always inclined to

see him imprisoned within a destiny in which he himself has little hand.'

At the Strand bookstore, Braudel's extraordinary works that impress upon us the importance of seemingly unchanging phenomena—climate, geography, weather, disease, pandemics—stand with the élan of an old aristocrat who is reconciled to being ignored. Volume after volume filled with words, numbers, paragraphs, summaries, nuances, curlicues of thought, contingencies, conjectures greet a reader. I couldn't help but think of Braudel himself, the man who must have stooped in front of a desk, with his pen in hand, ink smudges and paper cuts on his fingers, with backaches, shoulder pains, loneliness and, ultimately, the fleeting sense of futility that

afflicts any writer. But on that book rack, there was so little of the man himself. Braudel, the author, was a ghost. There was no autobiographical account, no reflections on his oeuvre, not even a photograph of the author in the inner backflap of his books. In contrast, surrounded as we are by our celebratory cult of the self, with 'authenticity' held as talismanic codeword in public discourse, when even the most clichéd of writers and high priests of cant project themselves as Socratic embodiments, Braudel seems like an anomaly. One who knew that for all the self-aggrandisement by individuals and the manias of our shortlived delusions of self-importance, our lives are in the ultimate reckoning as brief in the face of historical time as those of fireflies at night. ■

*Keerthik Sasidharan is an author who lives in New York City. His forthcoming book The Dharma Forest will be published by Penguin India*

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tions. It is within these institutions that we see a chronicle of discernible human events. History, Braudel argued and demonstrated, operates simultaneously at different timescales. By the time Braudel's thesis was translated and published into English, by 1973, he had been widely acknowledged as the most influential historian then alive. The German historian Helmut Koenigsberger, reviewing in an English magazine called *The Listener*, wrote that Braudel's thesis-book was 'a classic you can compare with the great classics of history writing, from Thucydides to Gibbon and from Macaulay to Burckhardt'. By the time Braudel died in 1985, he was seen as a 'grand panjandrum'—with legions of admirers and critics, including outside the academy.

But by now, Braudel is largely forgotten today, except among a niche group of historians who follow in his footsteps, at least methodologically, including Geoffrey Parker in his deeply influential work on 17th century climate change. 'Braudelian structure' is a code word that is used to either follow, sidestep,



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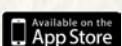
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# MINDS 2020





# PORTRAITS *of* HEROISM *in the* TIME *of a* PANDEMIC

**They brave a virus to silently do their duty  
and keep the wheels of society moving  
while the rest remain safe**

**By MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI**

**I**n a calamity there is usually a slight lag before heroes make their entrance. In a pandemic, for instance, the starting minutes of the reel are entirely the virus notching up victories as was the case with HIV, small pox, Ebola or the bubonic plague. Covid-19 is somewhat of a departure in that the story begins with an act of heroism in China, entwined in the discovery of the virus itself. Li Wenliang, an ophthalmologist, was the first to suspect that there was more to a series of patients being brought to hospitals in Wuhan with respiratory distress, noting the similarity with a SARS outbreak 15 years ago. As to his fate, it was just as F Scott Fitzgerald wrote: ‘Show me a hero, and I’ll write you a tragedy.’

Having noticed similar pneumonia symptoms among those who had stalls in a seafood market, Wenliang made it public on Chinese social media, mistaking it for SARS. It went viral. Whereas it now seems no one can possibly not see a pandemic when it hits, the response by the Chinese authorities was to punish him in the modes known to totalitarian societies. *The Economist* would write about him later: ‘...he was summoned to the police station. There he was accused of spreading rumours and subverting the social order. He then had to give written answers to two questions: in future, could he stop his illegal activities? “I can,” he wrote, and put his thumbprint, in red ink, on his answer. Did he understand that if he went on, he would be punished under the law? “I understand,” he wrote, and supplied another thumbprint.’ Note that Wenliang submitted. By itself, what is then the heroism in the story? But there were other acts to follow. Wenliang got infected by a patient. The Chinese state, now unsettled by the public anger at his treatment, apologised to his memory and stamped him a hero. *The Economist*’s obituary had this to add: ‘His fame had spread far and wide, too. Reporters, even from the *New York Times*, wanted interviews. These had to be done by text and via WeChat, since from late January he could not breathe on his own and was hooked up to continuous-flow oxygen. It didn’t help as much as he expected—his blood-oxygen saturation levels got no better. But online he could go on making defiant and upbeat remarks. There had to be more transparency. The truth was important. A healthy society should never have just one voice.’ In his ailing last minutes, he had also found his voice again.

If heroes are individuals who through character keep the pages of history rolling in a virtuous direction, then Wenliang

fits the bill. He did not possess the immense strength of classical protagonists of mythology but that is not a requirement for the modern age. Individual physical prowess went out of fashion once mechanised armaments arrived and that was another aspect of heroism earlier—it was tied to violence and victory. Without them, the Pandavas wouldn’t be the leads of Mahabharata or Rama in Ramayana. For the modern hero, other qualities become more important—suffering through adversities, the overcoming of it and the final defeat of a stronger enemy even when he is not part of a defined war. Wouldn’t Wenliang’s story be less tragic and poignant if he had not been up against an all-powerful government that considered only itself the repository of right action? What if he had been in a politically free society that considered freedom of expression more sacrosanct than social order? Quite possibly, even if the government didn’t approve of his insight, he might just have been ignored altogether. The future would prove him right eventually, but he would be lauded as a seer and not a hero because there was no one shutting him down.

Adversity is a necessity for heroism and you can apply this measure to another phenomenon in India that led to millions of heroes. Imagine yourself in the shoes of a migrant labourer in a city far away from your native home, sending every little surplus back and when the lockdown begins, it sees your source of income end abruptly and the little you had on your person dribble away like water held in a closed fist. You can choose to remain where you are, begging and scrounging or hoping that the government’s scraps will eventually reach you. Or, with no form of transportation available, the certainty of arrests and the increasing news of police brutalities on those flouting the lockdown notwithstanding, you take a bottle of plastic water, a

cheap backpack with a towel and change of clothing, and start walking in the general direction of a village 2,000 kilometres away. The destination would be half-a-year away on foot but you walk anyway and that is either being stupid or heroic. In any case if that is not looking adversity straight in the eye, what is? It might not be the arrogance of the warrior and a docile fatalism that propelled the migrant labourer who walked, but he was refusing to be a victim of his own adversity.

The consequence of such heroism then? A Government that, in its omniscience, was quick to announce the national lockdown without giving any one time or space to plan their survival—and was then floundering on what to do as the spread refused to relent—had to ultimately give in to the most voiceless of Indians. The walking of the poor must count as the biggest act of civil disobedience in independent India and it wasn't even political. We don't really know whether they harboured anger; only a resolution that there was a limit to what they would endure and not all the policemen in all the states that they would have to get through could prevent them from exercising their right to survive. Like the 15-year-old Jyoti Kumari, who took her father on the backseat of her bicycle and rode 1,200 kilometres. How can anyone do something like that unless you never look back after the first turn of the pedal? How is it any different from the ventures of Greek heroes into unknown worlds as fearsome creatures blocked their journey? There is a difference. Vast rewards awaited should they succeed and it made the risk acceptable. For the walking migrants, there were no chests of gold, just more misery at the end, but it was home. The simple act of reaching home can be heroic in the present.

**T**he movie *Contagion* imagined a pandemic which, except for the lethality, has parallels to how Covid-19 developed and the world's reaction to it. In it, a vaccine is fast-tracked when a scientist tests it on herself. There are instances in medical history where this has been done. A *Washington Post* article which wrote about it, said: 'In the race to discover how disease spreads and what treatments might stop it, someone has to be tested first. That someone is often the doctor in the white coat. Jonas Salk tested the polio vaccine—which contained a nonliving form of the virus—on himself and his children before giving it to strangers. In 1986, Daniel Zagury, a French immunologist, appointed himself to be the first person dosed with an experimental AIDS vaccine. A 2012 study identified 465 episodes of doctors' self-experiments, with 140 of them related to dangerous infectious diseases. Eight self-experiments resulted in death, including physicians and scientists trying to curtail outbreaks of plague, typhus, cholera and yellow fever. What would possess someone to, say, drink a hearty soup infused with cholera bacteria, as Max Joseph Pettenkofer did in 1892?

"Historically, self experimentation was an important part of the scientific process, allowing medical advances that would have been hard to achieve otherwise," wrote two researchers in a rollicking 2018 paper titled "Adventures in self experimentation." And why? "Because no sane human would agree to be a research participant and no ethical review board in its right mind would approve the experiment," the researchers wrote.'

We haven't seen any noteworthy instances now and no self-experimentation has changed the course of the virus. No one has magically willed a silver bullet to end the contagion. Instead, what we do have are the regular foot soldiers transcend-

≡ **Li Wenliang in Wuhan Central Hospital on February 3, four days before his death**



REUTERS

**IF HEROES ARE INDIVIDUALS WHO THROUGH CHARACTER KEEP THE PAGES OF HISTORY ROLLING IN A VIRTUOUS DIRECTION, THEN LI WENLIANG FITS THE BILL. HE DID NOT POSSESS THE IMMENSE STRENGTH OF CLASSICAL PROTAGONISTS BUT THAT IS NOT A REQUIREMENT FOR THE MODERN AGE**



THE MOVIE CONTAGION IMAGINED A PANDEMIC WHICH, EXCEPT FOR THE LETHALITY, HAS PARALLELS TO HOW COVID-19 DEVELOPED AND THE WORLD'S REACTION TO IT. IN IT, A VACCINE IS FAST-TRACKED WHEN A SCIENTIST TESTS IT ON HERSELF. THERE ARE INSTANCES IN MEDICAL HISTORY WHERE THIS HAS BEEN DONE



≡ Jennifer Ehle as Ally Hextall, the doctor who tests an experimental vaccine on herself, in *Contagion*

ing their ordinariness by doing what they have always done but in a changed environment. At least now, doctors and nurses are more aware of the nature of the beast and have access to greater protection. But rewind to the beginning of the pandemic, when there was almost no personal protective equipment and healthcare workers turned up at hospitals daily knowing that it was just a matter of time before they got infected. Men and women doing their duty in the face of death. Policemen, sanitation workers, bankers, ambulance drivers, security guards, bus conductors and drivers transporting essential workers—all those who went to work while the rest remained safely inside their homes by government diktat.

Even for the essential workers, the alternative existed of refusing to comply. You could lose your job, but what does that weigh against death? And many did too. When the Maharashtra government asked municipal workers to resume duty after the first unlocking, a large number of them remained home and attendance only increased after threats of suspension. But there were also bank employees from the private sector who kept working from the beginning of the lockdown and, for a profession that is not predicated on physical risk, the number of infections and

deaths they saw were extraordinary. Just this week, the *Hindu Business Line* would write of one banking office in one tier-2 city: 'Less than a week back, 30 employees of State Bank of India's administrative office on McDonalds Road in Trichy were tested positive, while a senior manager succumbed to the disease. Employees then claimed that there were at least 38 positive cases in the campus.'

**T**here is a gradation, an inverse correlation of power, in the heroisms of essential workers. The higher up one is on the ladder, the less the heroism; and the lower the rank the greater the courage. In the police force, constables bore the maximum risk while the IPS officer the least. In hospitals,

the wards of infected were worked by junior doctors and nurses while senior doctors gave instructions from elsewhere. The irony is that society's admiration is reserved for cases at the top, as when Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan tested positive. But even among politicians, those who worked in the slums and containment zones were the local leaders and volunteers. In Mumbai, as the sero-surveys are being conducted by the administration, it is the corporators who are providing political support and legwork. The MLAs and MPs are not seen as much. The ministers even less. In Kerala, it is the local ASHA volunteer in villages, part-health worker part-politician, who turned the tide when the disease first hit and now, as the second wave is being unleashed, they are once again at the frontlines.

Few will get recognition like Sonu Sood, a Bollywood star whose relief works has brought him admiration and praise. But that is only because the rest of Bollywood has done little. He is famous because he is the exception. When the pandemic is over, only the feats of individuals like Sood or Wenliang or Jyoti Kumari will be remembered. That is the nature of stories. The rest will be a saga of anonymity; the mere act of doing made extraordinary in an extraordinary time. ■



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# MIND OVER MATTER

## **From mapping the spread of the pandemic to**

studying the virus and helping with the efforts to find a vaccine or even equip laboratories and build requisite medical kits, medical professionals have been at the forefront of the battle against Covid-19. Indian medical experts have been part of it from the beginning, whether at the World Health Organization or Indian Council of Medical Research, the National Institute of Virology or AIIMS. For many of them, their expertise had to be supplemented with administrative responsibilities in helping governments decide policy and safe practices to keep the public as much out of the path of the virus as possible. Doctors and nurses treating patients have also fallen victim to the virus. But medical professionals are not the whole story of experts against the pandemic. There are those who have gathered, analysed and published data for the average citizen, helping to track the virus. Still others have helped set up online 'war rooms' or distribute medicines. Without such experts, we would not be discussing the pandemic still, let alone talking about its possible end.



Soumya Swaminathan / 61

Chief Scientist, WHO

## Scientific Temper

When the novel coronavirus first emerged, it was new to everyone, even science. Since then, in the worldwide mobilisation to understand the virus, vast amounts of new research have been emerging every day. Standing at the frontline of this battlefield, Dr Soumya Swaminathan vets what the worlds' scientists propose. As WHO's Chief Scientist, she leads the charge at both understanding this virus and equipping the public with that knowledge. The daughter of 'India's Green Revolution Man' MS Swaminathan, she has held a string of important positions throughout her career, from working on tuberculosis and HIV research to becoming the Director General of ICMR and later Deputy Director-General at WHO. Now, as the Chief Scientist, she designs the organisation's scientific response and leads global partnerships on research to find a vaccine and other drug therapies. For us to emerge from this pandemic with fewer casualties and emotional scars, Swaminathan will have to play a crucial role.



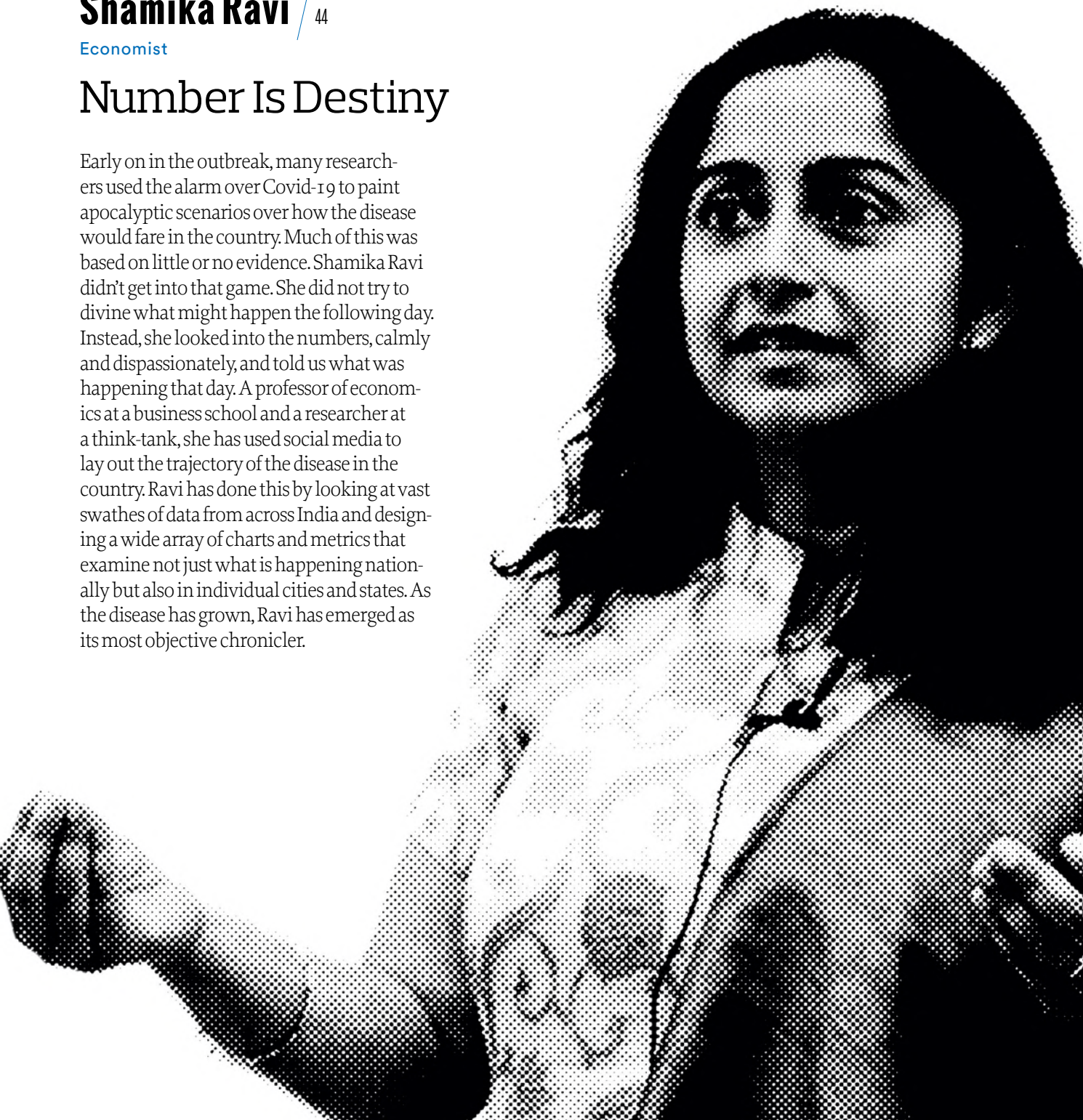


**Shamika Ravi** / 44

Economist

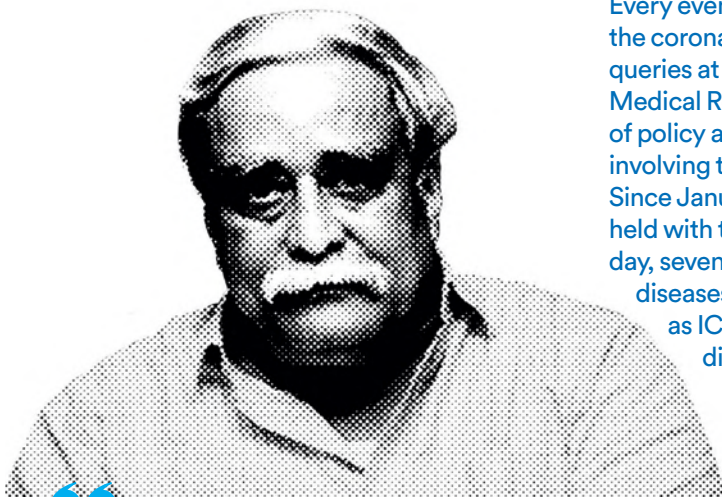
## Number Is Destiny

Early on in the outbreak, many researchers used the alarm over Covid-19 to paint apocalyptic scenarios over how the disease would fare in the country. Much of this was based on little or no evidence. Shamika Ravi didn't get into that game. She did not try to divine what might happen the following day. Instead, she looked into the numbers, calmly and dispassionately, and told us what was happening that day. A professor of economics at a business school and a researcher at a think-tank, she has used social media to lay out the trajectory of the disease in the country. Ravi has done this by looking at vast swathes of data from across India and designing a wide array of charts and metrics that examine not just what is happening nationally but also in individual cities and states. As the disease has grown, Ravi has emerged as its most objective chronicler.



# Raman R Gangakhedkar / 61 **Testing Times**

Head of Epidemiology and Communicable Diseases, ICMR



Every evening, as the country went into lockdown to contain the coronavirus, Dr Raman R Gangakhedkar would answer queries at media briefings, representing the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR). He was instrumental in formulation of policy and strategic-level decision-making on Covid-19, involving testing criteria, surveillance protocol and guidelines. Since January 17th, when the first meeting on Covid-19 was held with the Cabinet Secretary, he has worked 14-15 hours a day, seven days a week, says the head of infectious diseases department at ICMR. Gangakhedkar retired as ICMR's head of epidemiology and communicable diseases on June 30th and returned to Pune to assist its research body, the National Institute of Virology, and the National AIDS Research Institute.

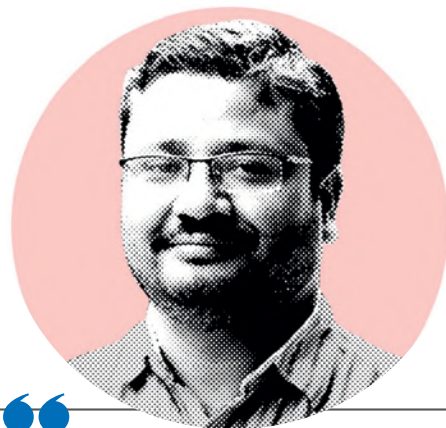
**The biggest challenge was that we did not know enough about the virus. We struggled on every front. Another challenge was to teach hygiene to such a large population. We could manage because of the lockdown"**

## Santosh Ansumali / 43

Academic

### Early Warnings

In the early days of the pandemic, when there were no reliable estimates of the spread to base healthcare policy on, a team of academics came up with a data-based model exploiting the universality of the disease across geographies. Santosh Ansumali, Associate Professor at the Engineering Mechanics Unit of Jawaharlal Nehru Centre for Advanced Scientific Research (JNCASR), Bengaluru, knew that an early prediction model, while not useful for long-term tracking, could help direct critical resources where and when they would be required most. The medical inventory dashboard based on the model developed by Ansumali and Meher Prakash at JNCASR, with Alope Kumar at the Indian Institute of Science, P Sunthar of IIT-Bombay, student volunteers and Soumyadeep Bhattacharya of SankhyaSutra Labs (where Ansumali is CTO), helped states like Karnataka, Delhi and Punjab stay on top of case loads through May and June. The team is now working on a quantitative model for Covid-19 that incorporates the impact of the lockdown and the spread due to hidden asymptomatic carriers.



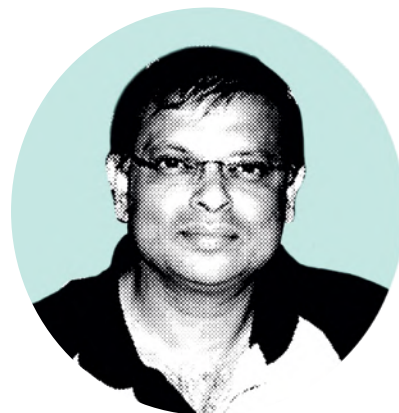
**We wanted to be wrong but we didn't expect to overestimate Covid-19 deaths by 5-6 times. The early lockdown made a big difference and we are studying the impact of it"**



## Atanu Basu / 54 First Sighting

Virologist

The ICMR-National Institute of Virology in Pune houses India's only biosafety level 4 (BSL-4) laboratory. Here is where, with the highest level of biocontainment precautions, the SARS-CoV-2 virus was first isolated from clinical samples obtained from the first three patients in Kerala who contracted the virus in Wuhan, China. It was thanks to this effort that as early as March 6th, with just a handful of reported cases, India deposited two sequences with the Global Initiative on Sharing All Influenza Data (GISAID). NIV Deputy Director Atanu Basu's lab produced the first transmission electron microscope image of the virus in the country—with the classic spikes we are now familiar with. The work, published in the *Indian Journal of Medical Research*, paved the way for research on drugs, vaccines and diagnostic tests in labs and pharma companies across the country.



## Vinod Scaria / 39 Back to Biology

Genomicist

The 39-year-old genomic scientist's initiative provides ready access to genomic, epidemiological datasets and protocols pertaining to Covid-19. He initiated projects to analyse the virus' genetic data from various parts of India. Conferred the CSIR Young Scientist Award in biological sciences for developing computational tools to analyse genomic data in 2012, Scaria has been pioneering the application of genomics to diagnose and solve rare genetic diseases in India, including discovering novel variants. The Covid-19 Open Research, Data and Resources is an initiative to make available research and resources at his lab at the CSIR Institute of Genomics and Integrative Biology in an open format to ensure they are widely accessible. Scaria's genome sequencing of the novel coronavirus is now widely used across the world to understand its characteristics.



**The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the need to share genomic data on a global scale. The genetic variants in the virus genome would allow effective tracing of the origin"**

Devi Shetty / 67  
Cardiac Surgeon

## Doctor Knows Better

Dr Devi Shetty's entire medical career and the success of Narayana Hrudalaya is a study in frugal innovation. So it was no surprise that he had the most radical yet simple solution to the pandemic: beds don't treat patients, doctors do. Asking, along with Biocon CEO Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw, for an imaginative approach to medical education, they showed that India could fulfil its immediate lack of trained doctors and nurses by waiving final exam results—that would yield about 50,000 more doctors and about 1.5 lakh-2 lakh nurses to be deployed across district hospitals as a flexible, moveable force. He was one of the first to raise the alarm about the disease spreading to the interiors of India's 740-odd districts where there is a lack of anaesthetists and ICU units. Shetty has long-term solutions as well, asking for a change in the way we design our health system, moving it to focus on surgeries rather than managing diseases, including infectious disease. Lack of basic surgeries such as emergency C-section, laparotomy and those for compound fractures kill about 17 million people annually in India alone.

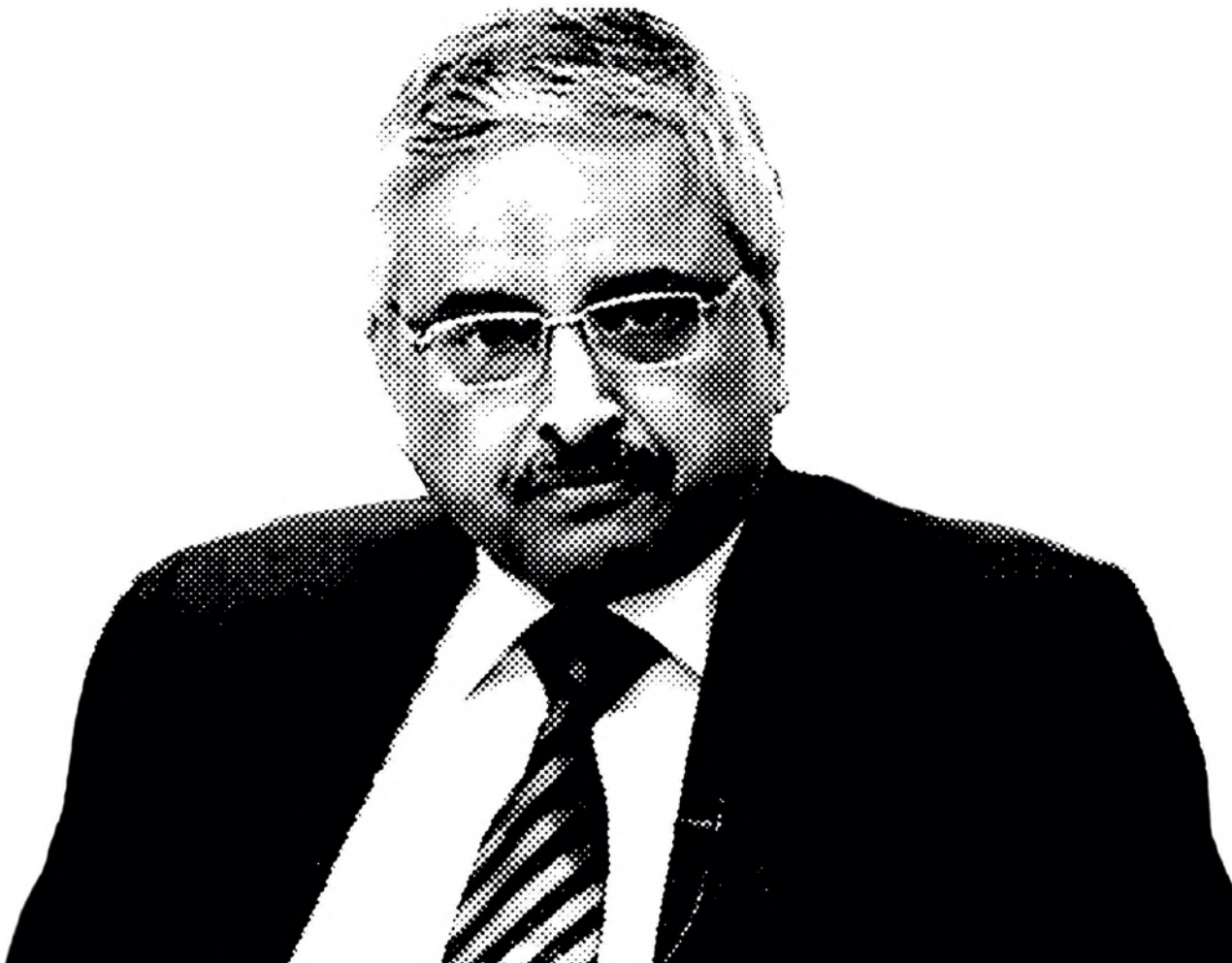


**By the end of the year there will be 200 million infected people in India and within a year it will affect 40 per cent of the country”**

## Randeep Guleria / 61 In the Vanguard

Director, All India Institute of Medical Sciences

The country's top pulmonologist has played troubleshooter for the Government. In early May, the director of the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) boarded a special Air Force flight to Ahmedabad, as Covid-19 cases crossed 7,000 in Gujarat. He met doctors to provide expert guidance on management of the disease. A month later, as Delhi witnessed a surge with a total of nearly 35,000 cases, he was on a high-level panel constituted by Lt Governor Anil Baijal to recommend ways to contain the spread. The capital, which recorded the highest number of cases in a city, has one of the lowest growth rates now. By the middle of July, Guleria said Delhi seemed to have hit the peak. Taking time off his busy schedule as part of the policymaking team for the pandemic, he answers queries ranging from plasma therapy to the indigenous Covaxin vaccine, highlighting the brighter side of the fight against the coronavirus. He joined AIIMS as an Assistant Professor in 1992 and was appointed its Director in 2017. He worked as a personal physician to former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee.







## Jagadish Hiremath / 48

Critical Care and ICU Equipment Expert

### Oxygen Rush

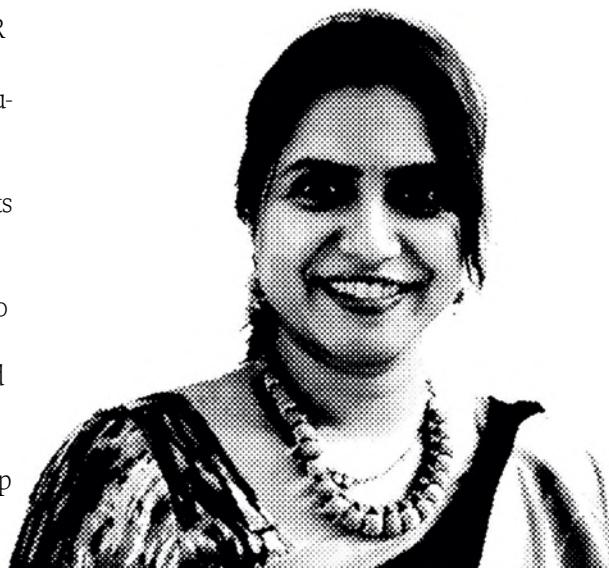
As an intensivist who also understands medical equipment design, Dr Jagadish Hiremath suddenly found himself in demand as Covid-19 hit India and a shortage of ventilators and ICU equipment seemed imminent. Even as his hospital in Anekal, Bengaluru began to function as a Covid-19 care centre in June, Hiremath was working with seven companies on alternative ventilator designs that could quickly and economically be manufactured in India. One of these, financed under the PM Cares Fund and manufactured by a PSU, has already hit the market. Another prototype by Mysore-based Skanray uses auto parts by Mahindra & Mahindra. Hiremath has also collaborated with Bosch on a humidified oxygen high-flow system, a simpler way of providing respiratory support. Aside from issuing popular citizen compliance messages in Kannada, Hiremath's tweets on the number of young patients getting very sick helped dispel a false sense of security among youth. The doctor is now busy setting up a second hospital with 80 beds.

**We learnt that we don't need full-fledged ventilators in most cases. Simpler devices could be built very quickly. At one point I joked to the state government that they should make me head of respiratory devices"**

## Minal Dakhve Bhosale / 31 Native Wisdom

Biotechnologist

The face of India's first homegrown commercial Covid-19 PCR (Polymerase Chain Reaction) kit, Minal Dakhve Bhosale is part of a young team of 11 researchers at Mylab Discovery Solutions, a Pune-based molecular diagnostics company, that saw opportunity in the early release, in January, of WHO's Berlin protocol for the real-time kits. Soon, Bhosale was leading efforts at the company to develop a kit in-house. The team had developed and tested primers and probes for the kit by early March and ICMR sped up approvals to get the first shipment of 20,000 kits out in the market by the end of the month. This wasn't the first of firsts for Bhosale and her team. In April 2019, Mylab had become the first company in Asia to get approval for nucleic acid tests for screening blood donations to reduce the risk of transfusion-transmitted infections. Mylab has since ramped up Covid-19 kit capacity to 2 lakh a day.



# A RACE AGAINST TIME

## After more than four

months since Covid-19 was declared a global pandemic, we now know more about the virus. Healthcare has reflected this increase in knowledge and experience. The results of the Oxford vaccine have also been encouraging. It is no longer wishful thinking to talk of a vaccine in a few months time. Vaccine entrepreneurs have formed a frontline in the battle against Covid-19 and Indian vaccine researchers and businessmen have earned their place in the global history of that battle. They have also taken the initiative. The Serum Institute of India has signed a deal to make over 100 crore doses of the Oxford vaccine, currently in its Phase-3 trials. Bharat Biotech's Covaxin was the first potential vaccine from India to get approval for human trials while Zydus Cadila, among the largest generic drug manufacturers, has been developing the second vaccine from India to get the nod for human trials. Featured in this section are India's foremost vaccine warriors without whom there would be no hope on the pandemic horizon.



Adar  
Poonawalla / 39  
CEO, Serum Institute of India

## Big Shot





Photo FORBES INDIA / VIKAS KHOT

Adar Poonawalla has been described as the important figure in the global vaccine race who doesn't work in a lab. That's because he owns the next most important thing—a vaccine manufacturing plant. Poonawalla, and his father before him, have built a vaccine empire, churning out around 150 crore doses annually against diseases such as meningitis, measles and tetanus. Poonawalla's company is working on five potential Covid-19 vaccines, the most promising being the one developed by Oxford University and AstraZeneca. Poonawalla, contracted to manufacture 150 crore doses of these for developing countries, has already begun manufacturing them in order to save on time if the final trials show they are effective. If and when a vaccine finally becomes ready, Poonawalla is going to play a crucial role in how quickly people get access to it.



## Krishna M Ella / 72 **The Pioneer**

Chairman and Managing Director, Bharat Biotech

India is the vaccine manufacturing hub of the world. Cheap manufacturing costs and a large pool of scientific talent mean every one in three vaccines is manufactured at an Indian plant. Where India has lacked is original research. Rarely have entirely new vaccines been developed from scratch. It is here that Krishna M Ella is forging an entirely new path. After establishing Bharat Biotech in 1996, Ella has quietly been developing a number of vaccines for ailments, ranging from Japanese encephalitis, hepatitis B and swine-flu to the Zika virus, at a fraction of the cost of most other vaccines. In 2015, his Rotavirus vaccine, inducted into the WHO's immunisation programme, was priced at about just \$1 a dose. Now, tying up with ICMR and the National Institute of Virology, he's using all his nous and ingenuity, balancing both government deadlines and scientific necessities, to develop a Covid-19 vaccine. Ella's new facility in Karnataka is set to be one of the largest vaccine manufacturing units in Asia. It will also house a state-of-the-art cryogenic spice grinding plant, he says. One of the few entrepreneurs to admit that input imports have been crucial to the success of Indian pharma, Ella is a fierce critic of regressive policies that force pharma companies to look to the West for equipment and reagents.

GETTY IMAGES

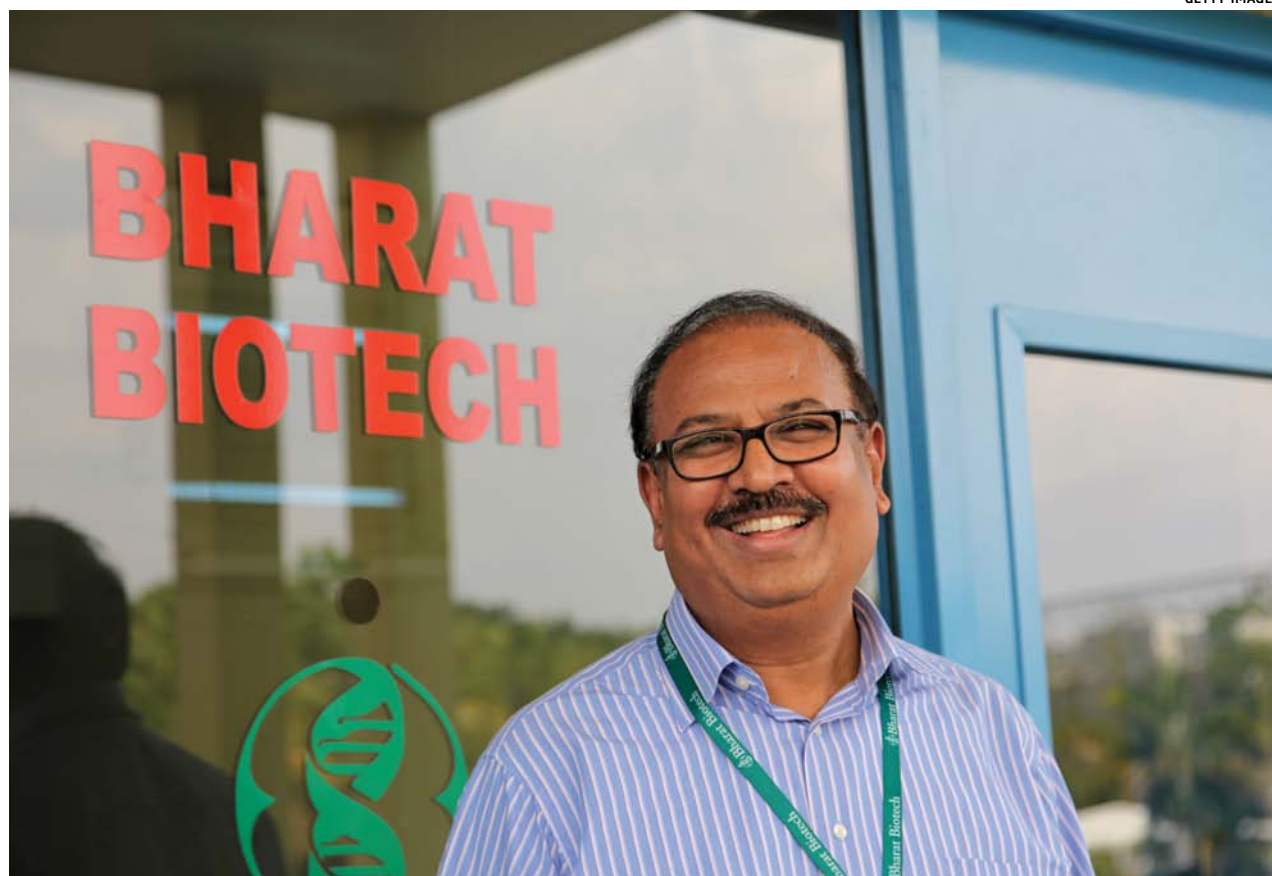




Photo FORBES INDIA / PRASAD GORI

## Pankaj Patel / 67 Lifeline

Chairman, Zydus Cadila

For a businessman who is considered exceptionally lowkey, there has been no keeping Pankaj Patel away from the news during this pandemic. When the world first began to seek hydroxy-chloroquine, Patel ramped up production to become one of the largest suppliers of the drug. Next month, he comes out with his version of the current in-demand drug Remdesivir. A few weeks ago, he sprung a surprise. His company, essentially a generic drugs manufacturer, was going to begin human trials for a Covid-19 vaccine. This isn't the first time he has surprised people. Ten years ago, he seemingly came out of nowhere, beating purely vaccine manufacturing companies to manufacture the first Indian-made H1N1 vaccine. He took over the company set up by his father—a chemistry teacher-turned-drug manufacturer who began making vitamin tablets a few years after Independence—and turned around its fortunes in the noughties by acquiring other firms and bringing out a range of new drugs. With a potential Covid-19 vaccine, he could take Indian pharma business into the next league.

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# CITIZEN CARE

## **The health of a society is determined, among**

other important things, by the willingness of its members to volunteer for a good cause. More often than not, the determinant of a good cause is need. And nothing triggers need like a crisis. In times of mass ill-health, people who come forward to serve the needy are more down-to-earth versions of the proverbial Good Samaritans, no matter how exalted their current station in life. If you are a chef, would you not volunteer your skills to feed others? Only, in a pandemic, you forego your Michelin star and take nothing in return. If you are a celebrity with means, there may be nothing amiss in arranging transportation for the jobless worker to help her get home. But then, there are those others, nameless and almost penniless, who too do what they can because of the compassion they feel for their fellow humans. In all of it, there is nothing if not heroism and every name featured here owes to the deed, not its fame.









## Vikas Khanna / 48

Chef

### Hunger Pangs

Vikas Khanna has made a living as a pretty boy cooking and talking up Indian food in some of the world's spiffiest spaces. He occasionally doubles as a filmmaker, most recently showcasing his movie *The Last Color* at a small screening at the United Nations. But his campaign of providing 21 million (and counting) meals through Feed India across 100 cities since the lockdown was announced on March 24th has won him fresh fans. Teaming up with the National Disaster Relief Force, Khanna was able to provide ready-made meals and dry rations to people at fuel stations, bus stops, leprosy centres, on railway tracks and highways, in elderly care homes and flood-ravaged cities. Controlling the logistics from New York, he collaborated with the rice brand India Gate and showed that technology can bridge distances. If there is one thing the pandemic has shown, it is that we are all interconnected and no more so than through our empathy, to the last person standing.



## Lama Thupstan Chogyal / 49

Buddhist Monk

### Altitude of Kindness





When the first case of Covid-19, a pilgrim returning from Iran, was reported in Leh in March, the ice was yet to melt. Lama Thupstan Chogyal agreed to the Government's request to take in contacts of the patient to be quarantined at his Ladakh Heart Foundation, about eight kilometres from the city. The water in the taps was frozen, the two roads—from Manali and Srinagar—to Leh were still closed, the hands of the nurses started cracking with frequent washing in cold water. "It happened suddenly. There were 13 patients. We had to switch on the heating," says Chogyal. He had shut down the OPD for two-three weeks. Several of those quarantined turned out to be positive cases and, as per guidelines, were shifted to a government hospital, while the Ladakh Heart Foundation was kept on standby in case the numbers rose. Chogyal, 49, had started the Ladakh Heart Foundation in 2007, after he saw how heart patients from Ladakh went all the way to Delhi for treatment because of a lack of facilities. He says the hospital gets 400-700 patients a week.



## Sonu Sood / 46

Actor

### Fit to Help

Some clichés are true. The heart is the strongest muscle, at least in the case of Sonu Sood, who has made a career of playing the muscular strongman in movies. During the pandemic, ignoring advice from friends who suggested he start video masterclasses on physical fitness, he decided to reach out and help those in need. Starting with distributing food packets, he sent stranded migrants home by bus, and soon chartered a flight to send a large group of migrant workers from Kerala to their homes in Odisha. Even as public transport restrictions were lifted, he continued to help, whether it was two sisters in Chittoor district of Andhra Pradesh whose plough he replaced with a tractor so they could focus on education or helping veteran actor Anupam Shyam with hospital fees. His latest initiative, the Pravasi Rojgar app, is a free platform to help migrants find jobs. The son of a cloth store merchant and teacher from Moga, Sonu is an engineering graduate, one of many 'outsiders' who has made his mark across the Hindi and southern language industries, and perhaps shown more humanity than established superstars.







## Baba Gurinder Singh Dhillon

Spiritual Leader

65

## Sheltering Shadow



In May, Gurinder Singh Dhillon, the 65-year-old head of the Radha Soami Satsang Beas (RSSB), told Prime Minister Narendra Modi that all the sect's centres would be available for care of Covid-19 patients. By the end of June, its sprawling premises at Chattarpur were transformed into the capital's biggest Covid-19 facility with 2,000 beds, 10 per cent with oxygen-support. Its 250 ashrams across the country have turned into shelter homes for stranded migrants, with hygienic community kitchens. In March, even before India went into lockdown, Dhillon offered Punjab Chief Minister Amarinder Singh use of the 'Satsangh Ghars' in the state, where three cases of Covid-19, all returnees from Europe, were reported by March 20th. The Lawrence School (Sanawar) educated Dhillon was working in Spain before he returned to Punjab to be nominated as the next spiritual head of the RSSB in 1990. The RSSB, which follows the philosophy of a personal path of spirituality, was established in India in 1891 and spread to other countries in the mid-20th century.





GETTY IMAGES

## Manish Mundra / 47

Film Producer

### The More, the Better

In the first week of March, murmurs of Covid-19 had just begun to be heard in India when businessman and film producer Manish Mundra flew to Nigeria, where he heads a petrochemicals company. As he watched Europe keel over, Mundra realised the situation was about to get alarming in India as well. By March 25th, his fears had come true. From thousands of miles away, Mundra decided to help India tide over the crisis. He turned his focus first to the supply of PPE kits to medical warriors and ventilators to hospitals. By May 31st, he had provided 50,000 kits across 60 locations. "After that we stopped counting. But it is a great satisfaction that we could help when it was needed the most," says Mundra. Mundra also played a pivotal role in helping migrant workers and many others with dry ration and financial help. After each instance, he would tweet: 'Let's do more'. And he did.



**It is a great satisfaction that we could help when it was needed the most"**





## Salami Shashankar / 27

SBI Employee

### Bank Madam

Among the Tribal hamlets near her Toyaput village in Odisha's Koraput district, Salami Shashankar is known as 'Bank Madam'. Armed with a mask, gloves and sanitiser, Shashankar has been riding her two-wheeler, a Yamaha-609, to provide banking services to the villagers, since the lockdown began on March 25th. In her bag she carries a laptop, with-





Salami Shashankar provides banking services in Konapadi village, Odisha, July 29

drawal and deposit slips and cash. All she needs is a clean place under a tree to sit and convert it into a temporary office. She is an outsourced employee of the State of Bank of India to provide customer services. After the lockdown, she has been helping them avail state and Central subsidies. She has already provided customer service in 10 villages.

**The Tribals could not move from one place to another. So I started providing banking services to them in the hamlet. It was my dream to help my people and I feel so proud I could do that in some way"**



JYOTIKUMARI

15

Student

## Soaring Spirit

Not just the plight of migrant labourers trapped thousands of kilometres from their homes with no means of livelihood or savings to sustain themselves but their innate resilience too was exemplified in the heroic journey of Jyoti Kumari. Just 15 years old, when the landlord in their Gurugram accommodation said he would be evicting the family because they had no money to pay rent, Jyoti took out her bicycle, made her ailing father sit pillion and rode over 1,000 kilometres in a week until they reached their native village in Bihar. It was a feat that caught the attention of the whole world with even Ivanka Trump, daughter of US President Donald Trump, lauding Jyoti's grit. An offer from the Cycling Federation of India to come for trials was turned down and she is now focusing on her studies. Millions drew inspiration from her. Her determination showed a country under siege from a disease what the human spirit is capable of.

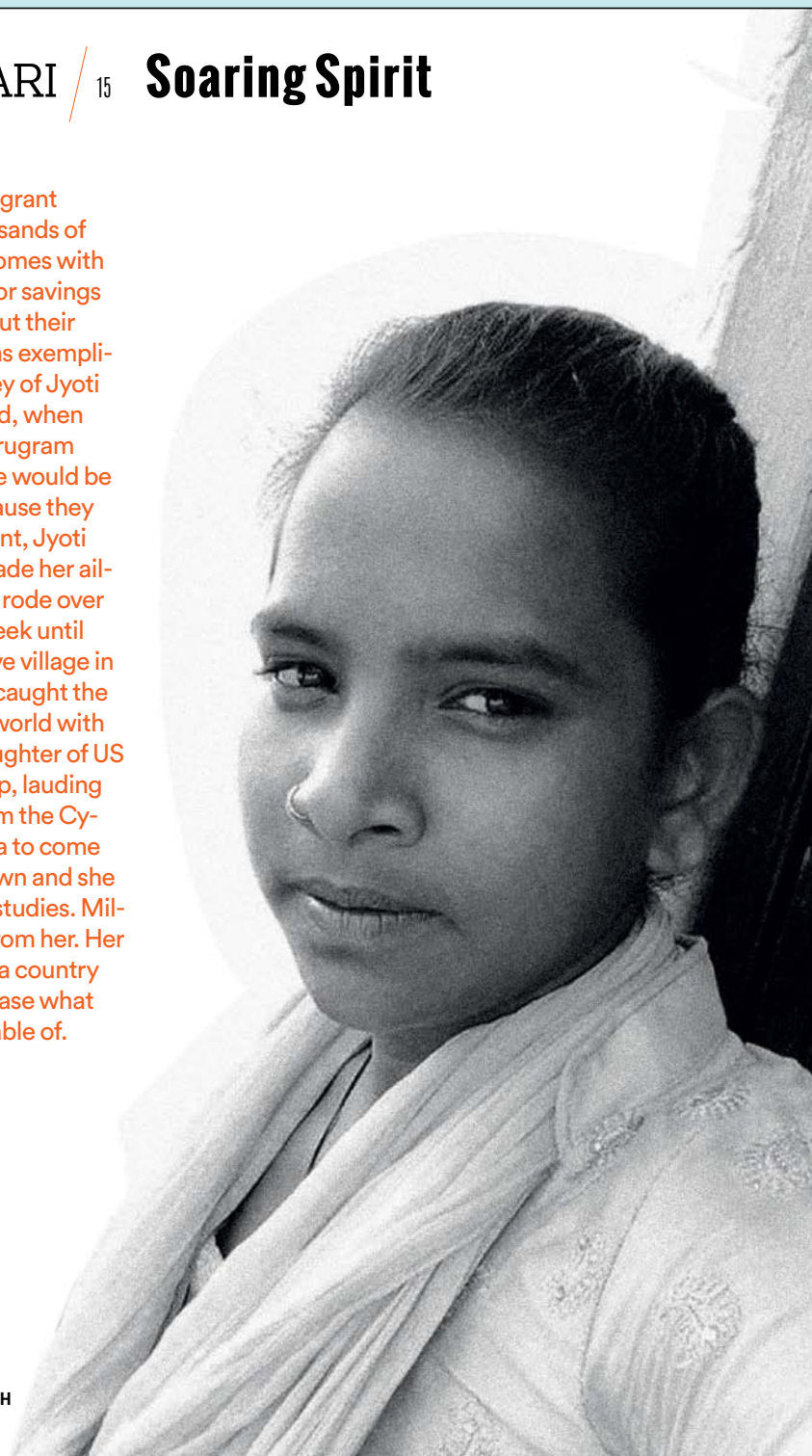


Illustration by SAURABH SINGH





## Chhayarani Sahu / 57 The Joy of Giving

Farmer

A farmer from Bhadrak in Odisha, Chhayarani Sahu went each morning for a month with her husband and two sons to distribute three-four kg packets of vegetables grown in her seven acres of land to families in nearby villages. After the lockdown, when her produce started getting a lower price in the local market seven kilometres away, she decided to rather give it away free to the villagers. From April 5th, for a month, she spent around two-three hours distributing vegetables—brinjals, tomatoes, onions, okhra, pumpkins, green chillies—covering 15 panchayats which include 30-40 villages. “Some villagers had lost their jobs. Some didn’t have land. The government gives rice, not vegetables. Since we had vegetables, we decided to give it to the villagers,” says the mother of four in Oriya, as her son translates it to Hindi. After the rains, she has only two-three vegetables on her farm, which she gives away when someone knocks at her door.



Danish  
Sait / 33

Comedian

## Humour Heals



Covid-19 has been an assault not just on our bodies, but also our minds. For many, comedian Danish Sait's short skits on social media came as a panacea to our mental woes. Locked up like the rest of us in our homes, using props, such as tissue boxes, room freshener cans, and even a cat to serve as a phone in these videos of everyday people talking to one another, Sait emerged as the star of the lockdown. Unlike other comic acts whose content is now increasingly difficult to distinguish from a political activist's tract, Sait's subject has been the humour in everyday life, even in the shadow of a pandemic.

N Suresh / 52

Engineer

## At Home



The man who coordinated the largest citizen participation programme to manage local crises and respond to help requests in the lockdown is now busy putting together a 40,000-strong home quarantine force for Bengaluru. In March, just as the coronavirus was making its way into Karnataka, 40,000 volunteers registered as Corona Warriors under an initiative of the state's Department of Information and Public Relations, signing up to deliver medicines by relay, drive distraught mothers across districts to their children, attend to patients who could not get a hospital bed, organise dry food and provisions for migrants and be where they were needed. Upon the request of IAS officer Captain Manivannan, Suresh, an IT executive, took a sabbatical from the multinational he works for and built the communications framework for the volunteer force that treated each query as a service ticket to be tracked and closed ASAP. The group was disbanded post-lockdown, but its achievements inspired many volunteers to keep up the good work.



# TIPS FOR STUDENTS DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC



**A**midst the many uncertainties today, one that continues to remain uncertain is how to go about with higher education for students in every corner of the world. As the world continues to fight against the COVID-19 outbreak, more than 130 countries are closed down to an extent, impacting nearly 80% of students, globally. This is unprecedented; the world has never seen these many students out of school/colleges at the same time. Astonishingly, students who once looked forward to study from the comfort of their homes, are now waiting for colleges to reopen. It has been over four months that colleges across the world have suspended physical classrooms and moved online. This includes admissions for those who passed their 12th STD/PUC boards as well.

Many universities have already plunged into the digital platform to provide the best for their students.

Top 100 NIRF Universities such as Jamia Hamdard University, Lovely Professional University among other institutes are now part of upGrad, an EdTech company from India for its best proprietary tech platform. Colleges will now be able to provide students more than just an ordinary 'tech platform' to connect. They're now capable of building end to end digital campuses with the complete Learning Management System (LMS) where they can support multiple assessment formats like coding tests in its inbuilt coding console, quizzes, individual and group projects, plagiarism checks, proctored exams for fair grading of assignment, among a host of others, etc.

Institutes from North India like CT University (Ludhiana), RayatBahra University (Punjab), ABES Engineering College (Ghaziabad) to South India like Hindustan University (Chennai), AMC Group of Institutions (Bengaluru) to

Central India like People's University (Bhopal) to West India like Nagpur University (Rashtrasant Tukadoji Maharaj Nagpur University), Sandip University (Nashik), Sinhgad Group of Institution (Pune) to even institutes from the North East corners of India like Rabindranath Thakur Mahavidyalaya, Netaji Subhash Mahavidyalaya and Bir Bikram Memorial College in Tripura, are all making use of the above tech platform to create the best digital platform for students.

There are some students who have found this shift easy but many are still finding it difficult to cope with. As many would agree, students deciding where to attend college is, in the best of times, an often-tough process! Given the pandemic situation, the difficulty level has gone up massively for those trying to figure out the best path for them.

Here are some tips that will help students to prepare themselves better during this pandemic.



# Meerut Institute of Engineering & Technology: Synonymous with Success

“**E**xcellence is not an option but a habit at MIET Group of Institutions,” that is the reason that both the colleges under the aegis of the group namely, Meerut Institute of Engineering & Technology and Meerut Institute of Technology have always featured in the top of academic rankings of the affiliating university AKTU. In the last three years, MIET Group has strategically tied up with Industry Giants, brought a paradigm shift in the approach to the academic curriculum, taking holistic rather than a unidimensional route to train our students, result being MIET Group has been now looked up at National Level in terms of quality technical education.

“Staying ahead of the times,” has been our core philosophy and the fact that even during the Corona pandemic the training of our students went seamlessly is a testimony to MIET’s commitment to excellence. We take immense pride in the fact that what now is new Normal, to be Virtual was imbibed and adopted way before, the world was hit by this gigantic pandemic. MIET was and is now as well the leader when it comes to virtual infrastructure and a pool of faculty members who are well trained with the latest technological needs of the industry. MIET not only did share its educational might with our students but with a series of informative and innovative webinars, it brought academicians and students from all across the nation abreast with our enormous knowledge base. COVID as an opportunity for us to showcase the already known calibre of MIET’s technical prowess and stamp our authority as one of nation’s top-notch academic & research hub.

These are unprecedented times, and today educational institutions are facing extraordinary challenges. But what seemed an improbable future for other



**Mr Puneet Agarwal**  
*Vice Chairman,  
MIET Group of Institutions*

institutions, MIET’s approach made it quite clear that it is ready to lead during these challenging times, and other institutions are taking a leaf out of MIET’s innovative approach. Even during the lockdown, we not only were focussed on providing quality education but also did not hamper the training of the next generation of leaders, it was paramount for them to equip them both personally and professionally.

It is quite evident that the real challenge for Institutions will arise during new enrolments. But we at MIET have moved on from traditional campus-based enrolments and adapted to more technologically driven admission procedures. It is quite imperative that parents are worried about placements but to put their doubt to rest, we take immense pride that both MIET & MIT are technologically equipped to facilitate virtual placement drive considering the unforeseen times we are facing. Our students have already been assessed by industry experts and our in house state of the art assessment facilities and we are sure that they will not only meet your quality criteria but also prove to be a valuable asset capable of handling multiple roles.

Before the lockdown, this year already

had been a watershed year as far as placements are concerned for MIET, by having the best placements in the region. MIET’s student Prachi Chaudhary, CS Branch bagged a whopping 25.6 LPA package from global giant Adobe, while Nandita Kundo, BioTech branch was hired at 12 LPA by Jaro Education. It doesn’t end here three of our students from BioTech, Aditya Tyagi, Pulkit & Ayushi Tyagi were absorbed in Extramarks for 10 LPA. We are proud to add that 112 of our students were placed at Tata Consultancy Services, while 112 were hired by Wipro. 335+ Companies, more than 76% placements - these numbers, when taken in totality, tell you how MIET has stamped its authority as the number one Institute in the region among aspiring students as far as placements are concerned.

MIET Group in last one year has organised four mega job fairs at our NCR Campus Meerut Institute of Technology, in association with government organisations such as MHRD & Regional Employment Offices, attended by over 1200 students, the job fair saw over 250 companies participating and more than 4,560 getting on the spot appointment letters. It was done for during the process of campus recruitments, we had come across requirements from many of our recruiters which involve skills different from those available with students of our educational institutions. In such cases, we have organized pool campus and job fairs at our educational institutions from time to time where we have brought recruiters and candidates belonging to other institutions (basic graduate colleges, polytechnics, ITI and PMKVY institutions) on one platform. These initiatives have been taken up under ISR (Institute Social Responsibility).

*(with inputs from Vishwas Gautam, Brand Head) ■*





### 1. Stay connected:

More than 300 million students worldwide haven't faced this level of disruption in generations, but unlike any time in the past, we have the ability to continue education even when we're in lockdown. Thanks to technology, no matter in which part of the world you live, buy that affordable smartphone and stay connected 24X7. Today, most colleges and universities are relying even more heavily on sharing information virtually. They are constantly communicating through emails, college websites, social media pages, and YouTube channels with real-time updates. Watch videos, check out photos, read and engage with posts and participate in live events sponsored by colleges. Colleges are now providing access to expert faculty, best practices from their universities, free campus tours, etc., for students who want to apply online. Grab each of these opportunities and ask when you've some doubts and stay connected.

### 2. Social distancing, not 'relational' distancing:

Being at home without meeting your friends may be tough, we understand.

But we've scores of different platforms for virtual meetings. All the fancy apps on your phone were created for such a time as this. On your social media accounts, go live/post statuses to see if you have anyone from your friends circle currently attending an institution you are considering and consider reaching out to them. Leverage all your networks, if you don't have a direct connection to someone, put out a general call, or ask a guidance counsellor or trusted teacher for leads. This isn't the time to be shy or worry about spamming. Make video calls and create those WhatsApp groups with students applying for similar courses etc., and keep each other informed about your admission process. You can stay in touch with your teachers/counsellors to help you make the right choice. Even if you've missed some important announcements from the colleges you wanted to apply, your friends would be there to keep you posted on your WhatsApp groups/weekly calls. Remember, it's just social distancing and not relational distancing.

### 3. Hone your research skills:

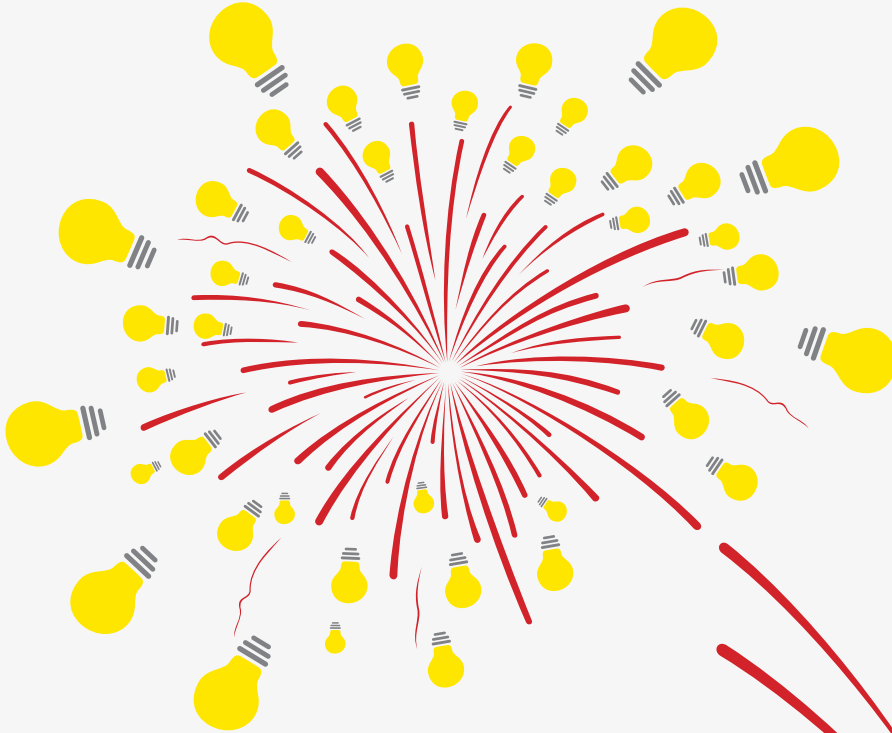
Are you a stalking pro? It's time to

turn your stalking skills into research skills and find that best college that would make your dreams come true. Read blogs, articles, reviews on different websites. Read about the course you're picking, be a visionary and see if it's practically a good course to take up, whether you would have opportunities in the future. Most importantly, opt for colleges that have the best digital platforms. Make sure you research various faculty members who are part of the college you want to join and chat with students who are currently studying for a better understanding of how they function.

Write down a list of the pros and cons of the engineering institutes you're interested in, and rate them out of 10 against different aspects of college life like affordability, teacher-student ratio, infrastructure and other facilities available, the university it's affiliated to, placement record, etc. This exercise should be able to say which college is leading and help you make the final decision when you tally the marks together. The following are a list of considerations that you can use to evaluate colleges the right way.

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**Digitally equipped:** This becomes extremely important because, without digitization, you won't be able to be part of smart classrooms and technology-aided teaching methods. With the pandemic affecting us, not knowing when one would go back to campus, it will be wise to look if universities are technically proficient to provide all your necessities.



#### **Financial aid/scholarships:**

Engineering is generally one of the costliest college majors. Fortunately, we have scores of scholarships available for students. In India, especially, scholarships are not just limited to the meritorious students but are also extended to people who cannot afford and are living below the poverty line. So, go ahead and highlight those institutes that will help you with scholarships to move forward with your dream.



#### **Placement and internships:**

Did you know? Not even the most prestigious institutes in India can claim to give 100% placements to all its students. Recently, the AICTE and Confederation of Indian Industries (CII) published its Linked Institutes 2018 report, which mentioned that

22% of the engineering colleges have no collaborations with the industry and hence the curriculum is not industry oriented. So, before enrolling in a college, please do a thorough study of the college's industry tie-ups and placements.



**Accreditation:** Review the college's accreditation, without fail. In order to get into a good job later, it's ideal that students should have completed your engineering at an accredited institution. Students who attend unaccredited institutes are not eligible for financial aid. The importance of accreditation is also that it creates a set of quality standards for all educational institutions or programs. Furthermore, accreditation aims to ensure accountability of degree programs which boosts public trust and confidence. When an institution or degree program is properly accredited, you are able to gauge its overall quality without having to conduct a detailed analysis on your own. For different educational institutions or programs there are specific types of accreditation, so look for ones that involve the quality review, assessment and assurance of education institutions.



**Location:** Location is most likely a factor for every potential student. The pandemic won't attack us forever, it will eventually

come to an end with the invention of new vaccines. Thus, you'll have to decide whether you want the bustle of a big city, or if rural, small-town living will be a better fit for you. Don't choose a location, assuming your college will remain virtual for life. Real-life will slowly kick in, be prepared for both.



#### **Qualification of faculty and past performance of the department:**

No matter what kind of institution you're looking for, 'faculty' plays a huge role in the delivery of world-class student experience. A college with above 80% past performance is excellent but that can be delivered only through best-qualified teachers. Research on faculty-student interactions suggests how faculty-student relationships contribute to students' aspirations, promote student engagement and a passion for learning, increase motivation to learn, boost academic self-confidence, etc.

Looking for the perfect college can be extremely hard, but with few strategies in place, you can simplify the process by focusing only on what's important. Do analyse each of the above points for every college on your list, and pick the most important ones, based on your education, personal and financial needs. It will take some time and effort on your part, but in the end, you'll know that you picked the best college for you. ■



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Sanjay Malik, Dubai

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# PUBLIC EYE

## The bureaucracy, it is said, is status

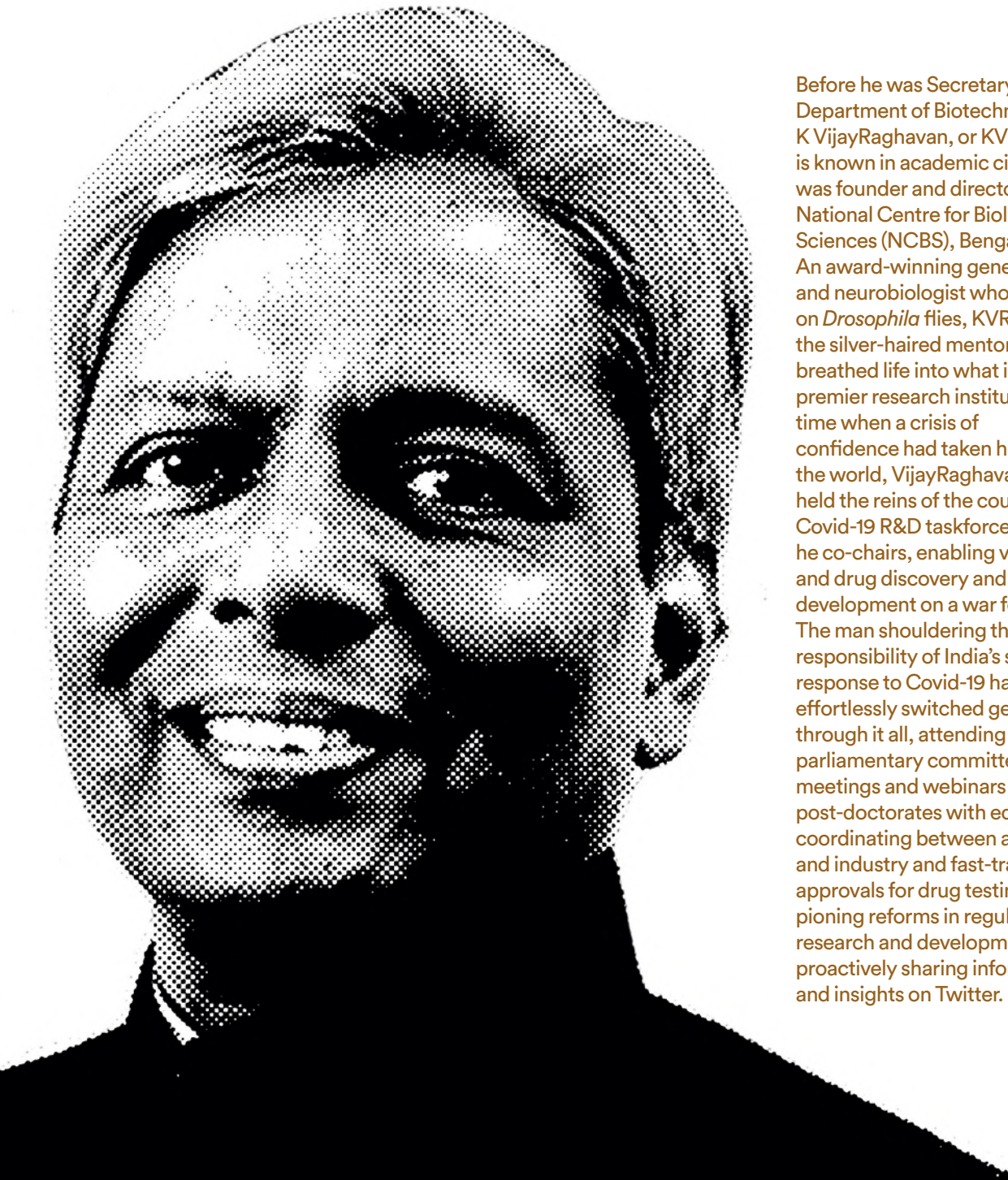
quoist. It revels in normalcy. Bureaucrats help make policy and also execute it. They are also, often, the interface between the public and its elected representatives. A health crisis of global proportions, not experienced in a century, with almost no living memory of being dealt with, is a nightmare for the most alert and well-oiled bureaucratic machine. When the Covid-19 pandemic overwhelmed the world, the day-to-day battle against the disease and the spiralling numbers had to be waged, first and often last, by bureaucrats. In India, bureaucrats became the public face of the country's efforts to contain the pandemic as they came on TV, went on Twitter administering data, delineating policy as well as the dos and don'ts. From the Principal Scientific Advisor to the Joint Secretary at the Department of Biotechnology, the personalities featured in this section have been instrumental in informing India and helping it meet the challenge.

Illustrations by SAURABH SINGH

K VijayRaghavan / 66

## Calm in the Storm

Principal Scientific Advisor, Government of India



Before he was Secretary, Department of Biotechnology, K VijayRaghavan, or KVR as he is known in academic circles, was founder and director of the National Centre for Biological Sciences (NCBS), Bengaluru. An award-winning geneticist and neurobiologist who worked on *Drosophila* flies, KVR was the silver-haired mentor who breathed life into what is now a premier research institution. At a time when a crisis of confidence had taken hold of the world, VijayRaghavan calmly held the reins of the country's Covid-19 R&D taskforce, which he co-chairs, enabling vaccine and drug discovery and development on a war footing. The man shouldering the responsibility of India's scientific response to Covid-19 has effortlessly switched gears through it all, attending parliamentary committee meetings and webinars with post-doctorates with equal ease, coordinating between academia and industry and fast-tracking approvals for drug testing, championing reforms in regulation of research and development, and proactively sharing information and insights on Twitter.

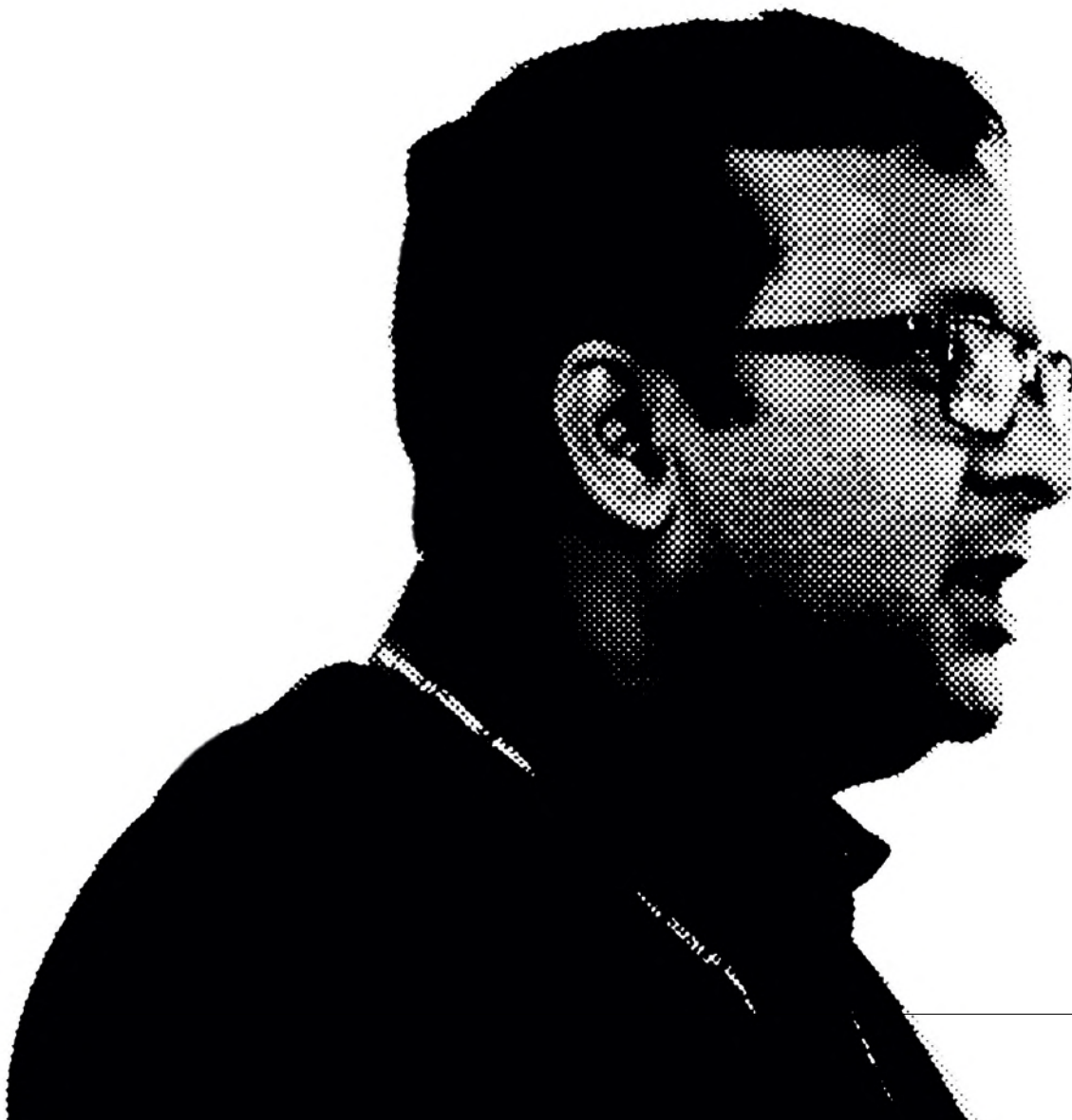




## Lav Agarwal / 48 Clear and Concise

Joint Secretary, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare

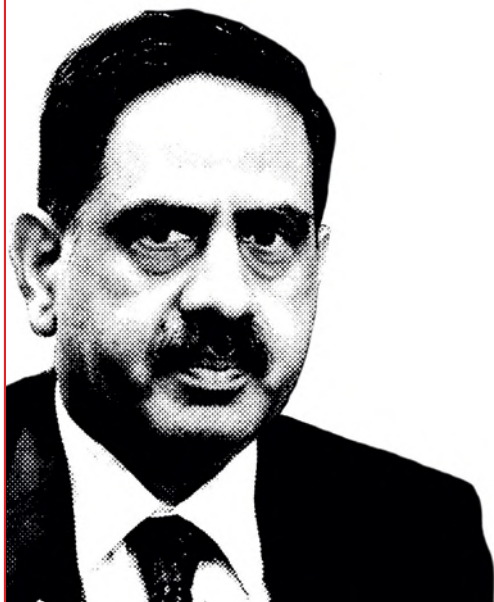
Bureaucrats tend to be faceless. Their instinctive interest is the status quo, to never entirely awake the large machinery of government. But with Covid-19, no part of the Government could afford to remain in slumber. Lav Agarwal, until recently a little-known bureaucrat from Lucknow who had just moved to the Union health ministry after spending years in Andhra Pradesh, became the official to challenge that attitude. If through his daily press conferences early on he brought clarity and calmness to frayed nerves and catapulted himself to India's most recognised bureaucrat, at the other end of the spectrum, he began leading teams across various states and cities, reviewing and pulling up those who hadn't put strong measures in place. Viruses move faster than any bureaucracy. But this no-nonsense bureaucrat has tried to ensure the large government machinery did not fall behind.



Balram Bhargava / 59

## Safe Hands

Director General, Indian Council of Medical Research



When the virus first began to spread in India after ripping through countries with advanced healthcare systems, there was alarm at what it would do to a country like India. To Dr Balram Bhargava's credit, India hasn't yet been overwhelmed. Although the number of cases has risen, fatalities have remained low. Bhargava led a distinguished career as a cardiologist and former head of AIIMS before he became ICMR's chief. Once asked why he continued to see patients even after stepping into his new position, he said that was because it gave meaning to everything else he did. India is far from being out of the woods. But even while he occupies arguably the most scrutinised office in the country outside the Prime Minister's and leads the country's response to a health crisis with a public health system far from optimal, the doctor has so far managed to steer the country away from the choppiest waters.

Renu Swarup / 60

## Synergy Savvy

Secretary, Department of Biotechnology

She has quietly transformed the Department of Biotechnology over the three decades she has served there, championing collaborations between industry, academia and policymakers and heading the Biotechnology Industry Research Assistance Council (BIRAC), the interface agency that has bridged the gap between government and biotech enterprises. By funding and supporting local biotech innovation right from the early stages, BIRAC has created a thriving ecosystem for entrepreneurship in biotechnology that has helped India achieve a higher degree of self-reliance. As Covid-19 swept the world, this ecosystem geared up to tackle the crisis at all levels—immediate disaster mitigation, fixing broken supply chains, drug discovery, test-kit development, scaling up equipment and critical care capacity. Any pharma or test kit company that has skin in the game now has Swarup to thank for expediting clearances and funding and making crucial linkages with academia and larger companies. A PhD in plant genetics, Swarup has a single-cell organism that can survive in extreme environments named after her (*Natrialba swarupiae*), but her contribution to India's fight against Covid-19 deserves bigger laurels.







# COMPASSION INC.

## **Almost as soon as the scale of what was before**

India became clear, it was also evident that the Government wouldn't be able to meet the crisis alone. Business leaders would have to step up, whether in contributing to healthcare infrastructure, relief operations or just donating plain old money. A number of them immediately responded. Industrialists promised to repurpose existing factories to make ventilators. Hospitals were created out of empty facilities. Thousands of crores of rupees was given to government relief funds. Pharma doyens got their companies to urgently research and manufacture medication that could combat the disease's complications. And a number of them who led India's biggest groups played a key role by announcing that they wouldn't lay off a single employee, thus providing a model that other businesses would want to emulate. As the pandemic enters its middle phase, the role of entrepreneurs and philanthropists who stood on the frontlines in the battle against Covid-19 is only going to be more instrumental in India getting back on its feet.







## || Mukesh Ambani / 63

Industrialist

### Generosity of Wealth

The imprint of Mukesh Ambani is evident in not just the enormous number of Covid-19-related relief works undertaken by institutions and companies under him but also the clinical nature of their execution. No sooner did the lockdown begin in late march than Reliance Foundation set up an entire 100-bed hospital from scratch for Covid-19. Hundreds of crores of rupees to government relief funds, free food for hundreds of thousands of needy people in multiple states, etcetera, might all be attributed to Ambani's social conscience but his biggest contribution was undoubtedly in keeping business sentiment alive and kicking in the bleakest moment of the economy. As Indian businesses nosedived into depression and the stock market tanked to unimaginable levels, Ambani announced that he had managed to receive a series of investments totalling more than over Rs 1 lakh crore in his telecom venture, Jio. These came from multinational behemoths like Facebook and Google who are at the forefront of the technology-driven online universe. The flag of Indian entrepreneurship continued to flutter high.



## Ratan Tata / 82

Industrialist

### Corporate Empathy



GETTY IMAGES

The numerous Tata companies have never seen a crisis of this magnitude, but the deeds and words of Ratan Tata indicate how, the massive hits to topline notwithstanding, he has steadfastly remained committed to the core value that the name stands for. While most of the business houses began layoffs and salary cuts at the first hint of recession, 82-year-old Tata said that responsibility to employees overrode such measures, and for the Tatas those options just didn't exist on the table. By insisting on empathy and not margins as being the primary driver, he has ensured that the lives of millions of employees continue without financial disruption. The Tatas, through their holding companies, also committed Rs 1,500 crore for the fight against Covid-19 and one can again see in it the paternal hand of Ratan Tata.



Azim Premji / 75 **A Big Heart**

Industrialist



Wipro, once upon a time, used to be among the Top 3 global information technology success stories from India along with Infosys and Tata Consultancy Services. As Azim Premji just turned 75, the company he founded may trail behind the others now, but in philanthropy he remains far ahead of the rest of the field. The story of how he has given away most of his fortune to charity is well-known. But when *Forbes* came out with a list of 77 billionaires who contributed the most to pandemic relief, Premji's name figured third, ahead of any other Indian, having provided \$132 billion or Rs 1,125 crore. In addition, recently when Wipro had its annual general body meeting, Premji also made it clear that they had not laid off even one worker and had no plans to do so in future either.



GETTY IMAGES

## Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw / 67

Entrepreneur

### Affordable Relief

As the first drugs that combated the complications of Covid-19 cases were discovered, Indians found them either not available or prohibitively expensive. But then India got one affordable medicine of its own in Itolizumab, made by Biocon, a company that is synonymous with the drive of its founder Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw. Already in use as a medication against psoriasis, Itolizumab was found effective in mitigating the cytokine storm of Covid-19 that often leads to complications and fatalities. Shaw is also an important voice in influencing policy in dealing with the pandemic, advocating an easing of the lockdown so that the economy can get going again. Her exhortations to use the crisis to bolster and pivot India's healthcare into a driver of progress could be a key economic strategy of the future.

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**Profiles**  
**written by**

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OPEN  
MINDS  
2020

# THE POWER

From helping migrant labourers to working against stigma

By NANDINI NAIR

Photograph by RAUL IRANI



Insha-e-Noor  
volunteers on a house  
visit at Nizamuddin  
Basti in Delhi, July 29



# OF MANY

tisation, organisations that made a difference



**I**t is easy to fall into a pall of doom and gloom at this time. But even in the midst of uncertainty and volatility this much is clear; humankind has banded together in unexpected ways. Billions of people have adjusted their lifestyles in order to stop the spread of a virus. And while each of us wears a mask to not only protect ourselves, but also those around us, there are those who have taken it upon themselves to help scores of others who are worse off. Across the country, civil society has joined forces to help those in need. 'Ordinary' men and women who looked at their television sets and out of their window and saw people walking for miles, or standing in line for food, started community kitchens with their own knives and stoves, cooking up to 100 meals a day. Community kitchens served an immediate requirement, while organisations were created or altered course to provide relief. While every city and village has its own heroes, we shall highlight the efforts of a handful here.

On March 24th, when a three-week lockdown was announced, limiting the movement of 1.3 billion people, the lack of information and options left many stumped. Those who came to face the brunt of it were the migrant workers stuck in metros and trying to make their way home to their villages in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, etcetera. **SWAN (Stranded Workers Action Network)**—a group of volunteers who connect relief to workers stranded across India due to the Covid-19 lockdown while documenting their experiences—proved to be succour for many thousands of migrants who had been earning a livelihood but suddenly found themselves deprived of jobs, wages and the money to afford food or rent. Seema Mundoli, a professor at Azim Premji University, who was one of the early volunteers at SWAN, says that once the lockdown was announced many social workers who had grassroot connections started getting distress calls from migrants who were trying to get home, and had no resources. Initially, the volunteers would log the calls into an Excel sheet and categorise them into zones, depending on location. They received the most number of distress calls from Maharashtra and Karnataka. With no centralised helpline number, the personal mobile numbers of volunteers became the lifeline for thousands of migrants.

Mundoli says: "We collected the basic information. We assessed the need. And realised that the need was critical. Many needed rations. Some needed money, as little as Rs 100 or Rs 200 was transferred directly to personal accounts. Civil society was able to provide help, but the needs kept changing. First it was the migrants who reached out, and then the settled population."

According to a SWAN report, dated June 5th; starting from March 27th, SWAN had interacted with 34,000 workers across the country through their zonal helplines, which connected workers to organisations and the government for rations. Since many workers were in dire need of cash for basic essentials, SWAN even solicited financial support from individuals who directly transferred money to the workers' accounts. Till June, SWAN had transferred more than Rs 50 lakh directly to the workers' accounts. Mundoli says that over the



MASHAL volunteers packaging dry ration kits in Pune, May 10








**Kudumbashree**  
 volunteers in Kerala  
 prepare food for free  
 distribution, March 31




**Mazdoor Kitchen**  
 volunteers packaging  
 food for free  
 distribution in Delhi



## Grassroots Support Sewa Bharti, NGO

Sewa Bharti launched its relief efforts in the first weeks of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Working among the economically weakest sections of society and headquartered in Delhi, the NGO, affiliated to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, had more than 200,000 of its cadres working on the ground by April, distributing masks, medicines, food packets, clothes, bed-sheets, etcetera. Of particular significance has been its work in the slums and resettlement colonies. By mid-July, Sewa Bharti had more than 500,000 volunteers in relief efforts across the country. It has also been trying to set up an organisational infrastructure to provide vocational training to poor

workers made unemployed by the pandemic. Reportedly, Sewa Bharti has distributed ration kits to more than seven million families. It has also distributed food to more than 40 million people. Traditionally the most visible in Kerala where it has the most number of volunteers, the pandemic saw the NGO spread out its relief work across northern and southern India. It had about 45 kitchens operating in Delhi alone by April to prepare food for distribution. Nowhere as old as its parent organisation, Sewa Bharti has lived up to its mandate of serving the neglected and vulnerable, as pronounced by Balasaheb Deoras at a gathering in Delhi in 1979, in the pandemic.



last four months SWAN has had around 130-140 volunteers, who have included researchers, students, lawyers, engineers and civil society workers. The volunteers also built the digital platform <https://migrants.covid-india.in/> for workers and others to obtain correct and timely travel information. SWAN succeeded in helping migrants with food and travel arrangements merely through word of mouth. The data they have collected and the reports that they have written over the last few months is now a valuable chronicle of the lockdown, the distress it caused, and the relief measures that were put into place.

**W**hile SWAN largely worked remotely and online as a conduit between migrants and donors, other organisations hit the roads and travelled to vulnerable neighbourhoods. One such organisation is the Delhi-based **Mazdoor Kitchen**, which has raised nearly Rs12 lakh since the lockdown and has provided close to 500 meals a day to vulnerable populations. It is run by college professors, students, theatre artists and people from the community itself. It has been providing meals and ration kits to hundreds across North Delhi. According to its Ketto fundraising page, it was previously known as MD-1. The kitchen initially was run out of a garage in St Stephen's College and provided meals to the homeless and needy in Azad Market, Filmistan, Kingsway Camp, Patel Chest, etcetera. In early June, the kitchen moved to Jawahar

Nagar Community Centre.

Nandita Narain, professor of Mathematics at St Stephen's College, who started the initiative with her husband Rashid Ansari, says that while they did factor in the risks about going out and distributing food and rations kits, she also felt that "The quality of your life is compromised if you feel you could have done more and did not." She adds, "The people who are normally invisible, it was no longer possible to look away, because it was so stark what they were going through." While the Mazdoor Kitchen has not had more than 20 volunteers at a time, they have succeeded in sustaining the effort even after the lockdown was lifted. Narain adds: "It is not just about handing out food like a robot, but it is about adopting a community."

While the Kitchen continues to provide some 500 meals a day, it is now also working with the community of Azad Market to sustain livelihoods. Those who have lost jobs, from Zomato workers to *dhaba* workers, are encouraged to work in the kitchen and pack the food for a nominal wage.

**V**olunteer groups like SWAN and Mazdoor Kitchen arose during the pandemic, other organisations have tweaked or altered their course to reach out to those in need. In Kerala, **Kudumbashree** is an organisation that is synonymous with resistance and resilience. Started in 1997, it is a poverty eradication and women empowerment programme imple-



mented by the State Poverty Eradication Mission (SPEM) of the Kerala government. With its three-tiered structure—from Neighbourhood Groups (NHGs) at the lowest level to the Area Development Societies (ADS) at the middle level, and Community Development Societies (CDS) at the local government level—the organisation has a wide and deep spread across the state. In March 2019, according to its website, it had a membership of 4,393,579 women.

Kudumbashree has played a vital role in spreading correct information and battling the virus in Kerala. It has formed 190,000 WhatsApp groups with 220,000 NHG members to educate citizens about government instructions regarding Covid-19 and the lockdown. Some of their activities, from a roster of undertakings, include mask and shield-making; thousand-plus community kitchens that provide meals for Rs 20; resource persons who call elderly family members about their health and food needs every five days; 360 community mental health counselors; and helpline workers who reach out to those who might be facing abuse. A counsellor or 'Snehitha', Sabira Shlipa, says: "We mostly get calls regarding domestic violence, which has increased during the lockdown. There has been a rise in joblessness and alcoholism. We offer tele-counselling support for those in quarantine." It is people like her who are the face and voice of Kudumbashree.

**I**n the western part of India, **MASHAL (Maharashtra Social Housing and Action League)**, a Pune-based NGO, which has worked in the areas of housing for poor, sanitation, slum mapping etcetera, since 1985, immersed itself in relief operations. From April to June, it raised nearly Rs 70 lakh in contributions and Rs 23 lakh in kind. It provided dry ration packets to the needy, fed thousands with hot meals, and arranged train journeys for migrant workers. With the help of 30 staff members and around 50 volunteers, it distributed 7,000-plus dry ration kits, and 22,000-plus cooked meals. Sharad Mahajan, the executive director of MASHAL says, "We were able to reach the right people because of our years of contact with the poor community and those who worked with the poor, like labour unions." MASHAL also used the help of the transgender community in a symbiotic way. They heard that a community of 80-90 transgenders had no food to eat. At first they sent them money for rations. But then the community itself adopted the role of relief workers. The transgender community organised the logistics of travel for 3,000 migrants, a majority by trains, and 140 by air.

**W**hen most organisations had to tailor their tasks to the unexpected travails of the pandemic, **Insha-e-Noor**, established in 2008 in Nizamuddin Basti in Delhi, found that it not only had to deal with livelihood and relief issues, it also had to grapple with questions of stigma. Insha-e-noor, initiated by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) is a women's business set up to provide livelihood opportunities to women living in the Nizamuddin Basti, adjoining the Humayun's Tomb. Usually, they produce souvenirs inspired from the motifs of the monuments but since the outbreak of the coronavirus, they have used their skills to produce face masks. Over 10,000 masks have been distributed within their community. Associated with close to 100 women from Nizamuddin, the organisation also works indirectly with many others who work at home after learning their skills from the centre.

Conservation architect and CEO, AKTC, Ratish Nanda says: "We realised early on that we were sitting on a hot potato. We started making masks for the community and craftspeople before the lockdown. We were paying for them and distributing them within the community. What was quite amazing is that through the lockdown we did not have a single positive case in Nizamuddin, proving that the disease can be controlled. And that Tablighi Jamaat (a religious congregation that took place in Delhi's Nizamuddin in early March 2020) is a separate entity. But what happened is that there was a stigma attached to the Nizamuddin community. The youth who have lost their jobs are finding it harder to find jobs." While the AKTC had initially planned to hand the organisation back to the community, they now feel that they will have to "handhold them for at least three-four more years".

The effects of the pandemic will continue to play out in the coming months, perhaps even the year, but it is in coming together of people that one can find hope in the darkness. ■



CINEMA

# Mrs India

Vidya Balan's aesthetic negotiates the demands of tradition with an innate sauciness

By Kaveree Bamzai

▲  
Vidya Balan

10 AUGUST 2020



nger. Surrender. Laughter. There are three ways of coping with rejection in the Mumbai film industry. Vidya Balan does it by laughing, a great gurgle that begins somewhere in the pit of her stomach, travels through her body and lights up her face. It is not a practised smile, a perfected pout or a weary sigh. It is a laugh that is hard won by the experience of living, its lows and highs and ups and downs. Much of it has to do with her spiritual practice wherein she's been working with a healer. "I used to pray a lot and always ask for something," says Balan, "till I decided to be grateful and to thank God for everything I have."

In the 15 years she has been in the film industry, Balan has earned many titles, such as 'the Fourth Khan' for her ability to shoulder movies; and equally as the cinematic daughter of Waheeda Rehman, Rekha, Smita Patil and Shabana Azmi. But the one that sits most comfortably on her now is 'Mrs India'. In her characters onscreen and in her demeanour offscreen, Balan best encapsulates the new woman. Unafraid to be ambitious, to express her sexuality and to claim her place in the world. In her latest movie, premiered on Amazon Prime, *Shakuntala Devi*, she plays that rare character: a female genius who is unapologetic about her unique ability. She is not the perfect mother, nor is she content being ordinary when she can be amazing. "She lived life to the fullest," she says. "She didn't let gender define her success. She wasn't guilt-stricken for having a life other than being a mother."

Intertwined with this is the idea perpetuated by society and Bollywood of the mother as primary and eternal caregiver. In *Mission Mangal* (2019), where she played Tara Shinde, fictional project director of the Mission to Mars, on the day of the launch, she has to cook *poha* for the family, give her father-in-law his medicines, sort out a quarrel between her daughter and husband, even squeeze out toothpaste with a rolling pin. "That would never happen with

a man," she says. "Everything around him would be taken care of."

Even in *Tumhari Sulu* (2017), where she plays Sulochana Dubey, harried mother by day and sexy-voiced RJ by night, she has to seek her family's approval before stepping into the workforce. But Balan's genius is in making these women real, injecting not just an ouch in them, but also an oomph. Watch her calling her husband a "gai" (cow) with a risqué smile in *Tumhari Sulu*, or responding to his flirtation with just a quiver of her shoulder, which leads to an aesthetically exposed back in an everyday synthetic saree blouse, Balan has put the earthy back into Earth Mother.

Much of this was first tapped in Abhishek Chaubey's *Ishqiya* (2010) in which she was Krishna Verma, part *pari* (fairy), part *tawaif* (courtesan). Chaubey says the film came to her at the right time, when after the initial success of her Hindu debut film *Parineeta* (2005), she



### SHAKUNTALA DEVI LIVED LIFE TO THE FULLEST. SHE DIDN'T LET GENDER DEFINE HER SUCCESS. SHE WASN'T GUILT-STRICKEN FOR HAVING A LIFE OTHER THAN BEING A MOTHER"

**Vidya Balan** actor

struggled in finding her niche in a world of Barbie dolls. "It not only discovered something special in her talent and image, but also made her one of the first representatives of the new woman in Hindi cinema," says Chaubey. This new woman blazed a trail for others. Women who could honeymoon on their own in *Queen* (2013), or who could have sexual relationships without entering "low IQ" marriages in *Piku* (2015). Women who could look the man in the eye and suck the blood on the thumb that they had purposely cut in *Ishqiya* or women who could enjoy their orgasms in solitary

splendour in *The Dirty Picture* (2011). Ask her if she feels the women have followed her path, she merely shrugs her shoulders elegantly.

As scholar Sukanya Gupta notes, in her films, Balan is neither the Sita/Savitri inspired by India's Hindu mythology nor is she the sex object disseminated by popular culture. Clad in sarees and not devoted to size zero, the women depicted by Balan have tried to keep it as 'real' as possible—at least as real as we can get on the silver screen. Yet, she asks, swinging between the prostitute in *Begum Jaan* (2017) or the working mother in *Tumhari Sulu*, are Balan's recent roles really addressing women's sexuality? Can the new woman in Bollywood, often the primary protagonist depicted with some agency, only be taken seriously, and her achievements and victories are highlighted/celebrated, when her sexuality is not addressed/depicted head on?

It's an interesting idea in what makes a woman desirable onscreen in a culture that venerates youth, and where marriage immediately categorises one as a matron. Few are able to make the transition successfully. Eternal singletons such as Rekha and increasingly Tabu, who embodied the forbidden, the erotic and even the taboo, in *Andhadhun* (2018), have retained their sex quotient agelessly. Balan's struggle, after the superlative success of *Kahaani* (2012), where she travels across Kolkata with a massive baby bump and still manages to crackle onscreen, arose from this convention.

But beginning with *Tumhari Sulu*, she has managed to reinvent herself yet again as the naughty mummy. It's a huge improvement on the wasteland of roles for women over 40 in the Hindi film industry. At 41, Balan is choosing her collaborations wisely. In *Shakuntala Devi*, she is having it all: marriage, motherhood, global acclaim as a human computer, without necessarily, as Balan, wanting "to do it all". Says Balan: "She said, 'I am a mother, I am a wife, but I am also Shakuntala Devi.' She embraced that identity, as much as she



embraced her shortcomings. She didn't expect herself to be perfect but knew she was amazing just the way she was."

In the short film *Natkhat*, which she co-produced this year ("Only in lieu of being paid for acting in it," she says), she is a mother in a *ghunghat* (veil) trying to save her boy from the world of toxic masculinity represented by the men around him. Her next film, for which she has already started shooting, is *Sherri*, where she plays a forest officer. The film is directed by Amit Masurkar who helmed the much-hailed *Newton* (2017).

**B**alan is also drawn to the idea of playing Indira Gandhi, in a web series she has been developing for some time now, with Ritesh Batra, director of *The Lunchbox* (2013). Indira symbolises power to her in every way possible. "Having been called all sorts of names and having been judged far more harshly than her male counterparts, I think she is still counted amongst the most influential prime ministers we've ever had," she says. Balan has started to trust her instincts when choosing her roles, going after what seems right, authentic, and believable. She radiates calm or as director Milan Luthria likes to call it, "positivity". "She has an innate positivity with which she reacts to everything, whether it is a difficult beginning to her career, an awkward phase in between, or playing a bold character on screen. She thinks a lot, but when she's done she lets the positivity take over. What you see on screen, like most great actors, has a little to do with physical requirements of the character, but more with what blazes through from within."

It makes her a dream collaborator, as director Anu Menon found from the time she narrated a one-page script of *Shakuntala Devi* to her. "We spent a lot of time discussing the script. She gives so much of herself to every collaboration that any director can get stuck on her. The best part of her is that she brings no attitude to the set. With every actor, your first question of the day is 'What's the mood?' before you proceed. Vidya would



Vidya Balan in *Shakuntala Devi*

**WE SPENT A LOT OF TIME DISCUSSING THE SCRIPT. VIDYA GIVES SO MUCH OF HERSELF TO EVERY COLLABORATION THAT ANY DIRECTOR CAN GET STUCK ON HER"**

**Anu Menon**  
director, *Shakuntala Devi*

always take care of herself and carve a space for herself so she could rejuvenate."

She has built resilience over time, especially the years before *Parineeta* and after her debut on television in *Hum Paanchin* 1995. There were 13 Malayalam films from which she was dropped, two Tamil films that were shelved, and even after she stunned Mumbai films with hits such as *Parineeta* and *Lage Raho Munna Bhai* (2006), she was repeatedly targeted for her dress sense and body weight. The unkind comments for both would have shattered a lesser spirit. But that is what makes Balan unusual. As an outsider, she has seen the worst of the industry—its misogyny, its feudalism, and its dynastic rule. She has understood the glass ceiling that allows insiders to get away with bad behaviour but expects outsiders to be at

their most humble and herd-worthy.

But she has, at all times, answered critics who go low, with work that goes high. Increasingly, as Balan's star ascends it shows society's assimilation of its contradictions and its comfort in itself. In Balan's determinedly Indian aesthetic, from body type to dress form, an emerging small town India finds familiarity while the globalised India of big cities identifies with her gender-breaking stereotypes, whether it be successful women in STEM or in the bureaucracy (the forthcoming *Sherri*).

And in her constant admission of her failings, big and small, they find someone they can identify with. In a world where everyone is her own selfie-made star, Balan's confessions of working on herself to not take criticism personally or her initial hurt at the cruelties inflicted on her before she found her own groove give us not only a better actor but also an inspiring role model of potential and possibility. *Sanskari* with sauciness, marriage but not yet motherhood, success with humility, and intelligence with empathy. In a world of ageing Khans and raging man-boys, is it a surprise that fortysomething women are providing the most riveting narratives? ■

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**RAJEEV MASAND**

## Post-Pandemic Avatar

**Vidya Balan** was shooting in the forests of Madhya Pradesh with *Newton* director **Amit Masurkar** for their new film *Shermi* when the pandemic required all productions to be shut down. The actress reveals that she hadn't been following the news closely so she was unprepared for the sights that awaited her. "There were very few people on the flight back to Mumbai, and the airports were practically deserted," she remembers, explaining that it was then that the magnitude of the situation became apparent to her.

Isolating at home for four months now hasn't been hard, she says. The actress has frequently taken time off over the years to focus on her health and to unwind. "But I've never been home for so long at a stretch. It helps that Siddharth is quarantining with me," she admits, speaking of her husband, film producer **Siddharth Roy Kapur**. The couple has been catching up on shows most evenings; on other days, Vidya admits she's been glued to all varieties of cooking shows even if she hasn't been tempted to experiment too much in the kitchen.

Interestingly, she hasn't been reading scripts at all during the lockdown—and deliberately so. "It's going to be a changed world when we come out of this." She says she is certain the lockdown will impact the kind of stories that are written and the films that are made, and she wants to remain open to consider all possibilities.

## Christmas Dampener

Both **Aamir Khan** and his fans were looking forward to a merry Christmas this year but the pandemic has changed everything. The *Dangal* star's new film *Laal Singh Chaddha*, an official remake of *Forrest Gump*, had originally been pencilled in for a late December release, but that is unlikely to happen now. With a substantial portion of the film still to be shot and continuing uncertainty over when cinema halls could reopen, Aamir's Christmas date with his fans may need to be rescheduled.

Reports, however, have emerged from the film's unit that the makers are gearing up to

take off to Georgia and Turkey where they plan to shoot the portions of the film that were originally meant to be shot in Ladakh. As soon as travel restrictions are relaxed, the unit may leave to wrap up the unfinished scenes. Aamir, his leading lady **Kareena Kapoor** and other cast are expected to travel. This will mean that the film could be released early next year or even as far as summer 2021.

Meanwhile, the makers of *Sooryavanshi* and '83 are hoping for some semblance of normalcy soon. At this point, there are plans that if cinemas open in time and the audience feels safe to go back into them, then *Sooryavanshi* could release during Diwali and '83 in Christmas.

## Hot Right Now

**Deepika Padukone** reportedly beat out at least a dozen top actresses from Bollywood and the Tamil and Telugu film industries to land the female lead in *Mahanati* director **Nag Ashwin**'s new film opposite *Baahubali* star **Prabhas**. The film, insiders say, is a mega-budget epic that will likely be shot in Hindi, Tamil and Telugu, and the pan-India appeal of both Prabhas and Deepika is expected to justify its cost.

After his National Award-winning biopic of legendary actress **Savitri**, Ashwin's new film again has a central role for the female character. This will not be the sort of actioner where the heroine has a merely ornamental presence, a source informs, clarifying that the characters played by Prabhas and Deepika are at the centre of the story. It has been widely reported that several leading actresses, both in the south and from Mumbai, had reached out to the director and the film's producers after it was announced some months ago that he had signed Prabhas for his next film. But the makers are believed to have had their heart set on Deepika. No start date on the project has been locked, given the pandemic and the uncertainty over when shootings can resume. Also, the actress has at least one project to complete before she can dive into this one. ■



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