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A REFERENDUM ON TRUMP • THE FUTURE OF LEARNING • THE TYRANNY OF COVID INFORMATION

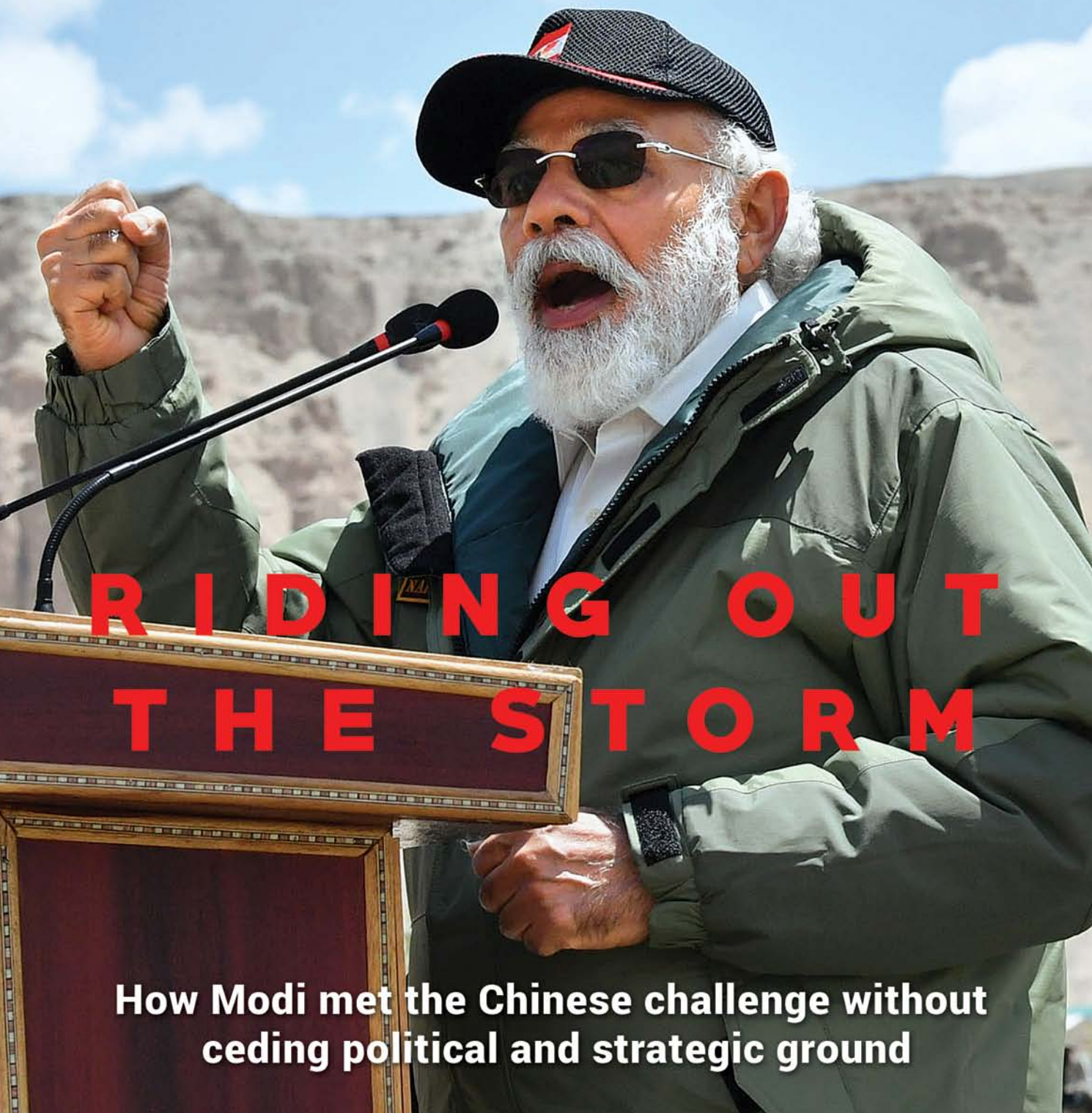
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Cover photograph PIB



LETTER OF THE WEEK

Democracy in India has not only survived for over seven decades now but it has also emerged as the country's strongest feature ('In Praise of the Indian Voter' by Shashi Tharoor, July 6th, 2020). Democracy has evolved in India, as evident in the several peaceful and seamless power transfers election after election over the years, one of the three key parameters political scientists look at for judging the strength and depth of democracies. Indian voters have also evolved over that period. They have shown maturity and pragmatism in choosing governments, bringing to and throwing out of power based on their differing needs at the state and national elections even when polls are held at the same time. That surely is a sign of intelligent and strategic voting where voters have shown that electoral literacy goes far beyond educational literacy. Indian voters have time and again surprised pundits and upset scientific predictions. A theory of the Indian voter remains elusive. The India Shining campaign was assumed to be a votewinner for the BJP in TV newsrooms but the voter quite disagreed. Similarly, when the first Modi Government went to polls, some commentators assumed that the party had touched its peak and could only go down from there. Certainly not, said the Indian voter. Cash and caste are not enough to predict them.

Bholey Bhardwaj



emerged out of the lifeless pillar that the Congress was to kill the demon of paternalist policies that were holding back the economy. Like Prahlad, the young country's economy was saved. He was a great achiever, much like our freedom fighters. It was for our economic freedom that he fought at the risk of ruining his political career.

PN Sreelekha

CORPORATE CLASS

Corporates the world over are the same ('The New Working Class', July 6th, 2020). When they need labour, they overindulge them. Once their need is met, they hardly care. The double whammy for the working class is that politicians too side with corporates. We need governments that think of workers. Especially this crisis caused by a global pandemic demands a fairer balance between the two classes. On the one hand, everybody talks about high unemployment. On the other, business is down as workspaces are shut. We need to adopt more humane management practices in these times.

MR Jayanthi

BHARAT RATNA

PV Narasimha Rao was a godsend for India ('The Debt to Narasimha Rao' by TP Sreenivasan, July 13th, 2020). He was a true 'ratna', which loosely translates as 'DIAMOND': 'D' for his developmental commitment, 'I' for innovation smarts, 'A' for assertiveness, 'M' for moderation, 'O' for omni-proficient, 'N' for non-violence and 'D' for the darling that he was of the poor. The first two features led him to opening up India to the world and saving it from falling into a financial abyss; the third was why he could resist political interference in his plans for the nation; the fourth

made him pragmatic in politics instead of veering to extremes; the fifth refers to his achievements in all the three aspects of life—knowledge, devotion and deed (*jnana*, *bhakti* and *karma*, respectively); the sixth to his commitment to Gandhian principles without going overboard; and finally, the last one for how liberalisation has liberated the masses from impoverishment. As teachers, we request the Government to award him the Bharat Ratna posthumously.

PV Padmavathi and Madhu

PV Narasimha Rao is an apt choice for the Bharat Ratna. Like the god Narasimha, he

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By S PRASANNARAJAN

MODI'S CALL

LEADERSHIP NEEDS A backdrop to make it, sometime in the future, a story worth retelling. That is why, when the stories of tyrants and redeemers are retold, history becomes a cautionary tale. Everything, in varying degrees of cruelty, began as a project in freedom, whether it was war or revolution. Those who won the wars, not necessarily all of them, weren't model managers of freedom. And those who led the revolutions, mostly all of them, turned the original slogan of freedom into a prescription for terror. Still, we return to their stories to tell the present in more clarifying words. Stories alone remain, as reminders of boundaries set—and defied—by dreamers and warriors.

The 21st century, still young, carries the burden of the last. Its larger dramas borrow from the script of the last. Its arbiters—whether wayward liberals or national populists or autocrats who have bestowed on themselves an eternal mandate—occasionally return to the rule books of the last. They have been denied the kind of backdrops that made some past portraits of leadership compelling even now. There are transformative stories still. The morning of September 11th in 2001 changed an American president from a privileged stereotype into an original action hero. In 2008, long before race was a frenzied dispute in the street and in the public square, an African American, a freshman Senator, became the reconciler president on the strength of his stump poetry of change. And in 2014, the Congress century came to an end in India when an outsider, a nationalist who told the Indian story in a vocabulary unfamiliar to the Establishment, stormed Delhi.

A pandemic, as has been argued in this space before ('Camus, Covid-19 and Leadership', March 30th), is not the kind of backdrop that leaders prefer. It is still testing them, and the days of some in office are counted against the number of infected and dying. It has been a winning battle only for a few; for the most, it's a day-by-day trial by an untameable virus. When it began, there were deniers and cynics, and some saw in it yet another opportunity to tighten their vicious grip on people. And some, to compensate for the economic cost of lockdowns, turned to the politics of fear. Even as the virus spread, in some places, the battle against it was not as fierce as the ideological battles. A virus-driven referendum on leadership has become inevitable.

For Prime Minister Narendra Modi, while he has been battling on one front, another opened along our border with China in the Galwan Valley. In the first battle, against the coronavirus, he was one of the first leaders who understood the enormity of the crisis. The lockdowns saved us from the initial spurt, and it was a lesson in useful fear. India listened to him, followed the instructions, and in enforced isolation, realised the vulnerability of being human. The story would have been worse had Modi behaved like Donald Trump or Boris Johnson. As India climbed up the worst-hit list subsequently, what was revealed in frightening starkness was not a political leadership in denial but one of our shameful inheritances: a healthcare system incapable of coping with the size and inequalities of India. The much-cited Kerala example in effectively containing the pandemic has to be credited to the state's heightened sense of healthcare.

The other challenge that tested Modi's leadership came from the world's most tolerated rogue republic ('Dream and Dictatorship', July 6th). India still suffers from a China complex, a reflection of national diffidence and insufficient faith in the possibilities of democracy. The look-at-China wonderment is perpetuated by a section of our academic and political class dazzled by a gilded autocracy. The country that wanted to be the sole author of the so-called Asian Century was in a permanent mode of disruption-and-diffusion in its relationship with India, the alternative power with the credentials of democracy. The latest display of thuggery was in sync with Beijing's active disrespect for borders and democracy. Modi had to deal with the neighbour's belligerence—and to ignore the liberals who taunted him for his non-dramatic response. All the peaceniks had suddenly turned into convenient warmongers.

Modi knew, as anyone familiar with the psychology of habitual bullies did, his tormentor was not inviting him to a war. Modi's restraint was not a way of giving in to the bully; it was a refusal to bracket India culturally with China. It was an assertion of democracy and morally superior international behaviour. It required a different kind of resoluteness to win an argument—and not to lose territory. In the end, his behaviour was endorsed, and supported, by other democracies.

If it's backdrop that makes the story of leadership, the pandemic and the People's Republic have given us one with no duller passages. ■



INDRAPRASTHA

Virendra Kapoor

FOR THE FIRST time since the lockdown in late March I can feel real panic all around. People Like Us (PLUs) seem to be now living in fear of the deadly infection. Till the other day, they seemed to behave as if the coronavirus was for those on the wrong side of the tracks. It is now the turn of those who are in the middle-and-upper-income group to dread the incurable disease. Its members are worried stiff, what if they are hit and there is no medical facility they would like to visit since that would mean further exposing themselves to the risk of infection. After all, hospital-acquired infections can be deadlier, isn't it? WhatsApp and other social media groups reveal an incessant conversation detailing who was down with the virus and what all medicines one ought to keep in store, just in case. Neighbourhood chemists have turned corona experts, advising panicky patrons what they need to keep in case of getting unlucky. (Yes, unlucky is the right word since nobody knows for certain where, when and how one can get infected.) In recent days, yet another hitherto unheard of dimension was added to the tentative lists for self-medication: oxygen cylinders. Electrically operated contraptions drawing oxygen from the atmosphere are being procured for corona emergencies. With their costs ranging from Rs 50,000 to upwards of Rs 3 lakh, depending on the make and features of the equipment, these too have found ready takers among PLUs. Ignoring the commonsensical advice not to



self-medicate, scores of people in my circle are frantically filling up their medicine cabinets. Unwilling or unable to consult specialists, who are busy anyway caring for the infected, they do not think twice about buying expensive devices which may be of little use once the pandemic is behind us. Ever since a close family friend invested in an oxygen concentrator with a nebulisation feature for his old parents, yours truly has come under pressure to acquire one of his own. I am not sure how long I will be able to resist. With media incomes shrinking thanks to the pandemic, it makes little sense to shell out upwards of fifty grand on a contraption which, hopefully, will be of little use to anyone, and would need to be discarded once the corona scare is well and truly behind us.

WHILE STILL ON the deadly virus, it seems to have a particularly wicked streak, being especially unkind to those who adopt a defiant, could-not-care-less attitude. From distant shores, you hear of Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro testing positive—he who had cried himself hoarse,

and without wearing a mask at any stage, asserting that coronavirus was “a little flu” which would do no harm to anyone. Earlier, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson had sounded blasé about the virus, ruling out lockdown. Soon, he fell victim and had a close shave with death before, mercifully, recovering. And Britain had to be put under extended lockdowns while it recorded a very high number of fatalities. Nearer home, the most vociferous voice against the lockdown was that of the scion of an old industrial family. He won praise in some quarters for speaking truth to power, when he decried the lockdown, maintaining that it would ensure that even if people did not die of the virus, they were certain to die of hunger. Ironically, the virus has hit him where it hurts the most, the pocketbook. One of his largest manufacturing facilities is now in the grip of the pandemic with more than 200 workers infected. At least two deaths have been officially acknowledged. Now the workforce of thousands insists on a lockdown while he resists it, arguing it would not help keep the virus at bay, causing a standoff. Of course, I relate the above not with a sense of schadenfreude but to strike a cautionary note: It pays not to defy the global consensus. So many people cannot be wrong. In the absence of a cure, lockdowns, social distancing, wearing of masks, washing of hands, etcetera are absolutely necessary to try and avoid falling victim to the pandemic. ■



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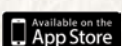
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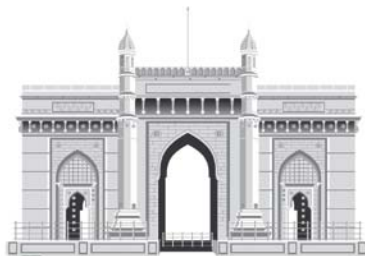
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MUMBAI NOTEBOOK

Anil Dharker



WHEN IT RAINS in Mumbai, it really rains. It seems unbelievable now that till a few days ago, people were scanning the skies for signs that the right clouds were finally getting together. It had come to a stage when the Municipal Corporation was issuing daily dire warnings of lakes running dry. Then suddenly, between 8.30 am on June 4th and 8.30 am on June 5th, over 200 mm of it came down and the city was its usual monsoon self with flooded streets and waterlogging in the expected places. We know them by heart: Parel, Chembur, Khar, Andheri, Jogeshwari, Malad, Dahisar....

There was a time when we used to think that surely in the 21st century, the richest Municipal Corporation in the country could take measures to avoid these annual visitations of disruption. But now we just shrug our shoulders. This is Mumbai's karma, and forever will it remain the same.

The streets, when you can see past water, bear a strange look that's halfway between being deserted and being crammed with cars and people. Offices work with reduced staff, buses run with just one passenger allowed per seat, a small number of cars scurry to their destinations. Suburban trains, the lifeline of Mumbai, now run only with essential service staff, and even then, they are overcrowded enough for the authorities to think about staggered working hours. This kind of thing, well-intentioned though it might be, cannot work voluntarily: the authorities will have to do this by executive fiat. Let's see if that happens, and if it does so quickly. One doubts it, because when quick action is taken, it's usually without too much thought given to consequences: a few days ago, the police suddenly announced that you were forbidden to

travel more than 2 km by car unless it was for official work or emergencies, the idea being to curb unnecessary travel and milling crowds. No one thought of the fact that to enforce this, you would have to check each and every vehicle. The result: massive traffic jams, cars bumper-to-bumper and unnecessary verbal exchanges. All to avoid overcrowding!

CRICKET AT LAST returns to our TV screens, thanks to the England vs West Indies Test series. The first match at Southampton has a surreal air to it with no spectators allowed. Imagine playing an international match to empty stands! We are told players will observe social distancing. So, no high-fives at the fall of a wicket, which takes half the joy out of bowlers' lives. And they are banned from using saliva on the ball. So what happens to reverse swing? And how do you have social distancing in the slip cordon?

Football leagues in Europe have been in full swing and recently the first F1 race of the year took place, all with no spectators. The English cricket team will be a pale shadow without its not-so-secret weapon, the tirelessly noisy Barmy Army. And what is football without its roaring crowds and lusty singing of club songs? For teams playing at home, their supporters were always like an extra player or two; now, home or away, no one has an advantage. It's fair, and terribly dull.

THE PAPERS ARE full of news about acute shortage of hospital beds for coronavirus patients, especially so for those needing ICUs. Well, here's an interesting story from someone I know. He needed to be under critical care, but no ICU beds seemed to be available. Finally, using friendly contacts, he got into one of the city's smaller, but well-known hospitals. To his surprise, he found that in the facility's 12 beds, he was the only occupant! That's not all, the hospital admitted him only after he had paid Rs 4 lakh in advance. Everyone loves making a fast buck, even if it's by exploiting human misery. There are honourable exceptions, of course. These are the doctors and healthcare workers fighting at the front in this strange war against an invisible foe. Most of them work long hours with no extra compensation, sometimes even without adequate protective equipment.

No one knows when the world will return to normal, but when it does, it cannot, and should not, be the normal we have so blissfully accepted in the past. Slums need to be replaced with proper housing, workers in the casual and informal sector need a social security net, and most urgently, our healthcare sector requires drastic overhauling and upgradation.

To finance this, budgetary allocations have to be shifted from vanity projects of political leaders so that the statues and monuments and showy infrastructure projects now in the planning stage are scrapped. The monuments we need are affordable and well-equipped hospitals, whose primary objective is to treat patients, and not fleece them. Only then will we qualify as a just society. ■



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NOTEBOOK

The Truth about Covid Transmission

IN ITS 'SCIENTIFIC brief' released on March 29th, the World Health Organization (WHO) said that Covid-19 can 'be transmitted through droplets of different sizes: when the droplet particles are $<5-10\text{ }\mu\text{m}$ (a micrometre or μm is one-millionth of a metre) in diameter, they are referred to as respiratory droplets, and when they are $>5\text{ }\mu\text{m}$ in diameter, they are referred to as droplet nuclei.'

It went on, 'According to current evidence, Covid-19 virus is primarily transmitted between people through respiratory droplets and contact routes. In an analysis of 75,465 Covid-19 cases in China, airborne transmission was not reported.'

Many researchers had objected to this statement back then, suggesting that infections could happen through aerosols, too, not just droplets which obey gravity principles unlike the former that drift in air, like fog stays on in the atmosphere. By way of comparison with droplets, one can say that aerosol particle diameters are typically less than $1\text{ }\mu\text{m}$. A strand of human hair is about $99\text{ }\mu\text{m}$.

What does this mean as regards Covid-19 transmission?

Until now, if you had been following the WHO guidelines rigorously, you would have believed that the coronavirus would spread when an infected person coughed and sneezed while you happened to be close to them. Now, however, according to assertions made by hundreds of researchers, some of them specialists in aerosol transmission, we learn that one can catch infection long after the carrier has left an enclosed room if they had merely been talking. That is because they leave tiny particles that linger in the room and even outside. Worse, as laws of physics explain, these tiny particles travel much farther.

For its part, the WHO has now indicated that it will closely look at evidence provided from more than 200 scientists across 32 countries that argue it is not just the droplets that fall on surfaces, but also aerosols that stay like mist in the air that are mediums of Covid-19 spread. These

researchers don't just want the WHO to acknowledge their findings, but also act swiftly.

Dr Able Lawrence, professor of clinical immunology and rheumatology at Lucknow's Sanjay Gandhi Post Graduate Institute of Medical Sciences, says that the WHO is over-cautious in the wrong way by force of habit. He sees it as a system fault of the organisation from the start. "This means that a lot of opportunities in fighting any new pandemic are lost thanks to these unwarranted delays. The WHO makes several false choices, and is still delaying an announcement on airborne transmission of Covid-19. This is nothing but a systemic problem in decision-making," says Lawrence, who reels out example after example of the WHO's prevarications and lengthy hold-ups in the past as well as when the news from Wuhan surfaced first about the latest variant of the coronavirus. According to BBC, Benedetta Allegranzi, the WHO's technical lead for infection prevention and control, merely says that evidence emerging of airborne transmission of the coronavirus in "crowded, closed, poorly ventilated settings that have been described, cannot be ruled out."

Lawrence falls back on author and thinker Nassim Taleb's theory of Black Swan to say that at a time when we know black swans are no longer imaginary, the WHO is treating droplets as the highly certain white swan and aerosols as the black swan.

"It is faulty thinking as Taleb has explained," he argues.

That might be a bit of a philosophical take on an urgent matter under consideration, but Professor Jose-Luis Jimenez, one of the 200-plus scientists who had written to the WHO to act quickly on the evidence of airborne transmission of Covid-19, is direct and sharp. He tells *Open* at the outset, "To be clear, we think the aerosol transmission applies to all variants of SARS-CoV-2." This University of Colorado chemistry professor and MIT alumnus is an expert in environmental chemistry, atmospheric field studies, aerosols and clouds, planetary

Until now, if you had been following the WHO guidelines rigorously, you would have believed that the coronavirus would spread when an infected person coughed while you happened to be close to them. Now, however, according to assertions made by researchers, we learn that one can catch infection long after the carrier has left an enclosed room

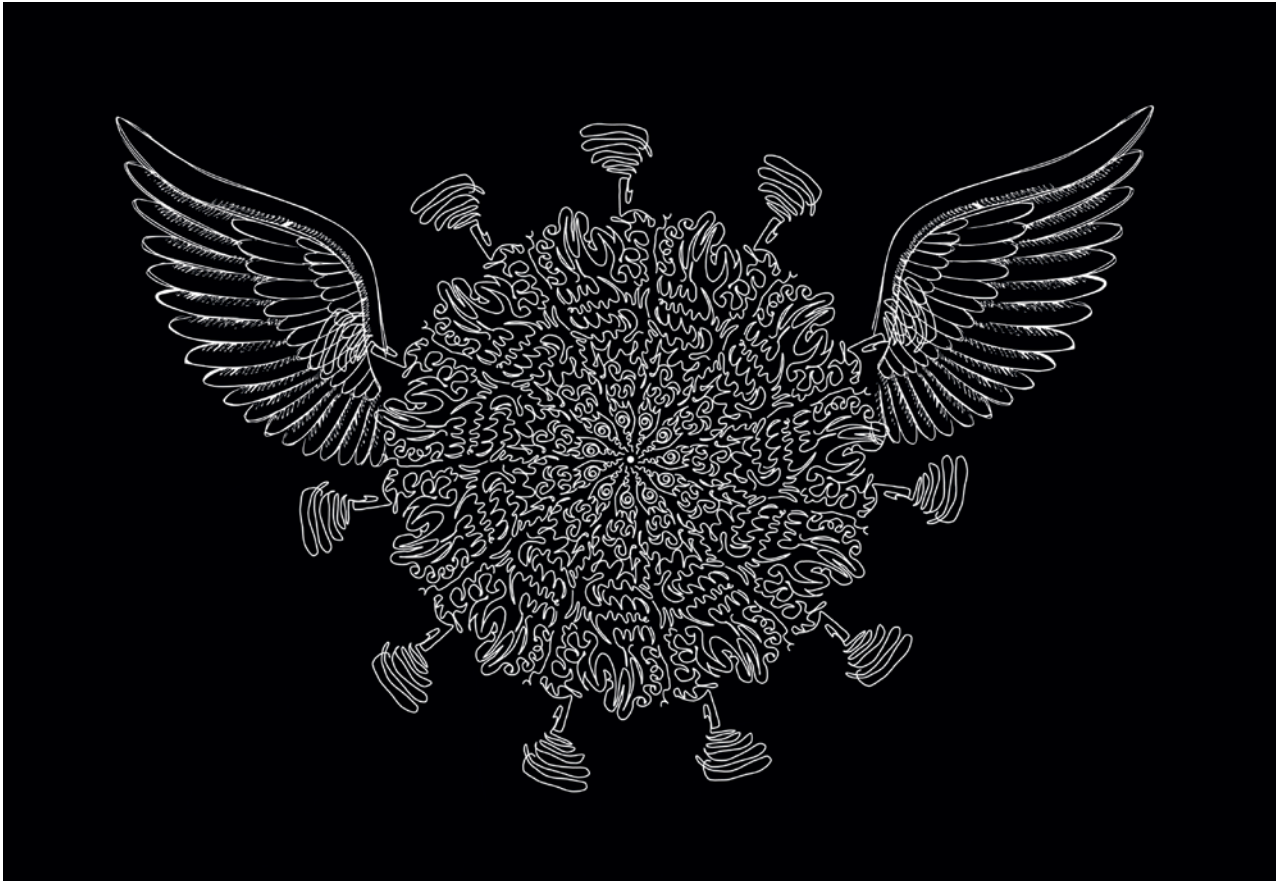


Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

atmospheres, trace gases and radicals, among others.

He elaborates on what he calls “multiple lines of evidence” that point in the direction of aerosol transmission of the coronavirus. “The most important are superspreading events, such as the Skagit choir in the US. In that case, 53 people [out of 60] got sick after singing for 2.5 hrs with one infected person. They knew about Covid-19 so they kept their distance, used hand sanitiser. We have written a scientific paper about it, but we don’t see a way to explain it other than aerosol transmission,” Jimenez says. The Skagit Valley Chorale went to an evening practice at the Mount Vernon Presbyterian Church in Washington in early March at a time when the WHO had downplayed aerosol transmission.

The University of Colorado professor adds that what happened at Mount Vernon is not an isolated case. “Similar cases have been reported at least in the Netherlands, Austria, Canada, Germany, England, South Korea and Spain [all mentioned in a paper co-authored by Jimenez.] Other events, such as ones at the Guangzhou restaurant, buses in China, etcetera, lead to the same conclusion,” he insists.

More importantly, Jimenez notes, most studies suggest that superspreading events are driving the pandemic. Most infected people don’t give the disease to anyone, a few give it to a lot of people, he adds. “This is very easy to explain with aerosol transmission, and very difficult to explain with the other modes that the WHO accepts: contact [shaking hands], fomites [touching infected objects] or droplets [larger than aerosols, fall to the ground in 1 second within 1-2 meters in

front of the person.] Also, the US CDC says now that fomites are probably less important,” the professor avers. He lists other evidences, “It has been shown that Covid-19 can be transmitted efficiently through aerosols in hamsters. SARS-CoV-2 viral RNA has been detected inside ventilation systems in buildings and in fan blades and hospital air. Similar viruses, such as SARS (another coronavirus) and influenza (flu), are also transmitted through aerosols. Similar viruses have been detected in infectious state in the exhaled air from patients, or in the air in the rooms they occupied.”

Jimenez proffers that he wouldn’t wait for the WHO to make any new announcements, but apply the precautionary principle and start with certain measures immediately. “A lot of them are the same, distancing, wearing masks, avoiding crowded indoor places. More specifically, avoid or reduce being in indoor places away from home, especially if crowded, low ventilation with outside air, long time, no masks, and if people are talking loudly or singing. Use portable High Efficiency Particulate Air (HEPA) filters to supplement that,” he suggests. For public and commercial buildings, recommendations include modification of the ventilation system using better filters.

Many more guidelines have been offered by numerous scientists amid mounting evidence that Covid-19 is airborne, yet it is a tragedy that the one international body all look to for health advice has been slow to catch up. ■

By ULLEKH NP

IN MEMORIAM • ENNIO MORRICONE (1928-2020)

A FISTFUL OF MUSIC

From his home in Rome, the Italian composer changed the sound of Hollywood movies

EVEN IF ONE may not recognise the name Ennio Morricone, it will be near impossible to have not heard his music. The Italian music composer, who died recently at the age of 91, composed some of the most memorable scores in film history.

Although film music was just one part of his career—he also wrote and conducted live performances—it was in film music where he made his lasting impact. No exact figures are available; but according to estimates, it is said he scored for over 500 films. Working through the decades with a wide range of auteurs in different genres, both in Italian and US cinema, and sometimes, other languages—from Sergio Leone, Pier Pasolini, Bernardo Bertolucci and Giuseppe Tornatore to Roman Polanski, Brian De Palma, Terrence Malick, John Carpenter, Pedro Almodóvar, and, more recently, Quentin Tarantino—Morricone produced music that sometimes became more remembered than the films themselves.

His most memorable work came, right at the start of his career, with his once schoolmate, the filmmaker Sergio Leone. In their very first together, *A Fistful Of Dollars*, Morricone introduced the world to a very unusual and exciting soundscape. But it wasn't one necessarily born out of an abundance of choices.

Leone was looking to make a quick and cheap Western in Italy, a film in the sub-genre Spaghetti Westerns that was then looked down upon. He had lifted Akira Kurosawa's *Yojimbo* and set it in some border town between the US and Mexico. Several lead actors either turned down the role of the protagonist or were too expensive for the production, from Henry

Fonda to Charles Bronson, before Clint Eastwood, a rising TV actor, was selected.

Morricone, who had studied classical music composition, was then supporting himself and his family, by working as a composer and arranger for radio, TV and pop stars. He had just begun scoring for Italian films and he even worked as a jazz trumpeter.

Without the resources available to compose a lavish score, Morricone improvised. There was that now famous whistling tune, strong electric and acoustic guitars, gunfire, whips, horses galloping, eerie church bells, and all sorts of embellishments. It was the kind of music needed to make Eastwood's unbelievable character—someone who puts in an order to the coffin-maker on his way to a shootout and later apologises for leaving an extra body behind—come alive. More musical improvisations, even howls, yodels and whip-cracks, came in the next two films in what came to be known as the Dollar Trilogy. Morricone's epic melodramatic scores in these films gave them mood and structure. It conveyed a new sense of place and character to what was then becoming a dull genre. It made Clint Eastwood, Clint Eastwood.

To Leone, Morricone's music preceded even the writing. He would approach the composer before the script was written, with just a 'feeling' of the film and the 'descriptions of characters'. 'From Ennio, I ask for themes that clothe my characters easily,' he once told an interviewer. '...I've always felt that music is more expressive than dialogue. I've always said that my best dialogue and screenwriter is Ennio Morricone.'

Despite his prominence in Hollywood, neither did he learn English nor move to the US. "I was offered a free villa in Hollywood," he would tell interviewers. "But I said, 'No thank you, I prefer to live in Rome.'"

His music has also spread through pop music, with him either working with pop stars or them using his pieces. In India—embarrassingly—many of our most celebrated musicians in the past have partially or substantially lifted Morricone's tunes for some of our most popular film songs.

A few years ago, when asked about the concert and film music he has created, he claimed only 5 per cent of his output is music that he aspired to write. "...95 per cent of my music was written for the public at large because a movie has to be understood by ordinary people who don't necessarily understand complex music... That doesn't mean that 95 per cent of my music is inane or trivial... it's music catering to simple needs." ■

By LHENDUP G BHUTIA

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH



ANGLE



CRIME AND LABELS

The problem with terming gangster Vikas Dubey a terrorist

By MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI

ON JUNE 5TH, a few days before Vikas Dubey, whose men ambushed and killed eight policemen sent to arrest him in Uttar Pradesh's Bikru village, was arrested, the Kanpur range Inspector General of Police told the media that the he would be treated as a terrorist. A *Times of India* article said: 'Commenting on the manner in which Dubey and his aides ambushed the police force, Agarwal said: "If a criminal is using such tactics, then we will also use our force in a similar manner. Dubey will be treated as a terrorist." The officer said Dubey had stocked a huge cache of arms and ammunition at his residence and set up a control room to monitor the activities of the outside world. "Amassing of such arms and ammunition clearly shows the intention of the person who possessed these," he added.'

But is he a terrorist? If terrorism is defined by the severity of the crime, then you could grant it. But one didn't think of the Nithari serial killer of children as a terrorist. Or, if terrorism is defined as violence against institutions of government, that could be true since Dubey killed policemen. But when lawyers in Delhi started beating up policemen, one didn't categorise them as terrorists. Terrorism has no universally agreed definition but, in its common usage, there needs to be a political motive to it. The Maoists are terrorists because they seek to usurp the state through violent means.

Kashmiri extremists are terrorists because they seek independence through violent means. It is not enough for Dubey to kill policemen but he also needs to have political intent for a terrorist label to be appropriate. What exactly was Dubey's motive is still not known but one would guess it is not the overthrowing of the state government.

Also, he alone cannot be labelled a terrorist for the particular variety of crime he represents in Uttar Pradesh. There are hundreds of such mini warlords with private armies in the state. Almost all of them, like Raja Bhaiya, become important players in the political setup, often becoming ministers. Since there is no weeding them out, as a strategy to delegitimise and disgrace this lot, it might even be good to term them terrorists but chances are any policeman who tries to do this won't have a job very soon.

Because Dubey exists in an ecosystem where everyone in the system is part of his racket. Is anyone surprised that he held a political post as a member of a party? How many such Dubey's are right now members of both the ruling and opposition parties in the state? If he is a terrorist, then all of Uttar Pradesh's politics is just an extension of terrorism.

It is easy to term one such criminal who has gone rogue a terrorist. It sounds good. It is also an obfuscation of the police's own role in creating this 'terrorist'. ■

IDEAS



GETTY IMAGES

EXAGGERATION

In the early phase of the Covid-19 outbreak, like many other countries, India began to ramp up their production of ventilators. It was seen as a vital piece of medical equipment to combat the approaching disaster. In India, there was an alarm over the estimated 30,000-50,000 ventilators in the country. One think tank claimed India will need between 110,000 and 220,000 ventilators by mid-May; others, like Centre for Disease Dynamics, Economics and Policy offered a need of around 1 million. Several companies like Bharat Electronics Limited, Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited and Maruti Suzuki began making ventilators expecting a crunch. The Government also put a ban on allowing for its export. As it turns out, the need for ventilators was grossly exaggerated. The focus at Indian hospitals is instead on the availability of high-flow oxygen support. Prices of ventilators have crashed and stocks now lie unsold. ■

WORD'S WORTH

'If you look at life one way, there is always cause for alarm'

ELIZABETH BOWEN AUTHOR



By Makarand R Paranjape

A Ganglord Saga

What unites *Mother India*'s Birju and Vikas Dubey

A DRAMATIC MIDNIGHT SCENE of the opening act of *Hamlet*. In the cold, 'nipping air', Hamlet sees his father's ghost: 'Angels and ministers of grace defend us!' His friend, Horatio, and Marcellus, the guard, have seen it too. Though his friends entreat him not to follow, Hamlet, freeing himself from their hold, lurches after the beckoning sprite. Marcellus observes: 'Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.'

Marcellus' remark not only signifies that all is not right in Denmark. The appearance of the ghost, something obviously unnatural, serves to underscore a deeper defect in the body politic. Hamlet is as much about political and moral corruption as about the problem of right action in confusing circumstances. Images of decay, disease and depravity dot the play from the beginning to the end, when we are left with a heap of corpses strewn on the stage.

Early on July 3rd, during an attempt to arrest him, the police found Vikas Dubey and his gang had set up a roadblock for them. From the rooftop of his sprawling mansion, they opened fire on the ambush party. Eight policemen were killed, seven others injured. Dubey escaped. A massive manhunt, with some 3,000 policemen pressed into service, has been ordered by Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Dubey was India's most wanted criminal.

In the fast-unfolding tale, one of Vikas' associates, Amar Dubey, was gunned down in UP's Hamirpur on July 8th. The previous day, 68 policemen were transferred out of the Chaubepur police station, in Kanpur *dehat* district, for possible collusion with the dreaded gangster. Earlier, the station officer Vinay Tiwari was suspended for allegedly tipping off Dubey about the raid on July 3rd. On the morning of July 9th, Vikas was brought into police custody in Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh, by the security guards of the Mahakal temple. It is not clear whether he surrendered or was arrested, but it seems likely that Dubey had staged the whole event to avoid being gunned down by the police.

Bikru, a tiny village quite close to Kanpur, was the location of the deadliest cops-versus-bandits series in recent times. With

scenes that might be straight out of a Western or a gangster movie. Or closer home, a dacoit or gang war film. What comes to mind, with its lethal mix of caste and crime is *Dabangg* (2010) directed and co-written by Abhinav Kashyap. '*Dabang*,' which the filmmakers officially translate as 'fearless', has connotations of boldness, bluster, swagger and assertion. It suggests a certain flamboyant defiance of authority and refusal to be bullied. The film grossed upwards of Rs 250 crore, spawning an artistically deteriorating but commercially successful series of sequels.

The lead character, Chulbul Pandey, played by Salman Khan, is a never-say-die daredevil good at heart Brahmin cop. He is a bit of a simpleton, but ends up both beating up and outsmarting criminals and gangsters. The latter always have the blessings and protection of some politician on account of whom they thrive. One part of the thrill is to expose and outwit the criminal-politician nexus. To do so, Chulbul often breaks the law himself, adopting unconventional methods to strike back. Caste plays a huge role because politicians, criminals and, for that matter, cops are also divided along caste lines.

In real life, Vikas started off as a teacher, but soon found crime more attractive and lucrative. He has over 60 cases registered against him, which include land grabbing, extortion and murder. He shot into fame when, in 2001, he killed Santosh Shukla, a UP minister right inside the Shivli police station. According to Shukla's brother Manoj, Vikas was accompanied by politicians to the court, when he surrendered.

Twenty-five eyewitnesses to the murder, all policemen, turned hostile, as did the investigating officer ('25 Cops, All Eyewitnesses to 2001 Murder, Turned Hostile during Dubey's Trial', *Hindustan Times*, July 7th). Acquitted, Dubey walked free. Since then, he is accused of killing several others, including Kaushal Kishore Tripathi and Shri Krishna Mishra in the following year in 2002.

When I visited UP during the Kumbh Mela at Prayag last year, I was told by friends that Yogi Adityanath had put the fear of God into the criminals of the state. Supposedly contrary to earlier Samajwadi Party (SP) and Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) regimes when a cozy nexus between politicians, police and criminals existed, with clearly demarcated boundaries and



Vikas Dubey

INDIVIDUALS FIND THEMSELVES TRAPPED IN THE NO-MAN'S LAND, EJECTED OUT OF THE OFFICIAL BUT DYSFUNCTIONAL RULE OF LAW. THEY ARE THE ABJECTED VICTIMS OF A DEGRADED GOVERNMENTALITY AND CALLOUS SOCIETY

rules in place. Paid or patronised gangs of criminals have often proved very useful to politicians.

In some states of the country, they are taken as par for the course. But Adityanath was changing this. His 'encounter' policy of 'shoot first, ask questions later' meant nothing less than the dismantling of the 'goonda raj'. Several offenders felt safer in jails than outside. But last week's shocking developments show that much more needs to be done before deeply entrenched vested interests and their criminal cohorts can be truly extirpated.

More caste confusion was added in UP during the very

unfolding of the 'Dabang Dubey' crisis. One of the prominent Congress leaders of the state, former minister and sitting Member of Parliament, Jitin Prasada, launched the 'Brahmin Chetna Parishad' on July 6th. Blaming the Yogi government for 'step-motherly treatment' of Brahmins, he accused them of systematically targeting them: 'Since the Adityanath government came to power, the crimes and killings against Brahmins have increased manifold. They are being killed, and they aren't being given any justice' ('Congress' Jitin Prasada Launches Brahmin Body, Blames Yogi Govt for 'Step-Motherly Treatment', *Theprint.in*, July 6th).

Prasada's timing, if not intent, was certainly ironic given that Dubey, himself a Brahmin from the 'Brahmin village' of Chaubepur, had just killed several policemen. But both the film *Dabangg*, as also the rise of Dubey as a ganglord, is about upper-caste reassertion in UP. Clearly, this is a reaction to the growing clout of Dalits led by Mayavati or the so-called backward castes led by the likes of Mulayam and Akhilesh Singh Yadav. The once-dominant Brahmins now perceive themselves as the new subalterns in an altered India.

Yogi has been blamed earlier for neglecting the upper castes in his cabinet. Of 58 ministers, as many as 19 are from the backward communities, with only eight Brahmin and Kshatriya each. Prasada's attempt to woo the neglected Brahmins of UP is clearly a ploy by the Congress to try to regain its foothold in the state: 'We want to reach out to Brahmins across professions—lawyers, doctors, teachers. Listen to their woes, be their voice, and help find solutions for them' (ibid).

Both Westerns and gangster films show a clash of two systems and notions of moral justice and social order. Individuals find themselves trapped in the no-man's land, ejected out of the official but dysfunctional rule of law. They are the abjected victims of a degraded governmentality and callous society. From this liminal space, they launch their own corrective or corrupt insurrections, usually to be gunned down in the end.

The institutions of the state, whether these are the police or courts of law, repeatedly come under scrutiny or criticism in such movies. Often, they are shown as failing the individual in distress. That is where the scope for vigilantism, free-lance justice delivery and settling political or personal scores arises.

No wonder the genre of *daku* or dacoit films gained popularity after Independence. Real-life incidents of the criminalisation of the innocent fuelled the genre. Such as the notorious case of Phoolan Devi. Or of retired army subedar, Paan Singh Tomar, an Olympic athlete who turned brigand. Both stories were captured on celluloid in critically acclaimed biopics.

From *Mother India*'s reel-life dacoit Birju to the real-life Vikas Dubey, there is a direct thematic line. No wonder almost reminiscent of Birju's mother played by Nargis, who shoots her own son at the end of the film, Vikas' mother also said, 'Kill him. Kill him wherever you find him.' But now that he has surfaced, somewhat like the scary spectre in Hamlet, the message that is underscored is that all is not right in the state of UP. ■



By Rachel Dwyer

The Outsiders

The Gothic film and rural India's struggle with modernity

AS EVERYONE ELSE under the lockdown, I've been watching serials and films, mostly in Hindi and Bengali, with a diversion to the wonderful *Babylon Berlin* which took us to the German film industry of the 1930s, which brought to mind the founding members of Bombay Talkies.

I thoroughly enjoyed *Panchayat*, where our flop hero moves from mall to village to set up a series of comic encounters. This is not a tale of unlikely smart villagers turning the tables on the urban incomer, and nor does the series romanticise or patronise them. Rather, the cultural clashes and negotiation of change in all aspects of contemporary Indian life is turned into material for comic happenings, which also show a serious move towards some sort of understanding between the rural and the urban.

The figure of the urban Indian who is suddenly transplanted to a rural area doesn't have much of a lineage in the Hindi film. We have seen classic films where city-dwellers go to the village and wreak havoc, as in *Barsaat* (1949) or *Raja Hindustani* (1996) or the villager who migrates to the city but leaves it, in *Shree 420* (1955).

Hindi films have mostly made half-hearted attempts at showing the village, which is some unreal space defined by not being the city. Sometimes the city-dweller on a journey stopped in a village where he met the village belle in her full make-up, short *choli* and sometimes a little cone of a 'Himachali' hat, where they performed a 'tribal' or 'gypsy' dance ('*Dilbar*', *Caravan*, 1971, or better, one with innuendo: '*Bangle Ke Peeche*', *Samadhi*, 1972); or we encountered the world of Thakurs (*Ram Lakhan*, 1989; *Karan Arjun*, 1995).

Although some films engaged more seriously with villages, such as *Swades* (2004), *Peepli Live* (2010) or the work of Prakash Jha, the 2000s saw many Hindi films set in non-metropolitan dystopias where the hero may or may not spout Bhojpuri—surely, the equivalent of English 'Ooo arrr' of Mumsnet—or may just carry on in his *Bambaiya* Hindi, a star transplanted to the small town.

While novels set in the villages became classics such as Premchand's *Godaan* (1936) or Pannalal Patel's *Manvini*

Bhavai (1947), Upamanyu Chatterjee's *English August: An Indian Story* (1988) distilled the experience of the Indian urban youth's alienation from the village with great hilarity and was made into a film by Dev Benegal.

This theme came up again in my lockdown viewing as I have been rewatching Satyajit Ray, Tapan Sinha, and films starring Uttam Kumar, as many of these were set in rural areas, albeit in massive, though often decaying, mansions, featuring zamindars who move between the city of Calcutta (as was) and the villages where they are feudal lords, just as Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Devdas*. They are unable or unwilling to survive in the modern world, often represented by the city of Calcutta/Kolkata, with the bumpkin surviving and thriving in this world. A classic example is *Saheb Bibi Golam* (1956), which is a fascinating contrast to the Hindi *Sahib Bibi Aur Ghulam* (1962).

The encounter of the outsider and the village is seen in three different ways in Satyajit Ray's *Teen Kanya* (1961), its three short films based on Tagore's short stories, each giving the view of the incomer but also showing the villager's view of him/her. *Samapti* (The Conclusion) shows the villager, Amulya (Soumitra Chatterjee), who moves to the city and returns as a partial outsider. He rejects the respectable girl who is chosen for him in favour of the wild village beauty, Pagli (Aparna Sen). Amulya struggles with walking in the village's muddy tracks but Pagli climbs trees to escape and to return to him, rising above the ooze. The middle story, *Monihara* (The Lost Jewels), is a ghost story set in a massive mansion where the wife loves jewellery more than her husband and, perhaps, her life. The village schoolteacher who tells the story regards the couple as aliens who perhaps deserve their fate. The first, *Postmaster*, is one of the saddest stories I know. The postmaster (Anil Chatterjee) comes to the village where he is startled by the locals, the group of men who invite him to a concert where he is clearly out of place. He makes his only connection with the young girl, Ratan (Chandana Banerjee), with whom he kills time by teaching her to read and write, and seems to adopt as his daughter. Although there are no questions about why this

able-bodied young man, with free time on his hands needs a servant at all, this child works for him, cooking—even learning to make bread though she usually prepares rice, bringing him water, nursing him through his malaria, and so on. He asks for a transfer and when he goes, tries to tip her. The girl refuses, her heart broken again because he sees their relationship as transactional rather than one based on love.

The Gothic struggle with modernity is seen in the magnificent *Khudito Pashan* / *Hungry Stones* (1960), based on another story of Tagore. A tax collector (Soumitro Chatterjee) comes to work in a remote area where he stays

characteristics ascribed to the typical Bengali hero, namely, he is kind and gentle but also ineffectual. He seems not to notice his patient has died and become a *chudail*.

Bulbbul and Sudip are outsiders in this world of zamindars, whose patriarchal culture contains child marriage, rape and unspeakable violence. The men are jealous but unfaithful and cruel. They regard the family as a private space to indulge in sadistic passions, thrashing and killing a female family member with impunity, even though there are local police present.

Even the widow (who has her head shaved rather than cut in Bengali style) deserves our sympathy despite her ambitions and lack of sisterly empathy. The youngest brother, who is a gentle writer at the beginning, travels to the West. It is unclear what he has done there and what has changed for him while Bulbbul herself has moved on.

The film has been acclaimed as different and new but it draws on many visual, narrative and cinematic traditions. Its melodrama is that of a Hindi film rather than the introspective realism of Bengali art cinema. The huge *rajbari* is seen in many Bengali films, actual mansions which are far grander and extravagant than even the wildest Hindi film fantasy, but aestheticised in the visual style of a Sabyasachi or Rituparno with details such as Bulbbul's exquisite clothes (especially her pink and mint green). Yet, it is also a Gothic tale, a form loved by Tagore, as well as linked to the *kisse-kahanis* of the folk figure, the *chudail*.

The rape-revenge drama was popular in

Hindi films in the 1970s while the protagonist was linked to the Devi in films such as *Chingaari* (2006) and the Tamil and Telugu films such as *Ammoru* (1995).

It is a shame that the film lacks suspense, the *chudail* plot being clear from the beginning, though the film mentions Sherlock, one of the three great Bengali detectives (albeit a Londoner), along with Byomkesh Bakshi and Feluda.

The outsider, often a representative of the modern state, encounters a non-modern or modernising India where the two seem irreconcilable. The person associated with the modern, often an agent of the state, is enchanted by the non-modern and its beauty; he may risk his life in this encounter (*Khudito Pashan*) or he may witness the end of this world (*Bulbbul*). Or in *Postmaster*, he shows that this world is insignificant and he must leave. Cinema, as the emblem of the modern, shows us the aesthetic charms of these other worlds, the power of the ghosts and *chudails*, but leaves us in no doubt which world we want to belong. ■



A scene from *Bulbbul*

in a deserted palace which is rumoured to be haunted. He is enchanted by the ghosts from the Mughal era, in particular, by a beautiful woman (Arundhati Devi). (The wife of the director, she was pregnant at the time with Professor Anindya 'Rana' Sinha of the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore, an animal specialist.) Welcomed by all, a fellow Bengali (Chhabi Biswas) takes an avuncular role, inviting him and then sending food but the young man is obsessed with his night visions, the figures calling him into their world. It was this movie that inspired Gulzar's *Lekin...* (1991).

A contemporary Gothic film, *Bulbbul* (2020), is made in Hindi but set in 1881 in a mansion in rural Bengal. The film has two outsiders, who are not necessarily urban migrants to a rural setting, though the doctor must have studied in a city, but hold modern values. One is Bulbbul herself who seeks love and work through writing (why in Hindi?), the lovely Tripti Dimra, with her peacock fan and the doctor, Dr Sudip, played by Parambrata Chatterjee who has the

HOME
TRUTHS

After the removal of her Special Protection Group cover, Priyanka Gandhi became ineligible for a government bungalow and has got a notice to vacate her residence at Lodhi Estate. Political observers are now remembering past high-profile housing cases, one of them being of Sheikh Abdullah, leader of Kashmir. In 1967, he had been detained in a New Delhi bungalow where he continued to live even after his release. Once, IK Gujral, then minister of housing, came to see him. Sheikh's colleagues complained to him that the house was too small. They wanted him to allot another nearby house. Gujral remarked sarcastically that earlier he wanted a country, now the demand had been reduced to a house. One of Sheikh's friends present there retorted that something is better than nothing. Right now, the question on everyone's lips is what will Priyanka do. Is she ready to shift to her own house? But she does not have one in Delhi. It will have to be a rented place.

POWER DIVISION

Jammu and Kashmir Chief Secretary BVR Subrahmanyam is none too pleased with Lt Governor GC Murmu. Murmu is an old hand of Narendra Modi from his Gujarat days. Recently, he nominated RR Bhatnagar as a security advisor with power that the chief secretary is uncomfortable with. The differences are over transfers and postings. The chief secretary has announced zero tolerance on corruption and transferred many officials. Now Bhatnagar has also got power to transfer, even at the Station House Officer level, in the name of security. Subrahmanyam did not attend a meeting called by Murmu, bringing to fore the differences. Amit Shah is reportedly mediating and sorting out the problem.

Wilful Ignorance?

Rahul Gandhi has been criticising Modi's handling of China but he is himself a member of the parliamentary standing committee on defence and never attended its meetings. BJP president JP Nadda raised the issue and requested Gandhi to be present so that he could get all information about what the Government is doing on that front. Gandhi reportedly did not reply.



Just Deserts

After the Madhya Pradesh cabinet expansion, it is clear Jyotiraditya Scindia has got the upper hand with most of his own men getting ministries. Of the 22 Congress MLAs who joined the BJP, causing the Kamal Nath government's fall, 11 have been made ministers. Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan, however, may not be happy. He was reluctant to give away so many ministries. The BJP high command in Delhi and Amit Shah tried to convince him that this was a tactical move and the agreement by which Scindia switched over. And honouring their word would send a message to other potential Congress dissidents like Sachin Pilot, Jitin Prasada, Milind Deora, et al. Scindia could now have a much larger influence in the state unit since he got Chouhan overruled. He has appointed a retired bureaucrat, close to the Scindia family, to look after government appointments and postings in Madhya Pradesh. This is to break the old loyalty groups formed by the Congress.

The Dalai Lama Factor

Even as India and China are at a particularly bitter moment in their relationship, Tibetan leader in exile, the Dalai Lama, has not issued any statement. Recently, on his birthday, he tweeted generally about peace, happiness and universal tranquillity. But there is a school of thought that contends Prime Minister Narendra Modi should use the Dalai Lama at this critical juncture. A BJP MP suggested giving him a Bharat Ratna. A former election commissioner thought the road in front of the Chinese embassy in Delhi should be named after the Dalai Lama. This would indirectly put the focus on Tibetan independence. Modi is listening to everyone but is unlikely to go for kneejerk reactions.

Recapturing Mumbai

The BJP has an internal slogan—Recapture Mumbai—to wrest power back in Maharashtra. Amit Shah is taking tremendous interest in it. A new team was formed on this front and the party's Maharashtra unit saw a change. With many loyalists of former Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis included in it, Shah and Modi apparently continue to repose faith in him.



Wobbling Coalition

The question of who really holds power in Maharashtra came to the fore again when the state's home minister and Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) leader Anil Deshmukh transferred 10 deputy commissioners of police without taking ally Shiv Sena into confidence. Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray, using his powers, cancelled all these transfers. It led to NCP chief Sharad Pawar rushing to Thackeray's residence 'Matoshree' to iron out the differences. There are also rumours that Rahul Gandhi is frustrated with the alliance but cannot dissociate the Congress from it because the BJP would take advantage of it. In different municipalities too, the NCP and the Sena are sniping at each other. It poached some Sena corporators at one municipality and the Sena dropped it as partner in another local body to join hands with the BJP there.

LOW PROFILE, LONG REACH

RSS leader BL Santhosh, who is also Karnataka organisational secretary of the BJP, has become a very powerful person in the state even though he maintains a low profile. Recently, three Rajya Sabha nominations from Karnataka were done by him and not by Chief Minister BS Yediyurappa. Modi and Shah both take his advice on state affairs. Yediyurappa is now apparently trying to reassert his own position as the boss of the BJP in Karnataka.



By JAMES ASTILL

WILL THE BASE HOLD?

Donald Trump gets a reality check four months before the presidential election

AP



US President Donald Trump at the Mount Rushmore National Memorial in South Dakota, July 3

INDEPENDENCE DAY IS traditionally a festival of hope and soaring national pride for Americans—celebrated with fireworks and parades, baseball and gargantuan overeating. This July 4th was more muted. There were plenty of burgers and fireworks. But most parades were cancelled because of the coronavirus pandemic. The baseball season is likewise on hold. And in a pair of speeches this weekend—one at Mount Rushmore against the petrified backdrop of the founding fathers, the other outside the White House—President Donald Trump offered Americans anything but hope. He promised them, worn down as they are by the relentless divisiveness, scandal and culture warring he has brought to American public life, much more of the same. “We are now in the process of defeating the radical left, the Marxists, the anarchists, the agitators, the looters and people who in many instances have absolutely no clue what they are doing,” he thundered outside the White House.

The country, to be sure, is beset by three mutually reinforcing crises: the pandemic, which has so far claimed over 130,000 American lives, its dire economic fallout and the mass protests for racial justice that have roiled America since the death of George Floyd in a Minnesotan gutter six weeks ago. Yet where Trump’s predecessors—probably without exception—would have sought to reassure and guide Americans through these fires, he appears determined to pour petrol on them. At Mount Rushmore he slammed the protestors—the vast majority of whom have been peaceful—as “angry mobs” seeking to “unleash a wave of violent crime in our cities”. He characterised a related campaign against memorials to the slave-owning heroes of America’s racist past as intended to “end America”.

Talk about doubling down. In his inauguration speech—three-and-a-half tumultuous years ago—Trump claimed to be taking over the helm of a country teetering on the brink of anarchy and collapse. “American carnage”, he called it. It was unprecedented (“some weird shit” was how the previous Republican president, George W Bush, described Trump’s diagnosis). It was also untrue: the economy was strong then and the unemployment and crime rates both approaching record lows. Yet it at least made a sort of tactical sense: by exaggerating the country’s problems, Trump set the bar for his presidency extraordinarily low. But what on earth is he thinking of now?

He appears to be basing his case for re-election in November on the fact that America has become significantly more divided, more riotous and economically damaged over the course of his tenure than it was even in his original dystopian description. Trump was supposed to ‘Make America Great Again’. He was not supposed to break it.

Perhaps if more Americans had confidence in his ability to fix their giant problems, his tactics would look shrewd. But he is one of the most unpopular and least trusted presidents ever to run for a second term. He is the first president never to have had an approval rating of 50 per cent since modern polling began. He is currently approved of by only 40 per cent of Americans and disapproved of by 56 per cent—many of whom loathe him.

He is faring similarly in head-to-head polling against his Democratic challenger, Joe Biden. The former deputy to Barack Obama currently leads Trump by around nine points in national polls. And he is beating him by substantial, though smaller, margins in the dozen ‘swing states’ that decide presidential elections. For example, Biden is ahead by 6.5 points in Wisconsin, one of a trio of Midwestern states that Trump squeaked in in 2016 and the one considered likeliest to vote for the president again. He is up by 3.5 points in Arizona, which has voted Republican in every presidential election since 1952, save when it plumped for Bill Clinton in the anomalously crowded 1992 election.

He is leading Trump by five points in Florida, which has picked the winning candidate in 12 of the past 13 presidential elections. And bad as things look for the president in these states, they could get worse, with America’s unchecked Covid-19 pandemic surging in the south and west. On July 8th the country recorded over 60,000 new infections in a 24-hour period—a record high.

Even before the pandemic struck, Trump’s poor ratings made him a weak incumbent. But his current standing represents a dramatic deterioration. His prospects began to cloud in March, when the Democrats rallied behind Biden, an unexciting but inoffensive centrist, over more radical alternatives such as Bernie Sanders. Most head-to-head polling showed Trump trailing the former vice president narrowly at the time. But given the strength of the economy, the advantages of running as an incumbent and the advantages Republican candidates enjoy from the electoral college system, most punters on betting markets made him a narrow frontrunner nonetheless. His slide has been caused by a subsequent erosion of his previously impregnable Republican base.

Older voters, who tend to be white and non-college-educated, appear to have recoiled against Trump’s handling of the coronavirus. They are, of course, the group likeliest to die of the disease. Little wonder Trump’s Covid-19-induced histrionics have gone down badly with them. He initially sought to dismiss the virus as a hoax then, after briefly taking it seriously, by turn downplayed it and promoted bleach injections and other whacko cures for it. Meanwhile, other Republican suggested American oldies might

**TRUMP APPEARS TO BE BASING
HIS CASE FOR RE-ELECTION
IN NOVEMBER ON THE FACT
THAT AMERICA HAS BECOME
SIGNIFICANTLY MORE DIVIDED,
MORE RIOTOUS AND
ECONOMICALLY DAMAGED
OVER THE COURSE OF HIS
TENURE THAN IT WAS EVEN
IN HIS ORIGINAL DYSTOPIAN
DESCRIPTION**

be willing to sacrifice themselves to the virus in order to avoid disruption to the economy. “There are more important things than living,” said one of them, Dan Patrick, the Republican Number Two in Texas, which saw 10,000 new coronavirus cases in a 24-hour period this week.

It seems the president’s erstwhile elderly supporters were on board with that. Unless Trump can reverse their flow to Biden, his chances will look grim. Older voters are the most assiduous voters there are and potentially decisive in every battleground state—including especially Florida and the all-important Midwestern trio of Wisconsin, Michigan and Pennsylvania. Their seepage from Trump is the single main reason an election forecasting model devised by *The Economist* currently gives him only a 10 per cent chance of victory. In a recent interview on Fox News, even he acknowledged the hole

he is in. “Joe Biden is gonna be your president because some people don’t love me, maybe,” he said. Meanwhile, strategists in both parties are daring to air a possibility that the president could lose in a landslide big enough to subsume his party, thereby handing control of the Senate and many state legislatures and governors’ mansions to the Democrats. Analysts on Wall Street were reported this week to be for the first time pricing Biden’s economic agenda into their risks assessments.

Trump’s parlous position makes his escalating of the culture war seem all the more risky. His fleeing supporters are scared and sick of the endless conflict he stirs. So why is he not instead doing as most of his party’s strategists are urging him to—and calming down, addressing the pandemic seriously, responding to his voters fears?

The most prosaic explanation is that he seems unable to do otherwise, at least for any sustained period of time. Trump is an aggrieved histrionic, committed to an eternal quest for attention and validation and always ready for the conflict he stirs. This has been the tenor of his entire career—including three marriages, 11 bankruptcy proceedings and, according to a count by *USA Today*, over 3,500 legal ones. According to a forthcoming diagnosis of the president’s mental state, to be published next week, he displays all nine clinical criteria of narcissism. Albeit, writes Mary L Trump, that ‘Donald’s pathologies are so complex and his behaviours so often inexplicable that coming up with an accurate and comprehensive diagnosis would require a full battery of psychological and neurophysical tests that he’ll never sit for’. Mary L Trump writes with some authority. She has a PhD in psychology and is the president’s only niece.

Yet another explanation for Trump’s destructive tactics is that, amazingly as it might seem, they could actually work. The president’s campaign advisors are said to have assured him that, in the end, his wobbly former supporters will recoil against the inevitable excesses of the racial justice protestors, the reluctance of Biden to condemn them and the president’s alternative promise of law and order. These advisors are, of course, having to work with the grain of their candidate’s intemperance, so their predictions warrant caution. Even so, this scenario is not infeasible. Moreover, the effective polling gap between the president and Biden is narrower than it seems.

That is thanks to the Republican advantage in the electoral college, a system of vote counting designed to ensure that every state has a role in electing the president. It favours Republicans because their support tends to be spread widely across the country. By contrast the Democrats’ is more concentrated in a handful of big coastal states where they win, in effect, by wastefully big margins (how they would love to transport a few thousand of their California or New York voters to Florida or Wisconsin). The result is that Trump could conceivably win re-election with only around 45 per cent of the popular vote; he won in 2016 with 46 per cent. And to those who doubt a race-baiting message is capable of giving him the extra couple of points that would require, it need only be remarked that it

TRUMP’S CAMPAIGN ADVISORS ARE SAID TO HAVE ASSURED HIM THAT, IN THE END, HIS WOBBLY FORMER SUPPORTERS WILL RECOIL AGAINST THE INEVITABLE EXCESSES OF THE RACIAL JUSTICE PROTESTORS, THE RELUCTANCE OF BIDEN TO CONDEMN THEM AND THE PRESIDENT’S ALTERNATIVE PROMISE OF LAW AND ORDER

Protestors at Columbus Circle in New York, June 30



GETTY IMAGES



Joe Biden in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, June 25

AP

has worked for Republicans in the past—including, again, for Trump in 2016.

A third possible explanation for Trump's tripling down on divisiveness is more intriguing. It is that he would sooner shore up his base of aggrieved, white Americans at risk of losing the election, than risk disenchanting them with a more accommodative campaign message, which might anyway fail to deliver him victory. That is not to say Trump does not want to win, as some suggest: he plainly does. But if he cannot win, he wants at least to retain the valuable customer base and ongoing source of influence on the right that his ultra-loyal 40 per cent of the electorate represents. This was more or less his calculation in 2016, when he expected to lose to Hillary Clinton. He had already made plans to launch a television channel to cash in on his new political following in that event. And though now his calculation may be complicated by a new fear of post-presidential prosecution, in connection with the campaign finance and other alleged crimes unearthed during his tenure, it is essentially the same. He is a businessman-politician, who still thinks in terms of market share, not majorities. And 40 per cent of any market—let alone America's 140 million voters—is pretty good.

The veteran Biden must be unable to believe his good fortune. Over the past four months he has gone from being a disregarded laughing stock of the Democratic primary—too old, too gaffe-prone to keep pace with his jazzier rivals—to Trump's underdog challenger; to America's probable next president. And he has done so for the most part while being cocooned, for fear of the coronavirus, at his lakeside mansion in Delaware.

JOE BIDEN MUST BE UNABLE TO BELIEVE HIS GOOD FORTUNE. OVER THE PAST FOUR MONTHS HE HAS GONE FROM BEING A DISREGARDED LAUGHING STOCK OF THE DEMOCRATIC PRIMARY TO TRUMP'S UNDERDOG CHALLENGER; TO AMERICA'S PROBABLE NEXT PRESIDENT

He won the Democratic primary essentially by default. Notwithstanding his weaknesses as a campaigner, Democrats appeared to consider him the most reassuringly inoffensive mainstream candidate, who would be likeliest to unify the party against Trump. And that has turned out to be a reasonable bet. The hard left, despite having little love for Biden, has grudgingly submitted to him. However much its members may disdain his moderate healthcare policy, they know dissent could only help Trump—and the Democrats responsible for it would never be forgiven. Even before Covid-19 hit, this had made Biden look competitive. Now he is in the ascendant, despite having held no rally, delivered no memorable speech and sat for few interviews in the intervening four months.

Can the US presidency really be won with such little effort—by essentially not being Trump? Biden has another four months to find out. They will probably be eventful—with the president flailing and the pandemic gathering new pace. Yet Biden will probably spend them mostly padding around at home, conducting the odd Zoom meeting, reading his favourite Irish poetry and having pleasant lunches with his wife. ■

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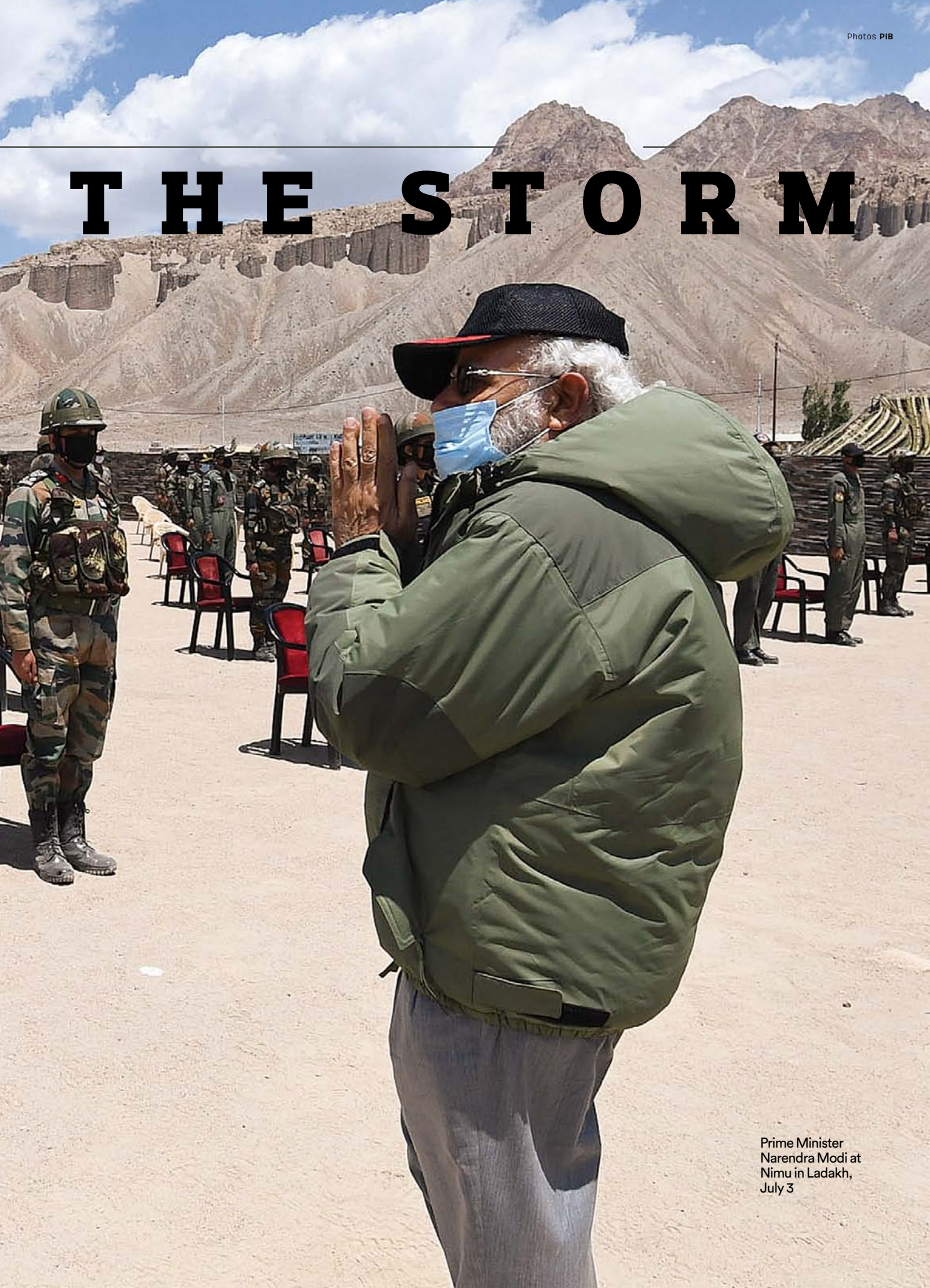
RIDING OUT



**HOW MODI MET THE CHINESE
CHALLENGE WITHOUT CEDING POLITICAL
AND STRATEGIC GROUND**

By PR RAMESH and SIDDHARTH SINGH

THE STORM



Prime Minister
Narendra Modi at
Nimu in Ladakh,
July 3

P rime Minister Narendra Modi reached the far heights of Nimu on July 3rd, in the wee hours of the morning, for an unplanned but crucial interaction with the troops guarding the borders in extreme weather. Dressed in a thick down jacket and a black cap bearing the insignia of the armed forces, the Prime Minister had decided to personally thank the soldiers at the forward command and spell out his Government's message to China. This was his first visit to Ladakh after the June 15th clashes along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) that took the lives of 20 Indian soldiers. After a brief interaction with senior officials of the army and the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) that morning, Modi was the picture of a man who meant business. His stride, as he headed towards the podium, was confident; his chin slanted determinedly upward, sunglasses on his face, the Prime Minister sent out a clear signal that India would no longer be blindsided by Beijing.

The landscape lying before his podium sported rows of chairs on which were seated jawans in camouflage gear. Nimu, of which thousands of Indians had not heard just a few days ago, was about to be etched indelibly on the nation's mindscape. At 11,000 feet above sea level, surrounded by the stark and beautiful Zaskar Range on the banks of the Indus, it is among the harshest terrains for India's security forces. Till hours before, it was Defence Minister Rajnath Singh who was supposed to visit the border troops on a motivational trip. And just hours later, it was the Prime Minister who flew to Ladakh. The trip was as imperative as the message would be categorical. As he stood on the podium, an expectation of something immense crackled in the chilly air.

Modi was about to firmly reset the terms of engagement and redefine equations with China, the first step for which he had taken as long ago as 2014.

In Tokyo, in September 2014, taking a jab at the People's Republic of China,



Modi had asserted that "The world is today divided among two schools: those who choose expansionism (*vistaarvaad*) and those who believe in prioritising development (*vikasvaad*) as the only way forward to achieve both progress and peace..." Chinese President Xi Jinping's trip to India came just days after that speech. On its heels came also the standoff at Chumar, an issue resolved only after Modi took it up personally with Xi. Nimu was about to draw a new map of the India-China relationship, extrapolating from Tokyo.

At Nimu, the Prime Minister hailed the tradition and culture of bravery of Indian soldiers in an inspirational address. "Everyone believes that peace and friendship are important for the progress of the nation, the world and humanity. But we also know that the weak can never bring peace. The weak cannot initiate peace.

Bravery is the precondition for peace...All of you are the leaders who have established this goal, tradition and this glorious culture of India." Quoting Saint Thiruvalluvar, he emphasised: "...valour, honour, the tradition of dignified behaviour and credibility are the four qualities that are the reflections of an army of any country. Indian forces have always followed this path."

It was an address that forcefully resonated with the strong martial spirit and culture of India's security forces. "You are the heroes of the same land that has repulsed the attacks and atrocities of many invaders for thousands of years. This is our identity. We are the people who worship Lord Krishna who plays the flute. We are also the same people who follow Sudarshan Chakradhari Krishna as an ideal. With this inspiration, India has emerged stronger after every attack."



 The discussion between Ajit Doval and Wang Yi dealt in detail with the situation in Eastern Ladakh. India insisted that peace and tranquillity on the border required careful handling of relations. This was reflected in the MEA statement. A day later, both Chinese and Indian troops withdrew 

It was a dynamic speech that addressed itself directly to each of the soldiers guarding the borders of the nation from its enemies. “Our support, strength and resolve for its [the Motherland’s] defence and security are as high as the Himalayas. I can see this ability and resolve in your eyes right now. It is clearly visible on your faces. The indomitable courage shown by the valiant sons of the country in the Galwan Valley is the depiction of utmost might. The country is proud of you.”

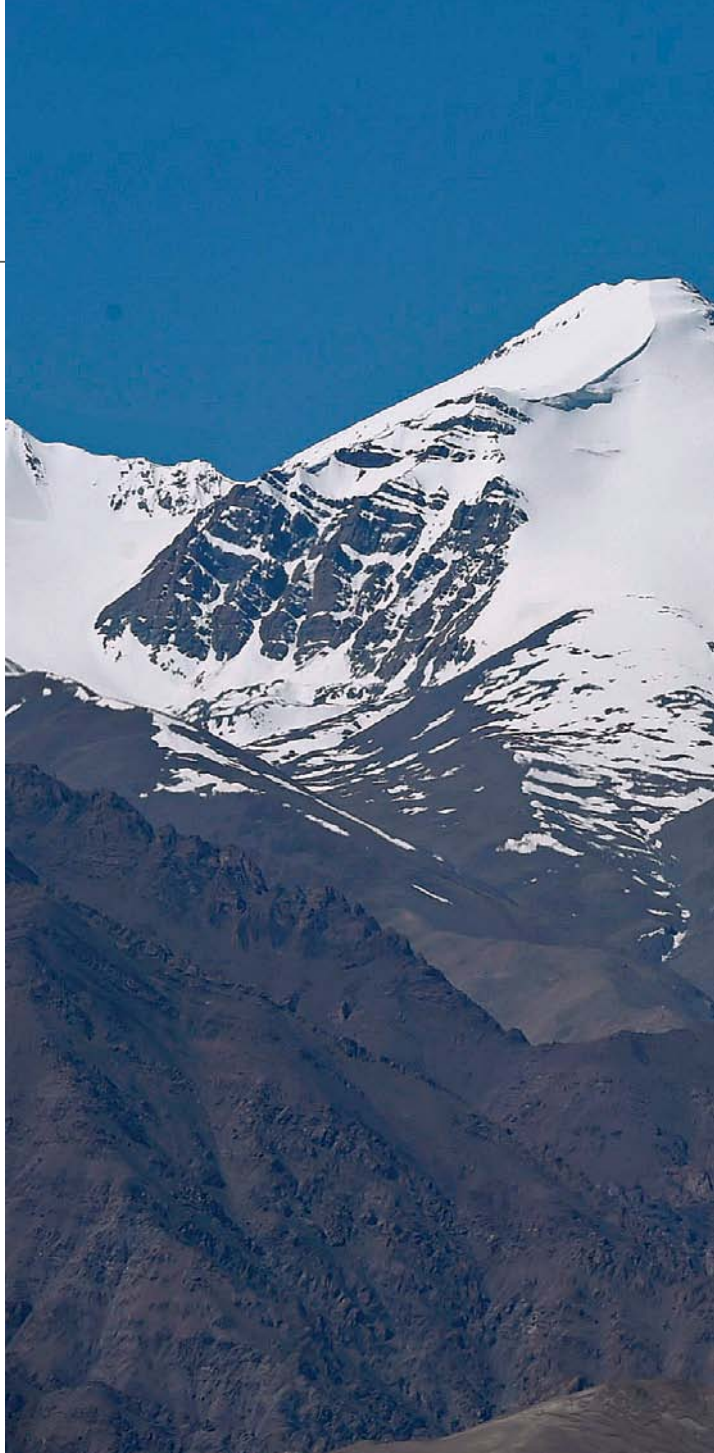
It was Modi’s political message to China from Nimu. His speech was a muscular echo of and a resounding sequel to the warning bells he had sounded in Tokyo in 2014 against the backdrop of the aggression shown by Xi’s regime in the South China Sea and its bullying of the nations in the region. “The era of colonial expansion is over; this is the era of evolution...It is an

opportunity for development and development is also the basis for the future. In the previous centuries...obsession with expansion has always posed a threat to world peace...history is witness to the fact that such forces have been erased or forced to relent... The whole world is now against the policy of expansion. Today the world is devoted to development and is welcoming the open competition for development.”

If his demeanour was grim; the spirit was martial. Modi’s message spelt decisiveness in the face of any territorial aggression. He signalled to China in clear terms that India would not be bullied, buckle under threats or retreat from defending its own land by any and all means. There would be no compromise and the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) would have to move back to its pre-May 3rd positions relating to the LAC or face dire consequences.



Modi sent a political message to China from Nimu. His speech was a resounding sequel to the warning bells he had sounded in Tokyo in 2014 against the backdrop of the aggression shown by Xi Jinping's regime in the South China Sea. The message spelt decisiveness. There would be no compromise and the PLA would have to move back to its pre-May 3rd positions along the LAC



GETTY IMAGES

Modi's Nimu address spells a landmark shift from the 1993 position on India's relationship with its neighbour, when the then Congress regime decoupled the border issue from the rest of the relationship. Modi made it plain that the border issue will be part of the overall equation.

This decisive reset was initiated by Modi as far back as 2014, during Xi's visit to India. At a meeting in New Delhi, the Chinese leader spoke at length about the robustness of bilateral ties, the participation of the two countries at various multilateral forums, trade links and so on. When it was his turn to speak, the Prime Minister showed his appreciation for the strength of the relationship but then ventured into an area that had, till that moment of the visit, been carefully skirted—the incursion in the Chu-

mar sector just prior to Xi's visit. A senior minister privy to the discussions between the two leaders told *Open* that Modi, brushing aside the rather careful stance taken in dealing with China, told Xi Jinping: "A single speck of dirt on the windshield could ruin a highly enjoyable high-speed cruise in a luxury vehicle on a state-of-the-art highway". Implied in the Prime Minister's remark was that India and China could not pretend it was business-as-usual when there were military incursions into one party's territory. Soon after this exchange, the PLA began stepping back from Chumar.

Modi has, since then, been ramming the point home that the pursuit of good relations between India and China would mean agreements on all fronts and no tiptoeing around the highly sen-



An Indian Air Force fighter jet flies over Leh in Ladakh, June 25

sitive territorial issue. The defiant note against China struck by Modi paved the road for India to opt out of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) over worries about putting both domestic industry and agriculture at risk by allowing the level of imports under the agreement. The RCEP includes China and ASEAN members, with the objective of covering a third of the world economy. India, for its part, was looking for stringent protection against Chinese imports. That was 2019.

Earlier still, in 2017, the Modi Government had refused to be part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) for which China had enlisted the support of 130 countries, 68 of which had already signed up. India alone sent no representative, not even a low-level one. The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) barred

representatives from think-tanks and business lobbyists from taking its prior permission for participation, besides sending out an aggressively worded statement listing its objections and concerns, including that parts of the BRI involved projects on Indian land, that the project could push smaller nations into a debt trap, destroy local communities and irreversibly harm the ecology, and that China's own motives were not clear. The underlying implication was that Beijing was looking more to expand its influence and assert its political standing. Bhutan, with which China has once again raked up territorial issues, was the only one of India's neighbours not to enlist for the project. The rest, including Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and the Maldives—nations where China has gradually but noticeably deepened its

influence—have all signed up.

The Government's redefining of relations with China on the boundary dispute comes as a complete break from 1993 when India separated it from the rest of the bilateral relationship. Curiously, that agreement on the maintenance of peace and tranquillity along the LAC made no provision for recognising the existing lines of deployment for the respective armies as they stood in 1993. Nor did the agreement reflect any attempt to have each side recognise the other's line of troop deployment at the time of signing it. In January 2008, speaking at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing, then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had said that the independence of India's foreign policy allowed the country to pursue the path of "mutually beneficial cooperation" with all the major countries of the world.

What followed was the period of the 'Golden Arches Theory of Conflict Prevention' proposed by political commentator Thomas L Friedman, as a way of explaining how globalisation affects foreign policy and conflict. Essentially, no two countries that both have McDonald's franchises have ever gone to war. The reasoning behind this correlation, Friedman said, was that once economies became sufficiently integrated, both the cost of going to war and the amount of contact between the two countries would increase. Both these factors lead to more effective conflict resolution, as states would attempt to pursue the more economically beneficial option. Friedman's argument echoed the main suppositions of the democratic peace theory, which contends that democracies never go to war. His analysis took this argument further in its economic emphasis, although he placed a similar emphasis on the role of domestic society in influencing a government's willingness to go to war.

In keeping with this, speaking in Beijing during a visit in May 2010, Jairam Ramesh, Congress leader and then environment minister, maintained that India was being "overly defensive and alarmist" over Chinese investments in India. "India should get rid of needless restrictions on Chinese investments... we are imagining demons," he said in the backdrop of reports that New Delhi had barred import of Chinese telecom equipment from Huawei, especially in border areas, due to security concerns. "Huawei is creating assets in India, hiring Indian professionals. Over eighty per cent of its employees are Indians... China is implementing projects worth over \$30 billion but unfortunately, the controversy over Huawei has overshadowed the whole issue of Chinese investments," Ramesh argued, stressing "Manmohan Singh is totally gung ho about it. The MEA and the NSA back this. People who are raising concerns are the home ministry and security establishments... we have a huge trade deficit with China but we are still suspicious of them." China had also given India information about the Zangmu hydropower project after first denying this information, Ramesh said, bolstering his argument that increased economic interaction could also lead to easier interaction on other issues, including security concerns.

Closer engagement with China was viewed, during the Unit-



Chinese President
Xi Jinping and Modi
in New Delhi,
September 18, 2014

ed Progressive Alliance's (UPA) stint in power, as flowing from the Look East policy adopted in 1992. By and large, the UPA preferred a continuity couched in the perception that increased interaction with China was in India's economic interest and should be pursued so that security concerns could also be addressed in an easier environment. The UPA perceived the relationship with China later also in the context of what Jonathan D James dubbed, in his analysis 'The Prospect of Chindia as a World Power', as 'fanciful'. That is, a reading by some select scholars of the meteoric rise of powers such as China and India on the global stage. It was the age of 'Chindia Rising', and economists and global political analysts were busy churning out reams on the growth of



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This decisive reset was initiated by Modi as far back as 2014, during Xi Jinping's visit to India. In New Delhi, the Chinese leader spoke about the robustness of bilateral ties. Modi ventured into an area that had been carefully skirted till then—the PLA's incursion in the Chumar sector. Implied in his remark was that India and China could not pretend it was business-as-usual. Soon, the Chinese soldiers began stepping back from Chumar



China and India and the implications for global growth, prosperity and security and the working in tandem of the two. There was no reading of expansionism in the Chindia concept.

Two days after the Prime Minister's visit to Ladakh, the special representatives of India and China on the boundary question, National Security Advisor Ajit Doval and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, held a detailed discussion on the situation in Eastern Ladakh. This was on Sunday, July 5th. While the language of the release issued by the MEA was formulaic, there is no mistaking that disengage-

ment on the ground and de-escalation are a reality now, after a tense 20 days since the fateful encounter at Patrolling Point 14 (PP-14) in the Galwan Valley region: 'The two Special Representatives agreed that both sides should take guidance from the consensus of the leaders that maintenance of peace and tranquillity in the India-China border areas was essential for the further development of our bilateral relations and that two sides should not allow differences to become disputes. Therefore, they agreed that it was necessary to ensure at the earliest complete disengagement of the troops along the LAC and de-escalation from India-China border areas for full restoration of peace and tranquillity. In this regard they further agreed that both sides should complete the

on-going disengagement process along the LAC expeditiously.’

The discussion between the two, which lasted more than two hours according to sources, dealt in detail with the situation in Eastern Ladakh. India insisted that peace and tranquillity on the long border between the two countries required careful handling of relations. This point was reflected in the statement issued by the MEA. The two special representatives agreed to continue their conversations.

A day later, July 6th, these words became facts on the ground when both Chinese and Indian troops withdrew by 1.5 to 2 km from the site of the clash. The Chinese, Indian sources said, were now fully in their territory while Indian troops remained on their side. The withdrawal was said to be ‘complete’ at PP-14 in the Galwan sector, while some movement has also been seen in the Pangong Tso region—Finger 4—further south from the Galwan Valley area.

By July 8th, China had withdrawn from Patrolling Point 15, indicating that the disengagement process had gone ahead smoothly, unlike the June 15th clash at PP-14. It is expected that the entire disengagement process—including from Patrolling Points 17, 17A and other parts—will be completed within a few more days.

On the Indian side, there was no hype or outward jubilation. Instead, the army continues to maintain a cautious posture in Eastern Ladakh. The possibility that Chinese positions in the Galwan Valley area had become ‘untenable’ due to flooding caused by efforts to dam the Galwan river for their benefit has not been ruled out. Reports of ‘complete withdrawal’ were issued after re-verification of Chinese positions. The lesson of June 15th—when an Indian patrol led by Colonel Santosh Babu of 16 Bihar Regiment and his men discovered Chinese troops in an area from where they were supposed to withdraw after a meeting between corps commanders of the two armies—has not been forgotten. If anything, India has strongly reinforced troops and air force presence in the region.

India’s claim line lies much further to the east and includes the entire Aksai Chin area that was lost in 1962. At that time too, the Galwan Valley was a zone of contention where hostile action was seen. But unlike 1962, when India engaged in a ‘forward policy’ without adequate preparation, this time round, not only are Indian soldiers equipped properly but the essential support infrastructure—roads, culverts, bridges etcetera—are all in place. The bone of contention involves the bridge that India has built on the confluence of the Shyok and Galwan rivers that is vital for its control over areas to the north of the confluence zone and the link road of about 12-14 km from this point to PP-14. Both have alarmed China even if these lie on the Indian side of the LAC. It has been speculated that the feverish pace of building infrastructure in this part of the Union Territory of Ladakh has made China think that India is planning to retake its lost territory of Aksai Chin. It is another matter that India has never crossed the LAC, by way of either aggressive patrolling or grabbing territory as the Chinese have tried since May. For all the trouble, India remains alert and wary of Chinese adventures in the area.

When it comes to safeguarding borders, every country has to do the job alone, however superior the enemy’s strength or economic power. That, after all, is the hallmark of sovereignty. But at the same time, no statesman will willingly take his country to war—whatever the provocation. In Modi’s case, the task was particularly complicated. Domestically, India finds itself in the throes of a pandemic that is yet to abate. Then the country’s economy is not exactly in the pink of health. The latter makes it difficult, if not impossible, to sustain a war beyond a certain duration. The cost otherwise is the certain destruction of the country’s economic potential, not just for the moment but also for the future. There were plenty of moments in the days between the clash at PP-14 when war seemed a distinct possibility. A long, geographically challenging, border with China and the possibility of Pakistan fishing in troubled waters were just two factors in the situation.

That, however, did not prevent India from taking harsh steps. On June 29th, India banned 59 Chinese apps. At that time, the step was laughed at, ignoring the fact that popular apps like TikTok had tens of millions of users in India. The derision stopped a week later when US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was asked about the app ban in India and Australia and said, in the course of an interview, that, “We’re certainly looking at it. We’ve worked on this issue for a long time, whether it was the problems of having Huawei technology in your infrastructure. We’ve gone all over the world and we’re making real progress getting that out. We declared ZTE a danger to American national security. We’ve done all these things.”

In the meantime, India—which had a trade deficit of nearly \$50 billion with China in 2019-2020—began taking other, non-military, steps against China. The ban on apps was just the latest. A few months ago, India had tightened the norms for allowing Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) from China. In recent weeks, imports from China—on which India is heavily dependent, from vital areas like pharmaceuticals to key infrastructure projects—have been put on hold. Various state governments have responded with alacrity on the issue.

And the world has noticed India’s resolve.

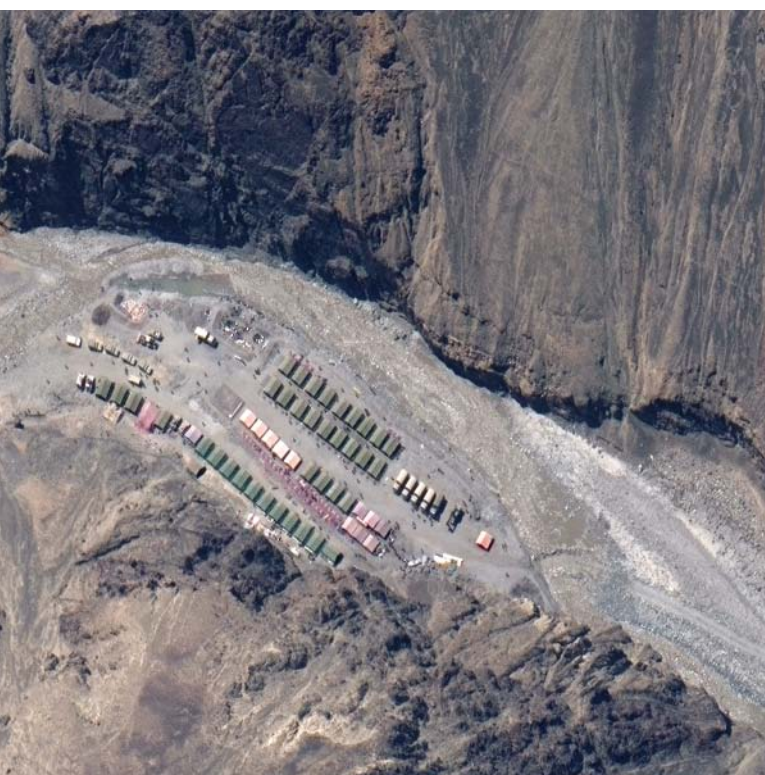
Two days after the incident at Galwan, the US issued a fairly



REUTERS

low-key statement that noted the deaths of Indian soldiers and expressed condolences to their families. The statement also said that “we are closely monitoring the situation between India and Chinese forces along the Line of Actual Control...we support a peaceful resolution of the current situation.” This was seized upon by domestic critics assaying that the US only offers lip service to India. What was left unsaid was the conversation between Pompeo and Minister of External Affairs S Jaishankar in the days after the incident. India was not only offered words of comfort but also given vital intelligence on Chinese troop dispositions across the LAC, something that would be of immense value in

A satellite image of the PLA's base in the Galwan Valley, May 22



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case the LAC ‘flared up’. During this period, Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne issued a statement and earlier this month, Japan’s Ambassador Satoshi Suzuki said that “Japan also hopes for peaceful resolution through dialogues. Japan opposes any unilateral attempts to change the status quo.”

Thereafter, the US has also deployed two aircraft carriers in the South China Sea. White House Chief of Staff Mark Meadows said on July 6th that “the message is clear. We’re not going to stand by and let China or anyone else take the reins in terms of being the most powerful, dominant force, whether it is in that region or over here.” He added: “And the message is clear. Our military might stands strong and will continue to stand strong, whether it is in relationship to a conflict between India and China

or anywhere else.”

The Chinese released their own readout of the conversation between Doval and Wang Yi. Somewhere in the Chinese text was a line that said: ‘Both sides should adhere to the strategic assessment that instead of posing threats, the two countries provide each other with development opportunities.’

It was revealing in many ways and a tacit admission of China’s error in understanding India’s reaction to the events in Eastern Ladakh. The phrase ‘adhere to strategic assessment’ is as good as saying India should continue plodding the old path, one that Modi ruled out in his speech at Nimu and in India’s actions in the last one month.

India’s relations with China have been adversarial even at



Manmohan Singh at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing, January 15, 2008

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In January 2008, speaking at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing, then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had said that the independence of India's foreign policy allowed the country to pursue the path of 'mutually beneficial cooperation' with all the major countries of the world. Speaking in Beijing in May 2010, Jairam Ramesh, then environment minister, maintained India was 'overly defensive and alarmist' over Chinese investments



the best of times: the huge bilateral trade—which, it was hoped, would bridge the political, diplomatic and military frictions—did not overcome the legacy of 1962. With the unwarranted action at Galwan and threats in Sikkim, territories that were considered settled, matters have just gone south. It is unlikely India will go back to the belief that trade can overcome mistrust. But that chapter, which has a history of its own, is now over.

There are lessons for India from the latest crisis along the LAC. First and foremost, with China, it is important to hold one's nerve in situations where it has transgressed the LAC. In the past, when India has refused to budge, it has usually managed to keep China at bay. The exemplar here is the Sumdorong Chu incident of 1986 that has eerie echoes of what has happened in Eastern Ladakh. In June that year, Chinese troops crossed the LAC in the Tawang district of Arunachal Pradesh in the Sumdorong Chu Valley—named after a rivulet in that area. Soon, New Delhi lodged a strong protest with Beijing and the latter in turn denied having crossed the LAC. Within no time, China had amassed 20,000 troops in the region. At a distance in the rear, it had close to eight divisions. This was over and above the two threats issued by Deng Xiaoping, China's paramount leader, that India would be taught a lesson. That did not deter India. Even before the tensions raged up later in 1986, 50,000-odd troops had been moved in the Zimithang area of Tawang district, a point near the contentious area. Later, another 10 divisions of the Indian army were kept ready in the Northeast region.

Then, as now, trouble arose because India decided to build military infrastructure on its side of the LAC. In the 1970s, the country did not have the capacity to build and maintain even basic infrastructure like hutments for posts in forward areas. By the early 1980s, the situation had improved to an extent and, in 1984, India had a permanent post in the area manned by paramilitary personnel. The post would be vacated in winter. In 1986, when a patrolling party returned, they found the area in Chinese hands. Again, this is something that has been observed multiple times in India's military history since Independence.

The moral of the story is clear: the more you accede to China's requests in such situations, the more it bends you, nibbling away at your territory. This does not mean one should rush to war with China; but it certainly means one should be prepared for war in case certain redlines are crossed. Wars are economically ruinous and draining in many other ways but if territory is not defended, there is pretty much nothing left to defend. The good thing is that China understands this. What is required is resolve. India displayed that in ample measure during the Doklam crisis in 2017—an event no less complex than the present crisis—when the territory involved belonged to a third country, Bhutan, but one that was of vital importance to India's own territorial integrity. Eastern Ladakh marks a continuation in India's resolve to confront China's aggression, however difficult the circumstances may be. ■



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Prisoners *of the* PRINCE

Look who's killing the Congress

By PR RAMESH

IN A RECENT EPISODE of the talkshow *The Rubin Report*, hosted by Dave Rubin, historian Niall Ferguson talked about what his eight-year-old son Thomas had to say about 2020. “There are two pandemics this year—Covid and another equally contagious Wokid.” The teenager was talking about a certain trend, the highlight of which is extreme, if not excessive, focus on issues not quite relevant to a particular situation.

It appears that Rahul Gandhi, former president of the Congress, is also preoccupied with such fashionable notions of the liberal world. The flip side, though, is that he and his team of advisers are holding the Grand Old Party hostage and pushing it on a slippery slope towards oblivion, accelerating a process that had begun in the 1980s, especially after the assassination of Indira Gandhi that saw Rajiv Gandhi holding its reins and losing the grip on the people.

Reversing the diminishing fortunes of the party seems to be the last thing on Rahul Gandhi's agenda. The confirmation of that came at the Congress Working Committee (CWC) meeting held on June 23rd, with



China baring its fangs along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Ladakh. It was a time when political leaders of all hues were expected to back the government of the day. The Congress had already been part of a multi-party video conference called by Prime Minister Narendra Modi where he had said that there was no intrusion by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in any Indian territory on June 15th, when 20 Indian soldiers had died at the hands of the Chinese. At the meeting, the head of the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) and senior ally in the Maha Vikas Aghadi government in Maharashtra, Sharad Pawar, stated firmly that this was not a time to make political capital and that he was firmly with the Government. Even West Bengal Chief Minister and head of the Trinamool Congress, Mamata Banerjee, who has no love lost for the Modi Government, threw her weight behind the Centre, asserting that questions and clarifications should be reserved for later.

The Nehru-Gandhi family at the head of the Congress was isolated as the sole political entity which, wording itself carefully, avowed full support to the Indian armed forces but not to the Government, which it held guilty of mismanaging the situation with China. The first family of the Congress was most miffed with the Bahujan Samaj Party's (BSP) Mayawati, who supported the Government despite expectations that she would stand with the family. The ire was evident in party general secretary Priyanka Gandhi Vadra's tweet that dubbed the BSP, without naming it, a mouthpiece of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

At that the CWC meeting, though, it was clear that not all the party's leaders agreed with Rahul Gandhi's aggressive posturing towards the Union Government. Neither did his sister Priyanka Gandhi's reiteration of her brother's mid-2019 claim that he was fighting a lone battle against Modi enthuse the party leaders present. For her part, Sonia Gandhi called for "mature diplomacy and decisive leadership" from the Modi Government, contending that there was a "growing feeling among people that the government had gravely mishandled the situation." That too could not cheer many of the leaders present at the high-level Congress meeting.

Despite the party's first family sticking to Rahul Gandhi's apparently preposterous position, including his "Surrender Modi" remark, younger leaders such as RPN Singh suggested that the Prime Minister's wrong policies should be attacked, and not him personally. Older leaders such as Anand Sharma, unwilling to be knocked off the 'loyalist' power pedestal, piped up to state that they had taken on the Prime Minister, the head of the Government, whenever necessary. Reflecting the discordant notes within, the party released Rahul Gandhi's statement on the issue separately, apart from a CWC resolution. The latter chose a more moderate line expressing 'unwavering solidarity' with the armed forces and assuring support to the Government for 'steps taken to safeguard national security and India's territorial integrity'.

Clearly suggesting that he was not in a mood to accommodate the views of his own party leaders, Rahul Gandhi's statement blamed Modi directly for what the Congress leaders described as a "failed" foreign policy that had disturbed traditional relationships with neighbours and attacked his remark denying any intrusion

into Indian territory. "The established institutional structure of diplomacy has been demolished by the PM," it said. Political analysts view such dictatorial tendencies, at a time when the party is facing its biggest challenge yet for survival, to be suicidal moves guided merely by egoism. "More internal democracy would mean that other Congress leaders would also feel that they too have a say in the party. Authoritarian instincts will alienate leaders, especially the young who want to revive the party as well as the old who are more pragmatic," says a person close to the matter.

Evidently, the family, and Rahul Gandhi in particular, has not allowed facts to come in the way of their statements on the faceoff. The Galwan River Valley was the flashpoint of the 1962 war when Gorkha troops set up a post in the upper reaches as part of New Delhi's Forward Policy in response to China constructing a road between Xinjiang and Tibet without India's consent as early as 1957. Colonel Rajinder Singh, a China expert, states that Patrol

Rahul and
Sonia Gandhi



Point 14 (PP-14) is the only area at the mouth of the Galwan valley that is now controlled by India: "The significance of this PP-14 is that it screens Chinese movement at the confluence of the Shyok and Galwan rivers. India has recently built a bridge over this confluence. Besides, a link road to PP-14 is being constructed from this bridge on the Darbuk-Shyok-Daulat Beg Oldie (DSDBO) Road, which is probably the bone of contention. It must be noted that LAC/ border with China is not marked. The Galwan Valley has been on the eastern side of the LAC, which is under Chinese control. And this has been the case for the last 58 years. Most of the Galwan Valley was lost during the Prime Ministership of Jawaharlal Nehru. And it has been status quo since then."

Modi was then stating the factual position at the all-party meeting. Reports after the violent scuffle said that a minimum of 18 PLA soldiers' were killed. 'It also turned out that Lt Col Maninder Nagpal, Capt Arjun Deshpande, Capt Manangma of 16 Bihar

The Gandhi family was isolated as the sole political entity that avowed full support to the armed forces but not to the Government, which it held guilty of mismanaging the situation with China. The family was most miffed with Mayawati, who supported the Government



REUTERS

Rahul Gandhi with farmers from Tamil Nadu protesting at Jantar Mantar in New Delhi, March 31, 2017



GETTY IMAGES

Rahul Gandhi has failed to connect with the young voter by projecting a new and bold political and ideological vision, despite the clever photo-ops of him interacting with ordinary citizens and distressed workers

Regiment were most daring in avenging the death of their commanding officer Col Santosh Babu. Another soldier of Artillery regiment, Sepoy Surinder Singh, is stated to have killed 10 PLA Soldiers with a sword. He too got wounded in the head and is convalescing at Leh,' Rajinder Singh wrote in a recent article.

Notwithstanding the historical flaws of Congress rule, and the new disclosures of the standoff along the LAC in eastern Ladakh, Rahul Gandhi seems to have chosen to run with the views of his three advisers—former National Security Advisor Shiv Shankar Menon, blamed by the Congress establishment itself for the 2009 Sharm el-Sheikh fiasco when India and Pakistan agreed to delink terrorism from bilateral talks and Delhi also allegedly conceded on Islamabad's claims on Indian subversive activities in Balochistan; Lieutenant General (retired) HS Panag, who was removed as chief of Northern Command by the Congress-led Government when AK Antony was Defence Minister; and Lieutenant General (retired) Prakash Menon, known more for his intemperate assertions against the Prime Minister on social media platforms and calling for the latter's trial for treason. Many Congress leaders view Gandhi's stand, at this juncture especially, as both politically and personally counter-productive. More so, since Modi's approval rating has not eroded in the course of the developments along the LAC. If anything, ordinary citizens look up to Modi to stand up to China and make it pay.

Rahul Gandhi's personal attacks on Modi are seen as avoidable and also as a repeat of the disastrous "*Chowkidar chor hai*" sloganeering of the last General Election that could boomerang once again on the Congress. Rahul Gandhi, however, chose to paint himself once again as the lone rider hero, backed fully by his sis-

ter and mother, to ensure that his unquestioning loyalists came out openly and commanded full obedience. The older grandees, irrespective of whether or not they backed his view, could not have gone against the family's wishes as their politics has all been about ingratiating themselves with it.

As political observers state, the two-hour-long CWC meeting provided an unvarnished picture of the Congress transforming itself primarily into the political tool of a family that no longer values even perfunctory inner-party dialogue and debate.

Rahul Gandhi has refused to budge from his line although his own party members admit that uncivil attacks and undignified barbs at the Prime Minister will work to the party's disadvantage. Many believe that the party's positions on the Pulwama tragedy that took the lives of several security force personnel and the retaliatory Balakot airstrike inside Pakistani territory, which the Modi Government launched, have been suicidal. While Congress leader Randeep Singh Surjewala attacked the Government for "politicising" the Pulwama tragedy in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections that followed, the party leadership demanded proof in public of the Balakot airstrike. Neither position went down well with the public, as Modi's resounding victory and return to power proved.

Many Congress leaders are wary of Rahul Gandhi persisting with old tactics. Unhappy with the affairs of the party, they have been confiding in others in the opposition and even in friends on the ruling benches, but no one seems to have the stamina to take on the family yet. In any case, seniors in the party have no political real estate of their own and completely depend on the family for their command over what they have. They have for long been held hostage to the dynasty and are prisoners to the prince's petulance.



Photo RAHUL RAVI

DESPITE ITS STEADY political decline, the Congress in the past has taken the utmost care to retain its centrist political position. But Rahul Gandhi has consistently cast the Congress in a Bernie Sanders kind of leftist mould by taking extreme stands on issues. He has gone in directions and traversed distances the party had avoided so far. Sanders, it is to be recalled, is no longer running for president and has apparently wound up his campaign which took a decisive turn after his aggressive calls for heavy taxation of America's wealth creators even when demanding a significant hike in blue-collar wages and cancellation of student loan dues, linked to universal higher education as evidenced in some Scandinavian countries. He also attacked childhood hunger in the US as a direct result of rapacious retailers selling food that leads to malnutrition. Also perceived as controversial was his unalloyed backing to the likes of Representatives Ilhan Omar, Rashida Tlaib and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, despite some of their statements being viewed as anti-American. The friction between Hillary Clinton and Sanders in the run-up to the Democrats backing the more moderate and far more acceptable Joe Biden as the official candidate for the presidential election forced Sanders to finally call off his campaign. As columnist Michelle Malkin noted: 'In Sanders' world, it's the "greedy"—America's real makers, builders and wealth creators—who must be punished and shamed...In Sanders' bubble, childhood hunger is the fault of selfish consumers, self-serving entrepreneurs and rapacious retailers who engage in voluntary transactions in a free-market economy.'

Rahul Gandhi's economics suffers from the same flaw as his politics: cheap populism. He doesn't seem to realise that the coun-

try—with rising aspirations and a progressively younger demography—has moved on. People now believe in being taught to fish and not being handed the fish. But Gandhi continues to press ahead with new versions of what the Congress believes was the killer blow in the 2004 General Election. This time, it is about universal basic income or UBI; and to generate intellectual backing for it, he has lined up a group of yesterday's public policy experts—some of whom have now come out of the ideological closet and admitted to their political predilections.

The latest project appears as illogical as Rahul Gandhi's previous idea of a single rate for the Goods and Services Tax (GST)—cooking salt and a Mercedes Benz would carry the same tax rate, apparently! Now, his firm conviction about providing everyone with a basic income would empty the already depleted exchequer. "Time that Rahulnomics woke up and smelled the coffee," says a Congress leader.

Rahul Gandhi has been taking what would appear to be extreme leftist positions, more than those of the extreme Left itself. He gave dramatic evidence of this when he rushed to support the 'tukde tukde' brand of politics at Jawaharlal Nehru

University. The student gathering there saw seditious slogans being raised against India and in support of the hanged militant Afzal Guru. It was a theatre that showcased a mindset thumbing its nose at India's unity. Among the slogans reportedly raised were the following: "*Bharat ki barbaadi tak, jung rahegi*", as well as "*Tum kitne Afzal maroge, ghar ghar se Afzal niklenge*" and "*Kashmir ki azaadi tak, jung rahegi, jung rahegi*".

These slogans echoed within the university grounds, with even elected student-body leaders overtly participating. And the gold-standard slogan for all India-hating mindscapes, "*Pakistan zindabad*", too, was raised on the JNU campus. None of this appeared to have upset Rahul Gandhi in the least.

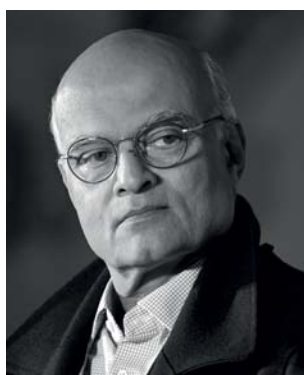
Rahul Gandhi's political positions have been pushing traditional Congress leaders into an acute discomfort zone. Worse, despite his contrived outreach to the downtrodden, the Congress has failed to gain any substantial ground pan-India and appears to be losing its hold further. Increasingly and irrevocably, it is becoming a Catch-22 for the party. The voter that traditionally supported the party has moved to the camp of its chief rival, as have several of its regional and national leaders, in pursuit of political survival and in consonance with changing times. The planks that it once considered its own—social justice, welfare and so on—are no longer so.

For the family to extricate the party out of this political quagmire is no easy matter, especially because India has transformed in the post-liberalisation era, slowly but decisively. For a fast-growing aspirational middle class, new wealth creators, start-ups providing unheard of opportunities for entrepreneurs, etcetera, the Congress is no longer seen as the vehicle to address their concerns.

It is a new India where the youth are self-confident and

Rahul Gandhi seems to have chosen to run with the views of his three advisers—former NSA Shiv Shankar Menon, blamed by the Congress establishment itself for the 2009 Sharm el-Sheikh fiasco; Lieutenant General (retired) HS Panag, who was removed as chief of Northern Command by the Congress; and Lieutenant General (retired) Prakash Menon, known more for his intemperate assertions against the Prime Minister on social media

(L-R) Shiv Shankar Menon, Harcharanjit Singh Panag and Prakash Menon



dominate the political and economic discourse. It is an India breaking its traditional political '*mai baap*' mentality in which dynastic and entitlement politics is perceived only through the prism of achievements tested on the ground. An India that is rapidly rejecting dynasty as a political enabler. Rahul Gandhi has failed to connect with the young voter by projecting a brand new and bold political and ideological vision for a new nation. All this, despite the clever photo-ops of the prince of the Congress interacting with ordinary citizens and distressed migrant workers on their way back home on foot. Besides, Priyanka Gandhi's desperate attempts to make political capital of bussing migrant workers back to their home villages in Uttar Pradesh, too, cut no ice with the locals.

The last real rebound for the Congress was in 1980. Although Indira Gandhi committed excesses, imposed Emergency, trampled on individual liberty, gagged the media and jailed opponents, there was no dramatic erosion in her support base. The Janata Party could not stay together and Charan Singh's routine assertions of a Nuremberg-kind of trial for Indira Gandhi apparently denuded the Shah Commission of all its legitimacy. Despite several odds, Indira Gandhi could bounce back. But post-1980, the decline of the Congress gathered momentum. Of course, it bucked the trend when the party won the Lok Sabha elections after her assassination. But ever since, it has been up against leaders more popular, with political planks more appealing. Social dynamics have changed drastically since. Muslims, once the Congress' traditional voters, no longer feel obligated to support the party. The appeal of Um-

mah now has more pull for the community that 'secularism'.

At the same time, the majority community has become more Hindu-ised. This is no longer Nehru's India where tradition was looked down upon in consonance with the West's perceptions of India as a regressive nation of rope tricks and snake charmers. Although a Hindu vote bank remains a tough proposition, there has been a consolidation

of the community on politico-religious lines.

A huge burden for the Congress is its previous role as a custodian of knowledge that promoted ideological dominance in the humanities and related disciplines. This was an era when leftists and Left-leaning people were placed in academia, especially in historical research. With the arrival of Narendra Modi at the Centre, however, the grip of leftists across campuses, cultural institutions, science bodies, and even in space-related research, has loosened and given way to multiple and differing voices and viewpoints. For instance, leftist icons like Romila Thapar and Irfan Habib have been taken down from their pedestal.

It is against this backdrop that Rahul Gandhi is apparently sulking for being cheated out of political victory—disinherited from what should have been his family's rightful entitlement. Most galling of all may be that the challenge is from a natural-born leader, a man without a family heritage in politics, who secured a massive mandate for his party on the strength of his own name. A man whose personal popularity nationwide refuses to slide despite every effort to trigger this, inasmuch as the popularity of the lawmaker from Wayanad refuses to go up.

But can Congress leaders help the party come out of the black hole its own prince has pushed it into? Not unless they gather the courage to speak truth to power and think beyond their invested political fiefdoms under the aegis of the party's first family, and to prioritise the future of the party, its reinvention in keeping with the times, even its political survival.

There is scant evidence that such an effort is on the cards. ■

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EDUCATION

THE FUTURE OF

Education in India is finally catching up with the digital

By V SHOBA and ULLEKH NP



LEARNING

revolution in the wake of Covid-19



SENIOR MARKETING PROFESSIONAL Sajeew Chemmany's LinkedIn profile says he is a student for life. An alumnus of University of California, Los Angeles' Anderson School of Management, he has been attending classes on Coursera and other online education platforms to keep himself updated and gain an edge at work. A self-made man who started his career in India as a video editor and TV producer and later helped launch several TV channels overseas, Chemmany has about 20 online courses under his belt. He is pursuing another, on marketing, from Hyderabad's Indian School Business (ISB), sponsored by Google. More and more Indian executives are now upgrading their skills through digital courses offered by both foreign and Indian players. As they face the realities of a new economy, perhaps even a new way of life, remote working and a lockdown have further inspired them to look for such courses to enhance their careers. Some of the certifications from once-obscure Indian startups that Chemmany picked up years ago are now quite valuable. "For education buffs, the lockdown has been a blessing in disguise," says Chemmany. "For educational institutions, it is, in fact, a road to redemption."

Indeed, as the Covid-19 threat continues to gnaw at semesters on end, gutting university finances and enrolments, pushing up campus costs and forcing educators to face existential terror, the solution to the crisis seems to present itself on our luminous screens: the rich, variegated terrain of online learning, populated by unicorns and decacorns that promise to help children with their curriculum and

keep them busy with experiential learning modules, employees re-skill in a drastically changed world, teach high schoolers maths and coding, and to enable institutions assess learners and manage e-classrooms. Online educators have cast their net far and wide, targeting schools of fish on their way to new feeding grounds. A whole industry is getting built as an older one crumbles under its own weight, with the pandemic triggering the seismic shift. "Most Indian management institutes will shut shop in the next five years," prophesies Krishna Kumar, CEO and founder of Simplilearn, one of the largest digital skills training and certification platforms in India. In the past year, many American institutions, including Universities of Missouri, Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and Iowa and, most recently, Purdue University's Krannert School of Business have hit pause on their full-time residential MBA programmes, shifting focus to online courses and speciality masters programmes. In India, too, management and engineering colleges are working on transitioning to a hybrid or fully online model even as they struggle to pay their staff at a time when the University Grants Commission has instructed them not to collect fees for the upcoming semester. In a letter to the Prime Minister earlier this month, the Association of Technical Polytechnics in Tamil Nadu sought a financial relief of Rs 50,000 crore for 50 lakh students pursuing engineering, technology, hotel management, pharmacy and management, noting that the fee-paying capacity of students enrolled in 39,931 colleges and 10,725 standalone higher education

Illustration by
SAURABH SINGH

institutions was deeply affected due to the Covid-19 crisis. "We are at a crossroads where we must look at doubling student intake and reducing fees to half the current levels by going online. But only the top 20 per cent of the institutions in the country are ready to switch to this mode right away," says Chocko Valliappa, Vice Chairman, Sona College of Technology, Salem, Tamil Nadu, and CEO and founder of HireMee, a startup focused on assessing graduating college students and connecting them to potential recruiters. HireMee has launched an artificial intelligence-enabled proctored testing solution for colleges at a time when institutions are seriously considering a transition to online assessment. The Graduate Management Aptitude Test (GMAT) was one of the first AI-proctored exams to be conducted at a global level in April 2020. In India, private universities like Shiv Nadar University and OP Jindal Global University have switched to online entrance exams, tying up with testing partners like Pearson VUE and Mercer-Mettl. Pearson is working on a solution that will enable tests to be taken on mobile phones and tablets.

While middle-rung colleges and garden-variety coaching institutes may not survive this largescale migration, remote learning content companies and enablers have galloped faster than they could have ever imagined. Simplilearn saw the number of learners attending online sessions double to 85,000 in May from 43,000 in January. Self-learning video consumption shot up by 105 per cent in the same period and the company saw a 30 per cent increase in enrolments just between March and April. While there were more enquiries from India, the US accounted for much of the surge in enrolments. "The most popular courses are from the data science and AI categories, followed by cloud computing and cybersecurity," says Krishna Kumar. Between March and May, the platform saw 1.1 lakh people attend its data science courses. "We live in an age when content is free. If you want to learn a simple skill like, say, Excel programming, you simply search YouTube," says Kumar, who founded Simplilearn a decade ago in Bengaluru. "To acquire deep knowledge

in a specific domain like data security or machine learning, you need a structured learning programme designed by subject matter experts and recognised by industry." The company, whose courses are conducted by industry experts rather than full-time tutors, expects revenues to grow 60 per cent this year.

The education technology (edtech) market in India is worth \$735 million—a mere drop in the \$90-billion largely offline private education ocean—and it is expected to swell to \$1.7 billion by the end of 2020, according to a recent report by Omidyar Network India and RedSeer Consulting. There are over 9 crore people already accessing education apps in India. According to Venture Intelligence, venture capital companies invested \$785 million in edtech in the past six months—nearly twice as much as they invested in 2019. And yet, online education is far from being a crowded space, says Krishna Kumar. "Look at the number of physical universities and colleges in the country. The online industry is only just getting built up and we need more educators and content to cater to everyone. The potential target market for upskilling is the entire LinkedIn user base," Kumar says.

IF LEARNING IS AN AFFECTIVE choice for working adults, it is a basic need for students. Now completely dependent on online classes to make sense of their curriculum, students are spending more time on apps like Byju's, the brand name for the online tutoring company Think and Learn. According to a report by the Broadcast Audience Research Council India and Nielsen, the lockdown led to a 30 per cent increase in the time Indians spent on education apps.

"Since the closure of schools in India, we made all the content on our learning app completely free for students across all grades. We also introduced live classes to bring scheduled engagement to students' everyday learning routine. And we accelerated the launch of our live classes and made them available for free in April," says Byju Raveendran, founder and CEO of India's most valued edtech company at

over \$10 billion, making it one of India's few decacorns. While the launch was scheduled for a later date in 2020, the company realised the value of adding this new mode of learning during the lockdown. "Students can now attend three to four regular sessions of live classes per week, apart from learning from the free content on our app."

As a result of the lockdown, says Raveendran, students now use the Byju's platform daily and spend an average of 100 minutes per day. "We saw 6 million new students use our app in the month of March and 7.5 million new students in the month of April," he adds. "This shows that digital learning tools have the potential to offer a holistic home learning experience. We have also seen a big behavioural shift in parents' mindset towards learning online as they have witnessed their kids benefiting from it in real time and we strongly believe that this will benefit us and the whole industry in the long run."

The Covid-19 crisis has caused a paradigm shift in the field of education, making online learning mainstream. Recent investments in edtech by telcos including Bharti Airtel, which has acquired a stake in Lattu Kids, and conventional education companies like Aakash Educational Services ramping up their digital footprint are cases in point. "On the other side of the crisis, we expect the rise of a blended model of education," says Raveendran. "The proliferation of smart devices coupled with the democratisation of the internet will hasten this process. As screens are the primary mode of content consumption for the new generation, this will further boost the adoption of the new model of learning."

The coronavirus has disrupted the job market, too, with Indian companies freezing hiring despite having vast cash reserves, Krishna Kumar says. "A lot of jobs were already getting axed due to automation and the crisis has accelerated the trend. Indian companies who were overstaffing and thinking in terms of the number of billable people per project will now be forced to be agile, productive and tech-driven. Skills and outcomes matter now, more than ever." A Java developer, for instance, would now be looking to



GETTY IMAGES



“PARENTS AND TEACHERS HAVE UNTIL NOW BEEN APPREHENSIVE ABOUT STUDENTS LEARNING FROM SCREENS. THIS SCENARIO IS HOWEVER CHANGING RAPIDLY, WITH A BIG BEHAVIOURAL SHIFT. PARENTS ARE NOW ABLE TO SEE HOW THEIR CHILDREN ARE BENEFITING THROUGH ONLINE LEARNING AND ARE BECOMING MORE ACCEPTING OF THE FORMAT. TEACHERS, WHO WERE HESITANT TO USE ONLINE LEARNING TOOLS, ARE NOW STEADILY ADAPTING AND BECOMING DIGITALLY EMPOWERED”

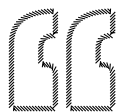
BYJU RAVEENDRAN, founder of Byju's

learn Angular, a framework used to build web applications. Recognising the need for digital skills training, Microsoft has announced a multi-million-dollar initiative to provide free access to content across LinkedIn Learning, Microsoft Learn and GitHub Learning Lab, coupling these with Microsoft Certifications and LinkedIn job-seeking tools. To companies like Simplilearn, which has trained over a million professionals—40 per cent of them paid

users—the opportunity is massive.

Among the beneficiaries of the e-skilling trend is Aashish Kumar, a 26-year-old from Sheikhpura, Bihar, who landed an opportunity thanks to a coding course he came across while perusing *Naukri.com* for fresh opportunities. A mechanical engineer who started his career as an AutoCAD designer in Chennai for Rs 8,000 a month, Kumar worked for a year in Silvassa as a maintenance supervisor and at a software

company in Vadodara where he picked up the basics of internet analytics and search engine optimisation. The pay was abysmal and he was looking for a way to transition to software programming. Masai School's 24-week full-stack development bootcamp, which he graduated from in April, seemed a sensible option. The country was under lockdown and the IT and IT-enabled services industry had all but frozen hiring. But Masai School, although only three



“WE DON’T BELIEVE IN CERTIFICATES AND DEGREES. A RELEVANT SKILL SET IS THE FUTURE OF THE WORKFORCE. IN SEVEN MONTHS AT MASAI, OUR STUDENTS DO OVER 1,000 HOURS OF CODING—THAT IS AS GOOD AS TWO YEARS OF EXPERIENCE OR MORE”

PRATEEK SHUKLA, cofounder of Masai School



(L-R) Masai School founders Nrupul Dev, Prateek Shukla and Yogesh Bhat

batches old, already had a reputation for grooming tech talent that was ready to start coding from day one. It had trained college dropouts who went on to get hired by Paytm, Sharechat and other software product companies. About 70 per cent of the batch that graduated in April, including Kumar, has already found suitable positions in companies that have adapted to remote onboarding. Kumar, for instance, works on a 4G network from his home in Bihar, developing software for Vyapar, which builds business apps for small companies. “We don’t believe in certificates and

degrees. A relevant skill set is the future of the workforce. In seven months at Masai, our students do over 1,000 hours of coding—that is as good as two years of experience or more,” says Prateek Shukla, CEO and co-founder, Masai School. Every batch of 75-100 students, chosen only on the basis of their zeal to learn, follows a 9am-9pm schedule where they login to classes and complete assignments online. The course follows a blended learning model—with highly curated and intensive online instruction supplemented by face-to-face mentorship and interaction with peers at

co-working spaces. The company is moving project submissions, doubt clearance and other engagements, which happened over GitHub and Slack, to an integrated in-house student dashboard. “Sixty-five per cent of our students come from financially weaker sections of society. Some don’t have laptops, in which case we or our partner companies sponsor them. Creating a space where they can work, eat and relax, much like in an office environment, was important to us and we will continue to keep these campuses, shut since the lockdown, alive, ensuring hygiene and distancing protocols. We’d like students from the same geographical circle to meet up once a month,” Shukla says. With three ongoing batches and three more about to commence, Masai School is looking to double staff to 28 from 14 instructors now within the next two quarters. It has also rolled out part-time courses in user interface design, data analytics and other new skills. The institute does not charge upfront tuition fees, instead following an innovative income-share programme, where you pay the fee from your future salary.

India’s learning curve can only be sustained by breaking the barriers to online education, says Hemesh Singh, co-founder and Chief Technology Officer, Unacademy. The country’s largest learning platform, Unacademy is a marketplace for tutorials by over 10,000 educators, with a focus on preparation for competitive exams. There is a reason Unacademy, currently valued at \$510 million, is touted to be the next edtech unicorn—and not only because it is reportedly looking to raise another \$150

million, barely four months after closing a \$110-million round led by Facebook and private equity firm General Atlantic. Unacademy's revenues grew tenfold in 2019. After the lockdown, engagement on the platform has touched new highs, crossing a billion watch minutes in March alone. It conducted over 1.2 lakh live classes in June alone. In the world of edtech, Unacademy is a rare platform that has democratised education on both fronts: content creation, by enabling educators to record videos on their phones and upload them through an app, as well as consumption. From free YouTube videos to premium courses that you can buy individually, the company pivoted to a 'Plus' subscription model last year, where users would pay a flat yearly fee, ranging from about Rs 1,500 for banking exams prep to Rs 3,000 for the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) exams. The cash-burn to reach a target of 10 lakh subscribers and \$250-300 million in annual recurring revenue (ARR)—Unacademy reported Rs 90 crore in losses in 2018-2019, up from Rs 24 crore the previous year—is beginning to pay off, with revenues rising to Rs 11.7 crore in 2019-2020 from Rs 1.76 crore in the previous year. 2020-2021 promises to be a special year; according to CEO Gaurav Munjal, the company's revenues in April were "more than all of 2017, 2018 and the first half of 2019 combined". Unacademy has ramped up to 1.3 crore learners across 30-plus categories and a dozen Indian languages and crossed 2 lakh paid subscribers. It is also on an acquisition spree to expand rapidly, with its latest bets, PrepLadder, a platform for postgraduate medical entrance exam preparation, and Mastree, a K-12 tutoring company, strengthening its presence in the test prep market.

On a Zoom call from the deserted Unacademy office in Bengaluru, Singh talks about the experiments the company has undertaken, including subscription modules for classes 9-12, a non-profit coding skills vertical under CodeChef and a new app for content creators called Graphy that is now in the beta stage. "We started as a YouTube channel for Union Public Service Commission test preparation in 2010 and we have since diversified into

banking and Railways exams and GATE and JEE prep. These will remain our core strength even as we continue to be in expansion mode," he says.

OFFERING CONTENT IN different languages is key to level the e-learning playing field, Singh says. Malayalam is one of the biggest language segments on the platform and Telugu is fast catching up. Kota-based coaching institute Nucleus Education, which recently became a partner for JEE Main and Advanced prep, uses Hindi as the primary mode of instruction. The Unacademy model works for several reasons, chief among those being that its top educators are influencers who then become evangelists for the brand. Mansoor Ali, a jailor in Kerala, is one of the most sought-after educators on Unacademy. He coaches aspirants of PSC exams in the state and is a popular figure on his own, but he tells *Open* that Unacademy makes it easier to reach a large number of students. "They give me a lot of respect and I am delighted to be a part of their operations. It is a fruitful association." Technology has indeed enabled, for the first time, the high-impact teaching practices of subject-matter experts like Ali and physics and JEE coaching specialist Balaji Sampath who runs the coaching platform Ahaguru to be scaled up.

Smartphones and tablets alone are not enough to democratise online education, Ali adds. Governments must launch TV channels dedicated to offering coaching for entrance tests and other competitive exams, says Ali, 32. The *Victors* TV channel in Kerala and the TSAT network of Telangana are models that can be replicated across India.

Inspiration is almost as important as the content itself, Singh says. While educators like Ali serve to inspire a select audience, popular achievers like actors and sports persons have an impact on a broad spectrum of students. When Virat Kohli and Anushka Sharma shared their personal challenges and journeys in a session under the 'Legends on Unacademy' series, over 50,000 logged in to view live. "When two self-made celebrities deliver



"WE HAVE TO WORK TOWARDS FINDING A BALANCE BETWEEN SCALABLE CONTENT DELIVERY AND BUILDING COMMUNITY AND PROMOTING HUMAN INTERACTION. WE ARE TRYING TO BRING SOME OF THE NUANCE AND THE SHARED EXPERIENCES THAT YOU GET AT A NEIGHBOURHOOD TUITION CLASS"

HEMESH SINGH,
cofounder of Unacademy

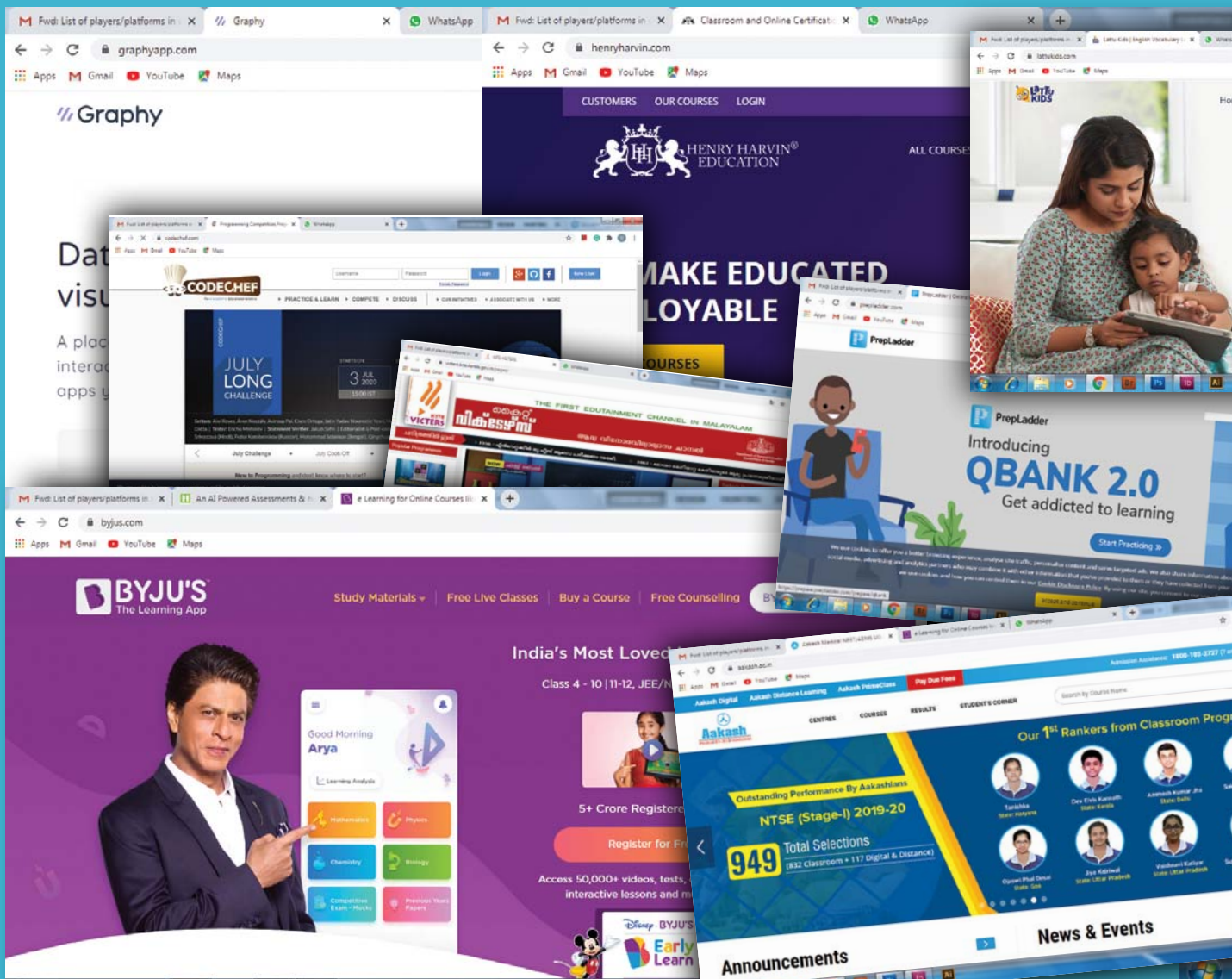
a guest lecture, it leaves a lasting impact. We hope to continue to bring inspiring personalities to the platform,” Singh says.

Learning is getting gamified across the industry, with platforms using daily goals, badges, leaderboards and collaborative activities to amp up user engagement. “It is about more than consuming content. We have to work towards finding a balance between scalable content delivery and building community and promoting human interaction,” says Singh. “We are trying to bring some of the nuance and

the shared experiences that you get at a neighbourhood tuition class by making assessments community-driven. For instance, a group of learners comes together to answer a quiz and competes for the top places on the leaderboard.” On the content creation side, Unacademy’s new app, Graphy, seeks to reimagine books. “Think of it as a series of videos and images that tell a story, like something you’d see in Instagram Stories but a longer narrative. And you could sell that the way you’d sell a book,” Singh says.

As edtech companies look for ways to quickly build market share and achieve virality, they are also trying to maintain a standard of trust. With heavy traffic comes the attendant need to shore up cyber security and to keep institutional data private. From Zoom bombing to students sharing inappropriate content and largescale data breaches, the edtech boom has thrown open a Pandora’s box. In January, when a cyber attack exposed at least 1.1 crore accounts on Unacademy—the details were sold on the dark

THE EDUCATION TECHNOLOGY MARKET IN INDIA IS WORTH **\$735 MILLION**—A MERE DROP OCEAN—AND IT IS EXPECTED TO SWELL TO **\$1.7 BILLION BY THE END OF 2020**. THERE ARE



web—the breach shook up the company and many of its users. “It should not have happened and it is a major cause for worry,” says Hemesh Singh. “We have since been working with the industry leaders in cybersecurity to rejig our infrastructure completely to make it difficult for anyone to gain unauthorised access to any part of it. We follow industry-standard encryption so that user passwords cannot be hacked. We are also building inhouse capabilities.” Unacademy has hired a chief information security officer to put

together a cyber security team.

A broadcast environment is not enough to hold the attention of younger learners, says Nandini Mullaji, Chief Strategy Officer at Lido Learning, a company that has reinvented the neighbourhood tuition class. Lido is a subscription service focused on maths and science—they have just rolled out English and coding—that bunches children into batches of six. “Relational pedagogy is our secret sauce. Since batching is done based on the mother tongue, English language fluency, geo-

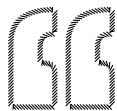
graphical region and general aptitude of the learning, they feel comfortable with learning together and from a teacher who understands them,” says Mullaji.

The company has seen interest from Gwalior, Lucknow, Indore and other tier-2 and tier-3 cities, driven by students rather than parents, says Mullaji. “The difference between the Indian and the Chinese edtech markets is that in India, it’s the students who go looking for solutions online. Parents in tier-2 and tier-3 towns are less tech-savvy.” Founded by Sahil Sheth, a former Vice President at Byju’s, Mumbai-based Lido Learning caters to Classes 5 to 8, offering curricular support in the form of intimate online classes. “In a country where the average classroom size is 55, the 1:6 [student-teacher] ratio makes all the difference,” says Mullaji. The platform has 5,000 paid subscribers. “Attendance used to average at 80 per cent before Covid-19, and it has now jumped to 90-92 per cent. For most kids, our classes are like hangouts with friends—especially when interaction with peers is what they miss the most.” Lido Learning has 700-800 tutors who each teach about 20 hours a week and lead three to five batches. The company has seen 25 per cent month-on-month growth since March.

WHILE THE LOCKDOWN has helped companies gain traction, much of it is thanks to free content. Henry Harvin, a skills-centric training startup founded by Narsee Monjee Institute of Management Studies alumnus Kounal Gupta in 2013, hopes that the unexpected rise in enrolment for its courses including data analytics and content writing will translate into brand recognition and an uptick in intake in the paid courses. “We had to rapidly expand the team to meet the demand. The growth in revenues since March has been 300-400 per cent,” says Gupta, whose platform offers niche programmes, including an MBA for teens called Mini MBA that focuses on leadership, team work, multi-tasking and other essential skills. The sharp rise in demand for such courses indicates that the online

IN THE \$90-BILLION LARGELY OFFLINE PRIVATE EDUCATION OVER 9 CRORE PEOPLE ALREADY ACCESSING EDUCATION APPS





“ONLINE EDUCATION IS NOT A CROWDED SPACE. LOOK AT THE NUMBER OF PHYSICAL UNIVERSITIES AND COLLEGES IN THE COUNTRY. THE ONLINE INDUSTRY IS ONLY JUST GETTING BUILT UP AND WE NEED MORE EDUCATORS AND CONTENT TO CATER TO EVERYONE. THE POTENTIAL TARGET MARKET FOR UPSKILLING IS THE ENTIRE LINKEDIN USER BASE”

KRISHNA KUMAR,
founder of Simplilearn

learning space won't go the e-commerce way where a handful of players alone will survive in the long run, Gupta says. The company, which also offers Six Sigma courses, is present in more than 23 cities countrywide and partners with over 50 colleges and universities.

Pioneers in what they call the “nichest of niche” segments, the Institute of Clinical Research India (ICRI), based in Delhi,



Krishna Kumar, CEO and founder, Simplilearn

with offices across India, was set up in 2004 to offer courses on clinical trials. Over time, it has won contracts to offer courses and training to the best hospitals and colleges in India and abroad. ICRI follows an asset-light model since it uses classrooms offered by its clients and online sessions. It has also expanded the courses on the menu after 33-year-old Sukriti Dugal, a lawyer by training, took over the business from her father. The company, which now offers courses in aviation and logistics management, besides others, has a lot in the pipeline, she says. “Because of Covid-19, there has been a lot of demand from hospitals to train their staff in clinical research and related courses,” she says. The company has a dedicated placement team to ensure students land jobs. Apart from masters courses related to public health and hospital management, the institute also offers a PhD in hospital and healthcare management in collaboration with Zee University and a diploma in aviation. Dugal says that although enrolment has seen a big spike, many are unwilling to spend because of the uncertain environment in the aftermath of the pandemic.

“The upward trend may not last and we may see some correction once the situation normalises but online learning is definitely here to stay because there has been a change in the mindset of students and parents as well,” says Gupta of Henry Harvin. “This kind of growth would have come in 2030 in the normal course of things.”

Speaking of the challenges ahead, Byju Raveendran adds, “Parents and teachers

have until now been apprehensive about students learning from screens. This scenario is however changing rapidly, with a big behavioural shift. Parents are now able to see how their children are benefiting through online learning and are becoming more accepting of the format. Teachers, who were hesitant to use online learning tools, are now steadily adapting and becoming digitally empowered.” While the digital divide is still a challenge, the inequities and disparities that exist in the physical world are a much bigger hurdle, he says. “Our best chance to solve this at scale is by using technology as an enabler, using smartphones as a distribution medium, so that high quality content is accessible to students across geographical locations.”

“Learning will never be the same again,” says Anant Agarwal, a professor and CEO of edX, a partnership between MIT and Harvard University that offers free online learning. An online education evangelist, Agarwal says online learning is the ultimate revolutioniser that will bridge the gap between classes and communities. Amid technology’s unstoppable march to democratise education, platforms such as Zoom, WhatsApp, Google Meet and Microsoft Teams that have supported the shift are sure to inspire a new wave of homegrown entrepreneurship in platforms and communication. With increasing collaborative engagement between edtech companies, academia, the state, policymakers and educators, it is hard to overstate the potential of this great migration to online education.” ■

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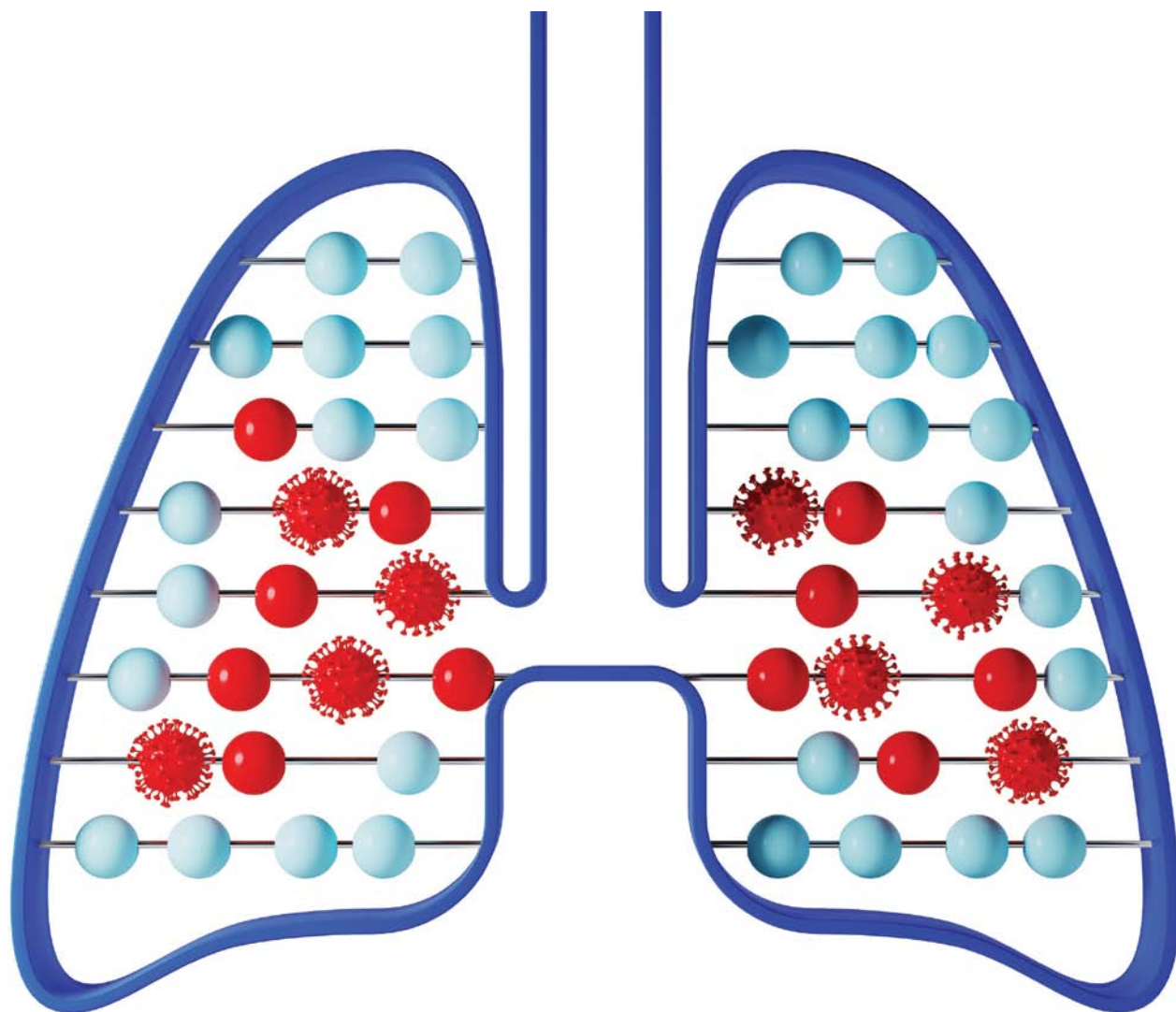


Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

A LUNGFUL OF LIFE

A PORTRAIT OF OXYGEN AS
BREATHING BECOMES HARDER
FOR THE WORLD

By MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI

It took some time for the medical profession to get to it but, when it did, the technique proved the easiest and cheapest to alleviate Covid symptoms—breathing could be improved by just turning the patient over to make him lie on his stomach. In a study published in *JAMA Internal Medicine* journal in June, 29 patients with severe respiratory distress were asked to lie as long as they could in the prone position. They measured the oxyhaemoglobin saturation (SpO₂), which indicated the level of oxygenation in the blood, before and after. All patients had SpO₂ less than 93 per cent when

admitted. For the first hour, nothing happened. But after that, oxygenation improved markedly for a majority of them. And fewer of those whose oxygen increased in this manner had to be put on ventilators. More survived. The paper said: ‘Mean difference in the intubation rate among patients with SpO₂ of 95% or greater vs SpO₂ less than 95% 1 hour after initiation of the prone position was 46%.’

Indian doctors were also doing it by then. An article by *New Indian Express* listed a number of hospitals using this technique. AIIMS Jodhpur, it said, was doing a study on it and also quoted Tamil Nadu Health Secretary J Radhakrishnan saying that government hospitals in Chennai had been following this. People infected by Covid had also begun proning at home. An engineer, who saw his entire family of eight struck by the virus, got through the ordeal by taking an analytical approach that included the technique. After they all got cured, he recounted the experience in a note to his friends on social media which said this: ‘We followed the below treatment plan: Sleeping on stomach for 4 hrs/day. This is one of the most significant steps, needed to improve O₂ levels. Whenever it goes < 90%, lying down for 30-min increases it almost by 10 points.’

Proning was not a discovery for Covid. Even earlier, it had been found to help patients with severe respiratory disorders. Its efficacy, even if yet to be confirmed in rigorous trials, points to a fundamental aspect about the novel coronavirus. Because it overwhelmingly targets the lungs, until a vaccine can kill the virus itself, a semblance of victory for humanity will depend on keeping the supply of what the lungs is designed to process and distribute—oxygen. As one of the country’s leading pulmonologist, Zarir Udawadia, in a co-written article in *The Indian Express* this month, while taking stock of the learnings so far when it came to Covid treatment, wrote: ‘Those with moderate symptoms will benefit from oxygen therapy, and “pronation,” which in plain English means lying on your belly, instead of your back. Doing so opens up the air chambers in the back of your lungs that are normally collapsed, thereby providing more oxygen to

your blood. Early evidence shows that this helps avert the need for more aggressive intervention in some cases.’

There is a lot of oxygen on earth and in man. The atmosphere is made up of 21 per cent of the gas. A little under 50 per cent of the earth’s crust is oxygen. Water is made up of a molecule that has two parts hydrogen and one part oxygen. Oceans, seas, rivers, lakes of the earth are thus one-third oxygen by volume but, by mass, because oxygen is so much heavier than hydrogen, it is between 80 to 90 per cent. The human body is made mostly of four elements and, by mass, oxygen is 65 per cent of us. For an element that was not a major player initially in the gameplan of the universe, it did an impressive turnaround in one small planet to become the centre of life. Born from stars and passed on to the rest of the universe, we are the only known planet with such quantities of oxygen. What makes it more extraordinary is that when the earth began, oxygen was almost non-existent. It is the most successful entrepreneur among the elements of nature on earth.

When oxygen began to first flourish on earth, it arrived as a destroyer. The earth was formed roughly 4.5 billion years ago.

THERE IS A LOT OF OXYGEN ON EARTH AND IN MAN. A LITTLE UNDER 50 PER CENT OF THE EARTH’S CRUST IS OXYGEN. BY MASS, OXYGEN IS 65 PER CENT OF THE HUMAN BODY. FOR AN ELEMENT THAT WAS NOT A MAJOR PLAYER INITIALLY IN THE GAMEPLAN OF THE UNIVERSE, IT DID AN IMPRESSIVE TURNAROUND IN ONE SMALL PLANET TO BECOME THE CENTRE OF LIFE

Life had taken its first faltering steps around half-a-billion years later with single-celled microorganisms and bacterial forms. When oxygen entered the picture, it wiped out a large part of them. It is known as the Great Oxidation event. The irony is that the thing that got oxygen’s rise on earth was also a bacteria, a type called cyanobacteria that we can even now see in blue-green algae. Cyanobacteria evolved—the hows and whys are still debated—into a form that spewed oxygen as a waste product, a process very familiar to all schoolchildren now as photosynthesis. Every plant in the world does it; gathering energy from the sun while taking in carbon dioxide and giving out oxygen. But when the cyanobacteria started doing it those billions of years ago, it was the first time such a thing had ever happened and it slowly upped the levels of oxygen in the air. Human beings on earth are a product of just waste matter.

In *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, Bill Bryson writes:

‘At some point in the first billion years of life, cyanobacteria, or blue-green algae, learned to tap into a freely available resource—the hydrogen that exists in spectacular abundance in water. They absorbed water molecules, supped on the hydrogen, and released the oxygen as waste, and in so doing invented photosynthesis. As Margulis and Sagan note, photosynthesis is “undoubtedly the most important single metabolic innovation in the history of life on the planet”—and it was invented not by plants but by bacteria. As cyanobacteria proliferated the world began to fill with O₂ to the consternation of those organisms that found it poisonous—which in those days was all of them. In an anaerobic (or a non-oxygen-using) world, oxygen is extremely poisonous. Our white cells actually use oxygen to kill invading bacteria. That oxygen is fundamentally toxic often comes as a surprise to those of us who find it so convivial to our well-being, but that is only because we have evolved to exploit it. To other things, it is a terror. It is what turns butter rancid and makes iron rust. Even we can tolerate it only up to a point.

The oxygen level in our cells is only about a tenth the level found in the atmosphere. The new oxygen-using organisms had two advantages. Oxygen was a more efficient way to produce energy, and it vanquished competitor organisms. Some retreated into the oozy, anaerobic world of bogs and lake bottoms. Others did likewise but then later (much later) migrated to the digestive tracts of beings like you and me. Quite a number of these primeval entities are alive inside your body right now, helping to digest your food, but abhorring even the tiniest hint of O₂. Untold numbers of others failed to adapt and died.’

Oxygen still remained too low in the atmosphere even after the Great Oxidation event for complex life to get moving. For about a billion years, called the Boring Billion, between 1,800 to 800 million years ago, the earth was in an uneventful state but then at the end of it, the equilibrium ended and as oxygen rose to present levels, complex cells became common and eventually evolved to animals and man.

Oxygen has multiple roles in the spectrum of earth. Add an

Medical workers help a Covid-19 patient breathe easy in the prone position at a hospital in Lisbon, Portugal



PHOTOS GETTY IMAGES

PRONING WAS NOT A DISCOVERY FOR COVID. EVEN EARLIER, IT HAD BEEN FOUND TO HELP PATIENTS WITH SEVERE RESPIRATORY DISORDERS. ITS EFFICACY, EVEN IF YET TO BE CONFIRMED IN RIGOROUS TRIALS, POINTS TO A FUNDAMENTAL ASPECT OF THE NOVEL CORONAVIRUS

atom and you have ozone, a form of oxygen in the stratosphere that protects life from the sun's ultraviolet rays. Inside the human body, lungs take in air, separate oxygen from it and through the blood feed it to cells for energy. Meanwhile, carbon dioxide is exchanged as waste to release it out of the body, reverse of the process by which cyanobacteria first created oxygen on earth. What was a waste byproduct is the food of life for those at the latest ends of evolution.

In the US-based UCSB Science Line, where scientists answer questions by students and teachers, there is one in their archive about what would happen if a virus and bacteria were both introduced into an environment of pure oxygen. The answer was that both would die but for different reasons. The bacteria would die because 'pure oxygen would poison any organism that depends on chemical reactions for life'. The virus would die because the bacteria dies. By itself, the answer said, the virus is the only organism that pure oxygen would not kill because it doesn't 'have all the chemical processes [metabolism] going on inside them that every other living organism does.' Viruses, according to one body of scientific thought, are not even alive until they infect the cell of a host. Without a bacteria the virus has no chance at life but from the killing power of oxygen itself, it is immune. With Covid, the relationship takes a different turn. The virus attacks and thickens the linings in the lungs. The body tries to fight it and inflammation often worsens the condition. Damaged air sacs can become damp with pneumonia. In all such cases, the end result is tied to the disruption of the channel that gets oxygen to blood and from there to the rest of the body. The virus is not concerned about oxygen at all in its bid for life but, as its aftereffect, the body is shorn of it.

This connection also has a commercial fallout in the spike in demand for oxygen products and the sudden efflorescence of the industry around it in recent months. In the beginning of the pandemic, ventilators were thought to be key to keeping severely affected people alive, but there was soon growing recognition that by the time the stage for intubation is reached, chances of survival are dim. The focus has shifted to early provision of oxygen cylinders and concentrators that make the gas from air continuously. Late last month, the World Health Organization warned of a shortage of concentrators. *Reuters* reported: 'The health agency has purchased 14,000 oxygen concentrators from manufacturers and plans to send them to 120 countries in coming weeks, Tedros [Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO director general] said. A further 170,000 concentrators—valued at some \$100 million—will be potentially available over the next six months.' It quoted Tedros saying at a news conference, 'Many countries are now experiencing difficulties obtaining oxygen concentrators. Demand is currently outstripping supply.'

Ordinary folks are also hoarding oxygen. A *Hindustan Times* article reporting on this said: '...many families are stocking up portable oxygen bottles as a precautionary measure. According



IN THE BEGINNING OF THE PANDEMIC, VENTILATORS WERE THOUGHT TO BE KEY TO KEEPING SEVERELY AFFECTED PEOPLE ALIVE. THE FOCUS HAS SHIFTED TO EARLY PROVISION OF OXYGEN CYLINDERS AND CONCENTRATORS THAT MAKE THE GAS FROM AIR CONTINUOUSLY

to the All Food and Drug Licence Holder Foundation [AFDLHF], the demand for oxygen cylinders and bottles in the past one month alone has gone up by 70%.' Online shopping sites are offering a wide variety of oxygen products from portable canisters to concentrators. One small instrument that has seen a huge upsurge in demand is the oximeter, which measures SpO2 or oxygen levels in the blood. In his *Indian Express* article, Dr Zarir Udhwadia has suggested that the Government could as a policy start distributing oximeters free to communities, so that Covid patients could remain at home and keep track of whether they need hospitalisation. Many are already buying these oximeters from a flurry of new vendors who have sprung up online. I, too, purchased one at a little under Rs 5,000, the price marked on the packet. While going through YouTube to understand its workings, I found one reviewer of pre-Covid times saying that he had bought it at Rs 1,500. The marked price even then had been the same but because of no demand, they were being sold at huge discounts. It was a little difficult to swallow that I had paid thrice what used to be the going rate but that was only till I remembered there is now a novel coronavirus occupying space along with oxygen in the air. ■

THE MEANING OF A MAN

The onscreen unravelling of traditional masculinity

By Kaveree Bamzai

IN Shaan Vyas' short film *Natkhat*, a child interrupts a conversation between his grandfather and father at the dining table. The father is complaining about a woman politician who is asking for a heftier cut than before. The son, all of five, offers the solution: 'Usey uthwalo [kidnap her].' There is stunned silence in the room, before the grandfather mutters how the child should be made to watch only the Ramayana and the Mahabharat from now on. But the child is only parroting what he has seen his classmates doing to a girl who dared to laugh at one of them—taking her into the forest by force, when she was returning home from school, and cutting off her plaits.

It's a searing comment on how little boys are socialised into ways of being a man, and for Vyas, who made his directorial debut, it is a powerful contribution to the unravelling, onscreen, of traditional masculinity.

In *Everything Is Fine*, directed by Mansi Jain and starring the majestic Seema Bhargava Pahwa, the husband's misogyny is so endemic that it seems almost invisible. It's not just the demand that the wife make tea for him, though both have

just undertaken a gruelling journey to see their daughter in her new rented home in Delhi, but in other not-so-subtle putdowns. Why does the wife need to go out and explore the city, why does she need to buy a pair of shoes, and why does she need to learn how to sign a cheque? When the mother weeps aloud her frustration to the daughter and tells her she doesn't want to return home, the daughter dismisses it: she's just tired, the daughter says, her father after all is not a bad man.

A series of other short films in the last few months have tried to decipher just what being a man means—especially so in relation to the modern woman. In Priyanka Banerjee's *Devi*, inspired by Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit*, a group of women wait to journey onwards. It is only later in the film that you realise they are souls trapped together in purgatory by the violence of what their men have done to them. Divided by caste, class and religion, they are united by the violence done to them, from rape to murder, from broken bottles to deadly rocks. Banerjee didn't want to show the perpetrators, only the women. "Everything else is left to the imagination in a world of Nirbhaya, the Kathua rape and the Shakti

Mills horror. I wanted to shake people from their apathy," she says. And she does, when the last victim walks in, a girl with pigtails.

In Nandita Das' *Listen to Her*, made at her Mumbai home, during the lockdown, the film tracks rising domestic violence as the lockdown intensifies. Das complains to the police about her maid whose husband is threatening great harm to her even as she herself grapples with another level of smug masculinity: from getting the coffee to getting the door, everything is her responsibility, not that of her male partner, even as she watches over her son and works on her film.

For Das, the response has been truly overwhelming with many women sharing their own stories. As she says, "A film cannot create a revolution, but it can subliminally inform our choices and responses, create empathy, make us question and bring about awareness. The audio-visual medium has become a significant influence in this lockdown world. A short film can be easily watched and forwarded to reach the widest audience possible. It is amplifying the urgent need to create awareness about the issue with helpline numbers for women to reach out for support. This so-called



Vidya Balan in *Natkhat*



A poster of *Devi*

“IT’S A MALE BEHAVIOURAL PROBLEM AND I’VE HAD EVEN SOME OF MY MALE FRIENDS WRITE TO ME ABOUT HOW ASHAMED THEY ARE OF THEIR MALE PRIVILEGE” SHAAN VYAS, director of *Natkhat*



private matter needs to be made public.”

Because it involves us all. How women respond to men who behave badly is at the root of *Natkhat*. Vidya Balan plays a *ghoonghat*-clad woman who endures violence from her frustrated husband every night but doesn’t want her son to grow up in the same way. She slowly enables him to distinguish between right and wrong, and ensures he chooses a more sensitive and empathetic way of being a boy. Of

course, it raises the problematic issue of yet again placing the burden of raising our sons entirely on mothers. For Vyas, none of the men in the movie is evil. “They’ve just internalised patriarchy and the film speaks to that need for reform. It’s a male behavioural problem and I’ve had even some of my male friends write to me about how ashamed they are of their male privilege.” The movie is like a blow to the solar plexus

and brings the lesson home, which may be why Balan didn’t hesitate to produce it, along with Ronnie Screwvala.

Meraj Ahmed Mubarki who has studied the evolution of the Indian man on screen says these shorts touch something familiar to all of us. Recall the instance in *Naya Daur* (1957) where Dilip Kumar and Ajit are to decide who will get Vyjayanthimala without, of course, her character Rajni getting to

Mukul Chadda and Rasika Dugal in *Banana Bread*

“WE LIVE IN TIMES WHERE A MODERATE OR GENTLE STANCE IS SEEN AS A POSITION OF WEAKNESS AND NOT OF NUANCE” RASIKA DUGAL, actor

“THE AUDIO-VISUAL MEDIUM HAS BECOME A SIGNIFICANT INFLUENCE IN THIS LOCKED-DOWN WORLD. A SHORT FILM CAN BE EASILY WATCHED AND FORWARDED TO REACH THE WIDEST AUDIENCE POSSIBLE”

NANDITA DAS, director of *Listen to Her*

A scene from *Listen to Her*

decide it for herself. As in *Everything Is Fine*, the husband is no different from Shankar (Dilip Kumar) as he takes all decisions on Vyjanthimala's behalf. This kind of rogue masculinity popularised in Hindi cinema became far more endemic from the 1970s onwards with angry young men taking things in their own hands, right up to *Dabangg* (2010) in which Chulbul Pandey feels he doesn't need to take consent from Rajjo (Sonakshi Sinha) before marrying her.

Cinema merely reflects the dominant values. A new more aggressive masculinity has emerged in Hindi cinema in the post-liberalisation age, says Mubarki, one which has taken advantage of the liberal values of its

more Westernised ruling elite. It feels aggression is the legitimate expression of male individuality. The subaltern/urban male is asserting his individuality through the virtues of virility and manliness. The aggressive macho man has replaced the Nehruvian hero who was more into nationbuilding. The post-Nehruvian hero is all about securing the state from all rival claimants. And keeping the woman submissive. Bhargava Pahwa says she sees so many women like her character, especially in small towns. “They don't even know they are oppressed. Even I, if I do one thing for myself, I will do nine for the family. Women are conditioned that way. We all become our mothers and mothers-in-law,” she says.

In many cases, this suffocation has increased post-Covid-19, and men and women have had to renegotiate their relationships. In the tongue-in-cheek *Banana Bread*, directed by Srinivas Sunderrajan, real-life couple Rasika Dugal and Mukul Chadda act as new neighbours during the pandemic. On the one hand, there is a renewed desire to meet. On the other, it almost feels awkward figuring out the new norms about getting close or not. So, have men and women become more tolerant or less tolerant of each other?

Dugal says, “As a society, we have become more polarised in the last few years than ever. There are strong opinions which become more radical with fierce and constant articulation of them on various social media forums. We live in times where a moderate or gentle stance is seen as a position of weakness and not of nuance. I think anyone who perceives another as the ‘other’ [whether on the basis of gender, identity, ethnicity, religion or political beliefs] is thriving in an environment of low tolerance.”

We watch her trying to ignore the differences, focusing on what they have in common and sometimes justifying

what he says to fit her worldview. It's the same for the man, notes Chadda: “It's a film about loneliness, especially for those who live alone. They're willing to tolerate so many more differences—that we've lately become intolerant of—because of the need for company.” Men and women are suddenly more equal by becoming equally vulnerable.

In *Devi*, where the number of women in the room grows in proportion to the crimes in the real world, with a rape every 22 minutes, there is much chatter among the souls about overcrowding. But Kajol, playing the nameless leader of the group, says: “We were adjusting there. Why not here?” It's that compromise Bhargava Pahwa is opposed to. Women have decided to live in this enforced world of sacrifice and sighs. They need to snap out of it and claim their independence.

In Gautham Vasudev Menon's *Karthik Dial Seytha Yenn*, the director takes the stars of his beloved blockbuster *Vinnaithaandi Varuvaayaa* (2010), Simbu and Trisha, playing Karthik and Jessie. Shot during the lockdown, the Tamil short film revisits the two characters. Karthik (Simbu) is still a man-child looking for validation while Trisha (Jessie) has moved on, with marriage and two children. The film inspired many memes partly because it was unusual in the way it portrayed the conventional Indian man. Here he is unsure, seeking the approval of the woman he loves, and has hit a creative roadblock. Only Jessie can help him, and she can only offer him platonic friendship.

Ghar Se, a Hindi film made by Malayalam filmmaker Mridul K Nair, is darker. A man is on the run for a rape. His mother and wife wait for him at night, stirring up a concoction that will send him towards death. All it takes is one more whack with a rolling pin and there is some redemption, some consequences for a crime committed. ■

SHORT AND SHOCKING

Animation films with a social conscience have become online hits

By Divya Unny

A MIGRANT WORKER walking for kilometres with his tired little son perched on his shoulder versus a man running on his treadmill inside a comfortable home. A young boy enjoying a shower in his house versus a man being showered with disinfectants on the road of his village. A group of friends enjoying a video chat versus a man sitting under a tree calling his family to inform them about the death of his baby.

These visuals depict the brutal dichotomy in our country during the lockdown. Animator Debjyoti Saha who was just one among the many budding 25-year-old animators in Mumbai till yesterday has won hearts with his *Korona* series that's being shared and appreciated widely on social media. Over the last two months he's created six animated sketches of about 60-90 seconds each depicting cruelties in the



Scenes from the *Korona* series, created by Debjyoti Saha

“THE KORONA SERIES IS SUBVERSIVE, ANIMATION TAKES IT A NOTCH UP BECAUSE YOU KNOW IT'S NOT REAL, BUT IT DEPICTS EVERYTHING THAT'S REAL AROUND YOU”

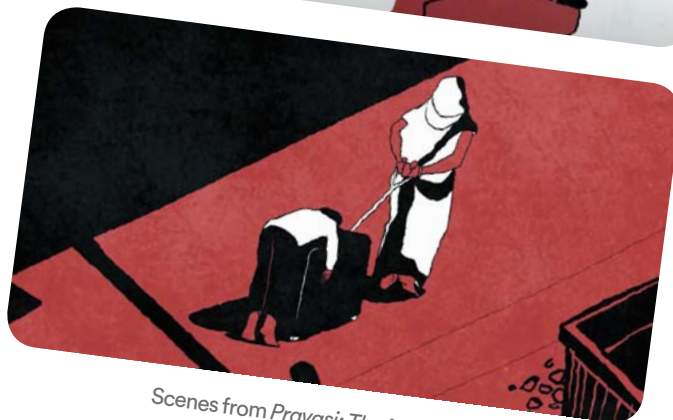
Debjyoti Saha creator of the *Korona* series





ANIMATION HAS THE POWER TO DEPICT PAIN AND THE IDEA WASN'T TO VICTIMISE OR GLAMOURISE THE MISERY, BUT TO SHOW WHAT MIGRANTS WENT THROUGH"

Kireet Khurana creator of *Pravas: The Migrant*



Scenes from *Pravas: The Migrant*, created by Kireet Khurana

times of Covid-19. They are hard-hitting, satirical and, most importantly, remind us to not take our privileges for granted. They have cumulatively garnered over 40 lakh views on Instagram.

Saha is one among the many independent animation artists in the country who have experienced a sudden wave of interest in their craft, not just because of the power of the animation medium, but also because work on live-action films has come to a standstill since March. Shoots have been stalled, and many are looking to artists creating life on a computer screen to satiate their need for new stories.

"When the lockdown began and I started reading about what's happening around us, I decided to create something to combat all the guilt I was feeling. We are born in a divided world, but the divide has come so close home, right in front of us during this lockdown and we don't know what to do about it. The *Korona* series is subversive, and animation takes it a notch up because you know it's not real, but it depicts everything that's real around you. It's a mirror of the changing,

desolate, unfair society we live in, and a lot of people have been able to connect with it because it showcases what many of us have been feeling," says the National Institute of Design graduate Saha.

Award-winning filmmaker Kireet Khurana, who has written and directed some 20-odd films, agrees with Saha. His 1.43-minute animation film *Pravas: The Migrant* once again showcases the plight of migrant labourers in India. The film garnered over 10 lakh views on Twitter within 24 hours of its release. For Khurana, who returns to animation after years, this short film chronicles a crisis we should never forget. The film makes a montage from images—smeared in colours of resistance, red and black—that we've seen in newspapers and on TV. From the young Bihari girl who cycled for over 1,500 km to get her father home safe, to blood-strewn clothes of the workers who died on the railway tracks and never made it home, to our fellow Indians fighting for food on roads and in trains, *Pravas* threads together the desolation of migrants.

The film asks a simple question: 'We are migrants. We want to be free. Are we not citizens of this country?'

Khurana says, "I think in the last few months we have become immune to the images on our phone screens and the television sets, but when it all comes together in a film, it reminds us of how we failed our citizens. The Government failed the migrants. It reminds us that the conscience of the nation was somewhere missing in the midst of this crisis. The dark shadows, the stark imagery, what the film says through the voiceover is the voice of the people who aren't heard. They are the ones who run our homes, our cities, our country but are voiceless. Animation has the power to depict pain and the idea wasn't to victimise or glamourise the misery, but to show what exactly they went through." *Pravas: The Migrant* has already been voiced in 11 languages and Khurana is now working on a second short film around the pandemic.

While these two films depict our current reality, there are also a host of other

independent animation artists who are creating compelling work. From 2D to stop motion, mythology to mime, the world of these animators extends beyond our imagination. Like Vivek Ram, the creator of Vaanarsena Studios, a steadily growing animation company that's been feeding the audience with the most uniquely crafted stories from ancient Indian mythology. The studio that now has over 50,000 followers online, a number that's increased manifold since the lockdown, reinterprets stories, characters and conflicts from Indian mythology, while targeting young adults.

THE IDEA IS to highlight that every problem we face today has been dealt with in our ancient stories. Mahabharata is about a property dispute. Ramayana asks, 'What is dharma?' A character like Shikhandi is a woman who wanted to be a man. We see each of these conflicts in society today, and the solutions are already there in our texts. None of these stories have lost relevance and the aim is to bring them back in their truest essence," says Ram. He has been an animator for over two decades and a VFX artist with some of the country's biggest studios, but is now taking Indian stories via 2D animation worldwide. In collaboration with Bengaluru's Zebu Animation Studios and LA-based Pure Imagination Studios, Vaanarsena is now working on a series of short films based on Indian stories to be released globally.

"In India, animation is mostly targeted towards children. But that is now expanding. The medium is more fluid and has less restrictions than live-action at the moment, hence the growing interest. Many platforms from OTT to ad films have been doing smaller animated content because it's inviting and possible to do it now. You don't need a big crew and location and a whole group of minds to make it happen. And though I have been getting a lot of enquiries for larger projects, I want to say animation takes its time and it is a long-term plan," he adds.

Tapping the Indian animation

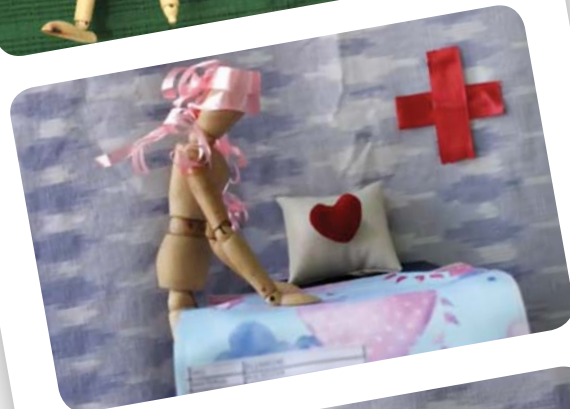
industry—projected at Rs 10,000 crore in 2020 according to KPMG—are also major OTT platforms including Netflix, Amazon and Disney+ Hotstar, which are creating animated content in multiple Indian languages. "The animation industry has a dynamic approach and it is not reliant on live shooting. The studios and animators can work remotely and ensure there is no dearth in content," says Leena Lele Dutta, Business Head, Kids' Genre, Sony Pictures Networks.

For veteran artist Soumitra Ranade, who runs Paperboat Animation Studios, this is a sign of bigger things to come within the genre. Ranade, who produced the popular animated feature *Bombay Rose*, calls the lockdown a blessing in disguise for animation artists. "As a country we thrive on live-action cinema. It's part of our culture and that will never fade. But now with bigger studios, really edgy ideas and even superstars lending their might to Indian animation films, the industry will see a massive jump, not just in terms of investment, but even good content. As a country we have so many stories that we can tell, and with a medium like animation possibilities are multifold," he adds.

Filmmakers who have previously not explored animation are also finding it a suitable medium for their stories. Like Bengaluru-based Pooja Hegde who chose to tell a heartbreaking story of the loss of her brother through a stop-motion film called *My Brother and I*. The film tells of her brother who lost his fight to cancer but lives on as an inspiration for her. Hegde, a filmmaker who never thought of animation before, is now looking at the medium in a whole new light. "I made this one right at the beginning of the lockdown. I was itching to tell a story, and this just happened. I never thought I could

through stop-motion, but the story was so personal it just poured out of me. Honestly, stop-motion is easier than gathering a crew and lights and a cast," says Hegde who has now received awards via online film festivals for best direction and editing.

While there's no dearth of live-action content on OTT platforms these days, the hope is that animation in India will continue to blossom. "We are in the midst of the biggest humanitarian crisis. There's no dearth of stories. In fact, as animators we have the tools to put work out there that inspire people to keep moving, and not lose hope. That's tremendous power and responsibility, and I hope we can use it well," says Saha. ■

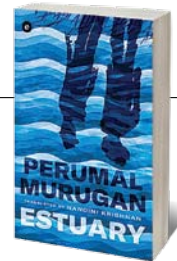


Scenes from *My Brother and I*, created by Pooja Hegde

Father and Son

A searing look at generational conflict and conservatism

By Sharanya Manivannan



ESTUARY

Perumal Murugan
Translated from the Tamil
by Nandini Krishnani

Eka/Westland
243 Pages | Rs 499

IN ASURALOKAM IS a civil servant named Kumarasurar who, despite being known as a poet of panegyric verses, is unable to have a fulfilling conversation with his own son. Each time Kumarasurar calls Meghas, he sticks to a script of seven prosaic questions, to which his collegegoing son responds cursorily. Despite Meghas' poor repartee, he insists that his father purchase a more expensive phone for him. Kumarasurar's enquiry into why leads him down the path of paranoia in Perumal Murugan's *Estuary*, a study of generational conflict and conservatism.

The characters in *Estuary* are asuras and asuris, often depicted in Hindu mythologies as demigod antagonists. Yet, this aspect of the novel is barely an aside, leaving some questions about why it wasn't utilised further. Only rarely, such as a passing mention of how a two-headed *andaranda* bird could be hired to cart a man away, are the fantastical possibilities of the setting explored. Aside from their looming sizes, Asuralokam's inhabitants are exactly like human beings. The author says as much in the foreword and hints at deliberately writing a 'deviant' novel.

Kumarasurar and his wife, Mangasuri, are devastated when Meghas opts for engineering rather than medicine as a course of study. Parting with him at a boarding school so oppressive that graduating students assault teachers as they leave isn't so difficult for them, but college is a different story. All over Asuralokam are engineering colleges that take the real repression of Tamil Nadu's institutions just one or two logical steps further: there are bridges for students, so that they focus exclusively on studies (parents request new designs

that also limit speech), branded canes to administer scarfree corporal punishment (with parental endorsements like 'cooling smoothness' and 'the feel of a cat's fur'), and more such abuses. Kumarasurar is appalled, but when Meghas finds a more liberal institution, the father's relief is mingled with horror about what he may encounter there.

Gradually, Kumarasurar begins to unravel, experiencing hallucinations and morbid thoughts as he imagines Meghas falling prey to temptations such as death-defying selfie-seeking stunts, spending time with girls (Asuralokam's other engineering colleges replicate India's gender-segregation and skewed gender ratios) and so on. The more he is introduced to the world as being a less rigid place than he thought, the more distraught he becomes. It is as though as Kumbhas, a colleague who answers his questions about pornography with-

out inhibition, notes: 'Kumarasurar was the only one who was clueless about the world they lived in.' As the novel progresses, it becomes clear who the subject of this subtle satirical work may be. At the outset, it seems like it's about the average contemporary Tamil man, who wants the best for his children but doesn't understand the world they live in. Perhaps it is that too.

Yet, a little consideration of the context reminds one of how Perumal Murugan was forced into exile from his hometown of Tiruchengode in 2014, following a controversy about his book *Madhorubhagan* (translated into English by Aniruddhan Vasudevan as *One Part Woman*). The situation was arguably fuelled by those in whom ignorance had festered to the point of fundamentalist ire. *Estuary* compassionately suggests that there is a fine line between the person who becomes preoccupied with perceived threats and becomes a danger to themselves and others, and the person who chooses to overcome their fears and expand their perspective instead. 'Everyone lived within a set of boundaries that circumscribed one's life. When one stood within one's ambit and looked at someone else, it appeared the other person was crossing his limits. When they were circumscribed by invisible lines, how could one tell what was right and good within the boundaries?'

Kumarasurar ponders in the closing chapters, having had the simplest brush with freedom. Perhaps this opening of the mind and spirit is what the author, much besieged, is able to wish for his erstwhile detractors now. ■



Perumal Murugan

'I Have Been Leaning Heavily on Meditation'

THE SERIES *Killing Eve* follows the character Eve Polastri, played by Sandra Oh. She is an agent working for the British intelligence who is assigned to capture the assassin Villanelle, in the latest season. As the chase begins, they develop a mutual obsession, and both end up playing a cat-and-mouse game.

Your character in the series seems to have no stress or anxiety. But given the pandemic and lockdown, have your anxiety levels been affected?

I'm in my house in Los Angeles. The one way I've been dealing with Covid and the lockdown is that I've been in communication with so many people, actually groups of people from my past. I recently created, and I'm also the Zoom organiser, for all these groups, from my theater class. I went to the National Theater School and I graduated in 1993, and recently a bunch of us were texting, and now every Friday we have a cocktail. But our first Zoom meet many of us had not seen each other or spoken in almost 27 years. So, it was really great to go back and say hi to people. And that is one of the best things, which I hang onto at this time. I'm sure that we all do, seeing how we need to connect and stay healthy. I do have a meditation practice and I have been leaning heavily on it, because I do feel the level of anxiety is so high, that my need to sit and practice meditation is very, very strong. I do this at least a couple of times a day.

Last year you were on the cover of *Time* magazine. What did that mean to



Sandra Oh

you? Did it make you feel empowered?

Being on the cover of *Time* was such an honour, a tremendous honour because *Time* magazine has a certain place in the North American consciousness, at least in my consciousness. I felt a certain type of validation and I was really, really grateful for that. As far as empowerment, it gave me a platform, but the greatest influence is through your work. But when you have those other platforms, let's say there was a gala around *Time* magazine covers and I was able to give a toast, and it's like those moments, what do you want to talk about, that is when you can possibly have influence. And at that time, I decided to talk about Beyoncé's homecoming, and I was able to talk about certain artistic visions that I saw, which is what she was doing and what

had influenced me. That is how those platforms can help you grow influence.

You have had great success as an actress. But was there pushback from your parents when you told them you wanted to be an actor?

Usually Asian parents want their children to be lawyers or doctors. Well, I did play a doctor on TV for a decade! My parents already had doctors in the family, my brother-in-law is a doctor. My brother and sister-in-law both have their doctorates. They are scientists. And I think that it was a really fun time for my parents when I was on *Grey's Anatomy*, they had at least one child playing a doctor.

But I think of a certain generation and the expectations that were put upon us as children. And I would say, honestly, after the battle I had

of wanting to go to theater school in the first place, in the early 90s, the first battle I had was for them to understand what it was that I wanted to do with my life as an artist, actually came when I did *The Diary of Evelyn Lau*. It was a television movie that I did in 1993 and that was the first step in their acceptance. When I won the Golden Globe in 2019, I was able publicly to thank them. I am very lucky to grow as an artist, because I had parents who do accept me. Let me tell you, there's plenty that my mother does not accept about me, plenty, but ultimately when it comes down to the resilience that I think that you need as an artist, I do think that my parents provided me with that. So, to thank them publicly at the Globes was a very profound moment for me. ■



RAJEEV MASAND

English Channel

Amid reports that the UK will make some new exemptions to social distancing regulations to allow film and television production to resume from August, Hollywood and Bollywood units are reportedly making plans to head there for work. **Tom Cruise** is expected to 'skip quarantine' to shoot *Mission Impossible 7* at Leavesden Studios in Hertfordshire. Cruise and the entire unit (of possibly hundreds) "will be required to live and work within a controlled environment while visiting England to help further mitigate the possibility of spreading Covid-19", UK culture secretary **Oliver Dowden** has been quoted as saying.

Encouraged by the invitation to film there, the unit of *Bell Bottom* is also reportedly planning to begin shooting the project in Scotland and England shortly. According to media reports, **Akshay Kumar**, **Vaani Kapoor** and **Huma Qureshi** may be heading out along with *Lucknow Central* director **Ranjit Tiwari** and producers **Vashu Bhagnani** and **Nikhil Advani**. Akshay had maintained that he would be among the first to go back to work when permissions were obtained. He was the first Bollywood star who stepped out to shoot a public service advertisement some weeks ago.

Big Screen Hunting

Given that there is no clarity yet on when cinemas could reopen, producers who are determined not to send their films straight to streaming have begun blocking release dates far out into next year. There are unconfirmed reports that *Sooryavanshi* and '83 are eyeing Diwali and Christmas 2020 release, respectively, but a trade source says those dates seem very optimistic "if you consider the fact that India looks nowhere close to flattening the curve".

New reports have emerged that Vashu Bhagnani, the producer of the *Coolie No. 1* remake starring **Varun Dhawan** and **Sara Ali Khan**, may be keen to put the film in cinemas over the long New Year's weekend—if the coronavirus threat is conquered. **Boney**

Kapoor recently announced that he was blocking August 13th, 2021 for his **Ajay Devgn**-starrer *Maidaan* that is more or less complete. The date is significant not only because it marks the beginning of a long (and potentially profitable) Independence Day weekend at the box office, but also for sentimental reasons: it is the birth anniversary of the producer's late wife **Sridevi**.

Having missed the Eid window this year, there is speculation that the makers of **Salman Khan's** *Radhe* will hold their film until next Eid, but industry sources are saying it is unlikely that such an expensive film can withstand that kind of delay.

Hot Right Now

Pulled from the line-up of the Mumbai Film Festival's 2018 edition amid MeToo allegations, **Rajat Kapoor's** *Kadakh* dropped straight to streaming recently making a splash with strong reviews and word-of-mouth praise. This delicious dark comedy about a couple that's hiding a dead body in their

home while hosting a Diwali party for friends features a crackling ensemble of actors, including **Ranvir Shorey**, **Mansi Multani**, **Cyrus Sahukar**, **Sagar Deshmukh**, **Shruti Seth**, **Tara Sharma**, **Manoj Pahwa**, **Kalki Koechlin** and Kapoor himself. The clever script skilfully captures the absurdity of the situation while frequently shifting its tone as more and more guests stream in and the pressure mounts.

Tumhari Sulu actor **Manav Kaul**, who is also an author and playwright, has a new book out. A collection of short stories in Hindi titled *Chalta-Phirta Pret*, the book, his fifth, has death as its theme. Kaul has said he found an outlet in writing because of all the 'free time' he's had over the years. He was fascinated with the idea of writing about death after noticing that many of his favourite writers—**Jean-Paul Sartre**, **Albert Camus**, **Virginia Woolf**—had made thoughtful observations on death in their works. He tells me that while he was editing the book, he discovered that in writing stories about death, he had ended up writing about life itself. ■



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— MEETS —

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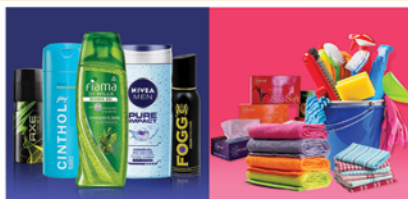
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