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# CONTENTS

5 OCTOBER 2020

5

## LOCOMOTIF

A tale of three leaders  
By S Prasannarajan

6

## OPEN DIARY

By Swapan Dasgupta

12

## THE INSIDER

By PR Ramesh

14

## INDIAN ACCENTS

A dirge for desire  
By Bibek Debroy

16

## WHISPERER

By Jayanta Ghosal

20

## OPEN ESSAY

No country for women  
By Mehr Tarar

AP



26

## COVID-19 CHRONICLES

26

### COVID-19 THE SURGE

How will India cope?  
By Lhendup G Bhutia

33

### THE MENTAL SIEGE

India's response to Covid is defined by the beginning when it was thought to be far deadlier and alien  
By Madhavankutty Pillai

36

### THE FARMER UNFETTERED

The farm sector reforms will end monopolies and give neglected states a level playing field  
By Siddharth Singh

42

### MORE THAN A MOUTHFUL

A new food atlas powered by the Ministry of Women and Child Development will help the country eat and produce better  
By Kaveree Bamzai

46

### THE ABANDONED

Orphans are being thrown out of shelters even as parents face a shortage of children for adoption  
By Ullekh NP

50

### THE SOCIAL SOUTH

With high literacy and internet reach, the southern states are driving demand for videos in regional languages  
By V Shoba



36



42



20



54

54

## THE ARGUMENTATIVE ACTOR

Swara Bhaskar does not hold back her political views. She talks about how she strikes a balance between art and activism  
By Divya Unny

57

## REBEL RAP

Singing against casteism  
By Dipti Nagpaul

60

## KILLER INSTINCT

From metaphysical thrillers to Agatha Christie redux  
By Shylashri Shankar

65

## HOLLYWOOD REPORTER

Arnold Schwarzenegger on what he would do if he were US president  
By Noel de Souza

66

## NOT PEOPLE LIKE US

Wrapping up  
By Rajeev Masand

Cover photo A man is tested for Covid-19 in New Delhi, September 17

Cover photo by T Narayan

# OPEN MAIL

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## LETTER OF THE WEEK

It is correct that 'Beijing's thought process displays a brazenness that is apparent' ('Winter Is Coming' by Manvendra Singh, September 28th, 2020). But then, as any subscriber to the realist school of international relations will tell you, what else do you expect? When wargaming battle scenarios, professional militaries as well as their political masters are driven by self-interest alone. Where gloves need to be off, they are off. India needs to come out of its 'non-aligned' hangover too. The signs that it is already growing out of that 20th century postcolonial pragmatism, for that is what it was, are already evident in the Modi Government's tough talk—even if it is more visibly so in public than in official discussions. That discrepancy is owing to our resource constraints, made doubly worse by the pandemic. We are stuck in the classic economics 101 textbook trap of guns versus butter. While the terrain of the current theatre of geopolitical tensions is favourable to us, Covid-19, by draining the Indian state, has made choices hard for us. Our security establishment and thinking need to adapt to this crisis-ridden world realistically. Other friendly countries will be hardpressed to put their own house in order after the pandemic before they could think of extending help to us. India should have no compunction about being brazen.

Pushpa Pant

### ANGRY YOUNG WOMAN

Kangana Ranaut is angry ('The Arsonist's Act', September 28th, 2020). She has had a frosty relationship with the high and mighty of Bollywood after she spoke up against nepotism in the industry on Karan Johar's show. Then she was painted as a cantankerous, confused, crass, crazy person. Here was a girl from Manali, giving competition to the best in the Maximum City, daring to raise an issue which troubles most new entrants in the industry. Instead of stirring a debate, she stirred up a hornets' nest. Her latest comments on rampant drug abuse in the industry have raised hell once again. To those vilifying her, I

would say that Kangana is taking a huge personal risk in exposing the issue. The arsonist could as well be the whistleblower.

Sangeeta Kampani

Kangana is treading where even Bollywood's demigods fear to go. Or probably she has taken her character as the queen of Jhansi to heart. Whatever the case may be, the state government's decision to demolish her office—even if acting on a very old order—at this moment appears vindictive rather than driven by administrative logic. It is trying to discipline the messenger. A 'frail' woman against the state is too easy a script that the state



government has handed over to Kangana. 'Fearlessness thy name is woman' is what people will remember once this episode is over.

Bholey Bhardwaj

There is a new circus in town. It is hard to tell though who the clown is: the crusading actor or the petty state government. For now, the Bombay High Court has decided she certainly is not.

Jayanthy CK

### INSTITUTION BUILDER

Kapila Vatsyayan was an internationally celebrated scholar of Indian classical dance, art, architecture and art history ('The Visionary Culturalist', September 28th, 2020). She was also an institution builder, laying the foundations for a sustained study of Indian art and culture. Her writings both revealed and exhibited the intricacies of India's artistic traditions, the various streams of which have enriched and enabled contemporary cultural pursuits to draw upon an inexhaustible pool of excellence. Her passing has left a huge void in the art and culture world.

MR Jayanthimani

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By S PRASANNARAJAN

## A TALE OF THREE LEADERS

**T**HOSE WHO FEAR the fall of the democratic project find the culprit not in some weird sociology of freedom but in a few men—it's still men—swayed by the demonic idea of themselves. The number of such end-is-nearists is multiplying in democracies that we thought were too evolved to perish under the whims of the elected leader. The fiends of the moment, and their crimes against norms retold by righteous liberals and revolutionary progressives, are more than textbook strongmen. They are in thrall to their powers and privileges as preordained liberators in a world where the old establishment is rotten; and they truly believe that their war on a consensus-driven liberal order makes them necessary subversives. Or so goes the scariest story of our time as told by the last moralists. They are right and they are wrong. Right because, in three democracies that represent the old and the new and the most varied, the politics of reordering history is helmed by men whose messianism is larger than their electoral mandate. Wrong because bracketing them together as narcissists and populists is to deny them their disparate cultural inheritance. What we see is not just the end of traditions. We see our moral bias against the impulses of democracy itself.

Take the churn in the UK, where tradition is a curse and future is a burden for those who still stand by the verdict of the 2016 referendum. A separation from the EU, with or without a deal, is enforced isolation of an island that has much to gain from the shared destiny of transnationalism, or so think the globalists. Prime Minister Boris Johnson, Britain's most popular politician, is unlikely to get a deal from the EU. He has such faith in the power of being Boris Johnson, a Churchillian self-portrait with a different war as backdrop, that what matters to him in the end is the nationalisation of Englishness without falling into the closed culture of anti-Europeanism. Add the reality of a worsening pandemic to the inevitability of a rude exit from the EU and what Britain gets is a scenario where its national misfortune has only one name: Boris Johnson. Suddenly, the institutions of democracy are overshadowed by the mythology of the leader as an agent of history. Democracy's curse, we are made to believe, is its biggest winner.

Across the Atlantic, too, the winner is the curse, and, unlike his English counterpart, Donald Trump is too immersed in the news cycle to borrow from history. No intellectual showmanship with Latin-laced one-liners

for him; history for him is a collection of exclamatory tweets. America's misfortune—spiralling pandemic toll, collapsing economy after a three-year higher performance, and anti-racial eruption after the death of George Floyd—too has been reduced to his size. It's an individual crime, and the President's personal aesthetics, or lack thereof, has made it a crime against good taste as well. The new *Atlantic* cover has the perfect counterpoint to MAGA: 'Making America Again'. America is in ruins, for one man's self-obsession has made everything else, from facts to racial justice, negotiable, or even disposable. Here again, the easy availability of evil has turned arguments into familiar declarations of solidarity of the offended. And it's the politics of offence that the President uses to control the base, subjugate the Republican Party, and to keep his critics transfixed. There could be no bigger me-alone moment in a democracy. The Jacobins have got a kitschy king to fight against in America's most intense ideological war. "We are the change that we seek," said Trump's predecessor who was supposed to be the post-racial president of America. And look where they are.

Or look here to see how gradualism works. If it was personal recklessness that denied the politics of change moral credibility on both sides of the Atlantic, here in India, democracy at its most varied and volatile, power has not diminished the idyll breaker. Modi has bucked the trend, even though his faith in himself as the sole nation builder has not wavered. Restraint can't be a revolutionary's credo, but it can certainly make even the most epochal changes culturally and constitutionally smoother. That is what Modi has achieved, and in so doing, he has not alienated his base. He has strengthened it without following its playbook. In the other two democracies with scene-stealing leadership, the sum of all national ills equals the follies of a Johnson or a Trump. As India goes up in the ranks of infected nations, we don't have a hastily identified political villain. That's because Modi did not resort to denial or bravado; he played the realist, a more believable role for a leader in the face of a global health crisis. And whenever there was the ideological fulfilment of the mandate, it was the

Constitution, not the street, that he turned to for legitimacy. Consolidation with restraint is not what passersby practise in politics. It is what those who are here for the long haul do.

You lose faith in democracy only when its fine instincts are suppressed by fly-by-night liberators. ■



# OPEN DIARY

Swapan Dasgupta



**T**HE MUCH-DELAYED Monsoon Session of Parliament that concluded eight days prematurely will go down in history as the first occasion when members of the Rajya Sabha sat in the Lok Sabha, and vice versa. I deliberately refrained from saying ‘only occasion’ because I get a nasty feeling in my bones that we are likely to see a repetition during either the Winter Session—if at all it is held—or the Budget Session.

In pure statistical terms, this Parliament was incredibly productive. The MPs diligently applied their minds to their primary job: enact legislation. Every one of the dozen or more ordinances that were promulgated since the lockdown began last March was enacted into law through due parliamentary process. These included landmark agricultural and labour reforms—changes which had been kept in suspended animation since 1991.

No doubt the Session was politically consequential, and not merely because a Congress and an Aam Aadmi Party MP danced on the table in the well of the Rajya Sabha. However, despite this flutter of excitement during a Sunday afternoon—when all good citizens should have been readying for a siesta, the Session lacked a soul. This didn’t have anything to do with the quality of either MPs or ministers—although it would have helped if some ministers possessed the parliamentary skills of the late, and much missed, Arun Jaitley. No, the listless Parliament had everything to do with the miserable fallout of Covid-19—the unusual seating arrangements.

I think anyone who has had the good fortune of becoming an MP will acknowledge that there is an

extraordinary charm in sitting inside the chamber when the House is in session. This time—quite understandably—members had to be dispersed with some in the chamber, a few in the galleries and the rest in the Lok Sabha.

I was banished to the gallery above and had a vantage seat to observe the Sunday fracas that resulted in the suspension of eight MPs—although I am slightly perplexed that the list included a CPM MP from Kerala who basically did nothing offensive. But sitting in the gallery was just no fun and was akin to watching the proceedings on TV. Additionally, on two occasions I had a chance to make brief interventions, it was obligatory to sit and speak. It felt like participating in a Zoom meeting. The majesty of addressing the House while standing was lost.

Under the circumstances, I did the next best thing and decided to sit in the chamber after the opposition MPs, quite unwisely, chose to boycott the final two days of the Session. There were enough seats available to be in the House and maintain social distancing. At the same time, it felt distinctly odd to address the House while sitting down.

It was also not the same while retiring to the Central Hall for the mandatory cup of the Indian Coffee House brew. The great thing about

the Central Hall—apart from the general atmosphere of cross-party conviviality—was the chance to meet members of the Lok Sabha, not to mention the large numbers of ex-MPs who routinely dropped by. The Central Hall is unquestionably the place for both good gossip and authentic political information. It is remarkable how much a politician opens up once he/she acquires the confidence to know that a fellow member of the tribe is likely to be discreet and never use the information for anything more than political understanding. When working as a journalist, there was always a thin wall between a politician and myself. The day I was accepted as a fellow politico, that wall disappeared. I had gained admission to the exclusive Club that is the Central Hall. And, to cap it all, it is a Life Membership.

This Session, the Lok Sabha kept different timing and the Central Hall felt relatively desolate. We felt their absence, just as much as we missed the plates of *vada* and chicken biryani. The small packets from Bengali Market didn’t seem right.

At the same time, I realise it was deeply courageous of the Government to risk a session during a raging pandemic. Yes, all sorts of precautions from testing and mandatory face masks to generous supplies of hand sanitisers were in place. However, it was still a grave risk and all it needed was one vulnerable MP to fall seriously ill with the virus for the whole exercise of convening a session to be called into question.

I was careful, very careful. But at the same time, I am aware that I was plain lucky to have escaped a parliamentary virus. Or, am I speaking too soon? ■

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# OPENINGS

NOTEBOOK

## The Return of Sasikala

**W**HEN FORMER TAMIL Nadu Chief Minister and AIADMK leader J Jayalithaa emerged on bail from Parappana Agrahara in Bengaluru on a Saturday afternoon in October 2014 after three weeks of incarceration in a 17-year-old disproportionate assets case, she was treated to a welcome worthy of a queen returning from exile. O Panneerselvam, whom she had installed as Chief Minister in her absence, and her senior ministers received her with folded hands. Throngs of supporters came bearing flowers and good wishes as her cavalcade drove to HAL Airport where a chartered flight waited to take her home. Like her mentor MG Ramachandran before her, she had succeeded in replacing politics with imagery, and the image of the leader was unthinkable outside of her portrait as the saviour of the land. The taint of corruption washed off her in no time and she coasted to victory in the May 2016 Assembly elections, bucking anti-incumbency, which had been the one constant in Tamil Nadu politics since 1984.

As Tamil Nadu awaits its biggest 'release' of the season—that of Jayalithaa's fellow-accused and long-time aide VK Sasikala from prison—and speculation about her role in the 2021 Assembly elections fills the air, it is useful to point out why she cannot execute an Ammaesque comeback. If the sobriquet of '*Chinnamma*' maps her to the wicked template of the stepmother—the opposite of the pervasive maternal archetype that Jayalithaa embodied—in the popular imagination, her own loyalists, including the present Chief Minister Edappadi K Palanisamy, who was chosen—by her, as her nephew TTV Dhinakaran has repeatedly pointed out—to keep the chair warm, have distanced themselves from her. There is no place in the AIADMK today for Sasikala, who briefly ran its affairs as interim general secretary, operating from Veda Nilayam in Chennai's Poes Garden. In fact, the

AIADMK government's proposed takeover of Jayalithaa's house, disregarding a court verdict recognising her niece J Deepa and nephew J Deepak as her legal heirs, is seen as a move to ensure that Sasikala does not come to occupy it, thereby symbolically excising her from Amma's legacy.

Ironically, if there is someone else in the AIADMK camp who feels sidelined today, it is Panneerselvam, who had joined forces with Palanisamy to oust Sasikala and Dhinakaran from the party in 2017. Earlier this month, Panneerselvam, who is the AIADMK Coordinator, called for a party high-level committee meeting to get closure on some of his demands—including the formation of an 11-member steering committee and control of party district units. The meeting was reportedly inconclusive and an executive committee meeting is set to be held on September 28th to sort out matters between the Palanisamy and Panneerselvam camps. Meanwhile, the AIADMK has issued a gag order prohibiting its leaders to discuss the matter or to speculate on the chief ministerial candidate for 2021. "We have decided not to talk about it for now," said AIADMK leader and Fisheries Minister D Jayakumar, in a telephonic interview. "What we can say with certainty is that the

party will stand together against divisive forces and against the DMK, which has been undermining our efforts to help farmers."

It is in the backdrop of this power struggle that reports of Panneerselvam reaching out to Dhinakaran acquire significance. AIADMK leaders from both factions have, however, denied that an alliance with Sasikala and Dhinakaran is in the works. That the AIADMK is ready to accept or merge with the Amma Makkal Munnetra Kazhagam—a party founded in 2018 with Sasikala as the president and Dhinakaran as general secretary—is "false propaganda by the AMMK to create confusion within the AIADMK," Jayakumar told *Open*. "There is no place for Sasikala, Dhinakaran

**There is little to suggest that Sasikala enjoys the BJP's support. Recently, the Income Tax Department began attaching 65 properties registered in the names of her benamis. While her lawyer's statement claiming that she could be released later this month on account of good behaviour has created a flurry of excitement in Tamil politics, the media may well be exaggerating her prospective role in the electoral denouement**



Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

and their brand of family politics in the party. Just look at their performance in the 2019 General Elections—that should tell you something about the support they enjoy. Why would anyone want to ally with them?” Jayakumar said.

Dhinakaran’s runaway victory in the RK Nagar bypoll in December 2017, the seat Jayalalithaa had held until her death, and his pitched battle for the “two leaves” symbol had installed him as an emerging political force in the state and threatened to further destabilise the AIADMK. But he failed to establish himself as a mass leader—as evidenced not only by his party’s abysmal show in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections and subsequent bypolls, but also by the attrition of AMMK functionaries including seniors like V Senthil Balaji who defected to the DMK and V Pugazhendi, who joined the AIADMK.

Dhinakaran’s visit to Delhi on September 20th-21st, reportedly to seek the BJP’s mediation in making a truce with the AIADMK ahead of the polls, has once again put him under the spotlight. He would like to shore up his political legitimacy, but what can he, in return, offer the BJP, which is desperate to gain a foothold in a state where there has been backlash across the board over the three-language system proposed in the National Education Policy and the distribution of the GST proceeds between Centre and state? “It is mere hearsay. We are not interested in an alliance with Sasikala, or in facilitating her return to the AIADMK fold,” says a BJP leader from Tamil Nadu. “She is a political liability and we cannot be seen to be associating with her.” The BJP’s relationship with the AIADMK seems to be on track—the Dravidian party has backed the Centre’s Farmers (Empowerment and Protection)

Agreement of Price Assurance and Farm Services Bill, 2020, citing ‘beneficial provisions’ for farmers—but the national party may not be averse to using Sasikala as a covert agent to keep its alliance partner on edge, say sources in the AIADMK. “The BJP did help broker peace between the two AIADMK factions after Amma’s death, but peacetime is almost over now. There is a war coming in April 2021 and we don’t have a General leading the charge,” admits a senior AIADMK leader. What he leaves unsaid is the possibility of Sasikala upsetting the tenuous balance in the AIADMK by luring disgruntled leaders away from the party. “An overt alliance between the Panneerselvam group and Sasikala is unlikely. OPS was the man who had insisted on evicting Dhinakaran and Sasikala from the party. If he patches up now, he will be seen as a bigger opportunist than Sasikala,” the leader adds.

There is little to suggest that Sasikala enjoys the BJP’s support. Recently, the Income Tax Department began attaching 65 properties registered in the names of her *benamis*, including a piece of land opposite Veda Nilayam where she had begun constructing what was to be her residence upon release from prison. While her lawyer’s statement claiming that she could be released later this month—her sentence ends in January 2021—on account of good behaviour has created a flurry of excitement in Tamil politics, the media may well be exaggerating her prospective role in the electoral denouement. Her grave-thumping act at Jayalalithaa’s memorial on the Marina before she went to prison in 2017 may turn out to be just optics in the end. ■

By V SHOBA

PORTRAIT • HARIVANSH

# HOT SEAT

## The affable Rajya Sabha deputy chairman finds himself in the midst of a political storm

IN THE WINTER of 2016, as both Houses of Parliament plunged into turmoil over demonetisation, a Rajya Sabha member had expressed his anguish in an article on a news website: 'I introspect at such moments, recalling that this is the Upper House of distinguished leaders and statesmen and valuable contributors to society. In the Constituent Assembly debates, the Rajya Sabha was envisioned as a House for reflective and evaluative reasoning detached from the ordinary, mundane and routine engagements of everyday life... N Gopalswami Ayyangar termed it as a House which may rein in the, 'passion of the moment' as reflective moment.'

Four years later, that MP—Harivansh—the Rajya Sabha Deputy Chairman, during an abridged September Session, sat late into the night writing to President Ram Nath Kovind and Vice President M Venkaiah Naidu, who is Rajya Sabha Chairman, disturbed by the developments of the day in the House. It was 1.30 am by the time he finished the letter, explaining how the previous day's uproar on the floor over the farm Bills had 'hurt' him and 'damaged' the dignity of the Upper House. He woke up early next morning, took his personal vehicle and an aide, and carried tea and *poha* for the eight MPs protesting overnight at Mahatma Gandhi's statue in Parliament House premises, a day after he had suspended them for seven days for "disorderly conduct". He told them this was not about politics and then walked to his office in Parliament building and went on a 36-hour fast. The MPs refused the tea and *poha*, but Harivansh's gesture drew praise from Prime Minister Narendra Modi who tweeted that he had a humble mind and a big heart.

Like everything else in Harivansh's life, including dropping his surname, this gesture too was inspired by socialist Jayaprakash Narayan (JP) and he

went on to participate in the JP Movement.

It was politics that inspired him to become a journalist. "He has a Gandhian approach. His gesture now with the protesting MPs too was Gandhigiri," says Janata Dal (United) leader KC Tyagi, whom Harivansh had interviewed in 1977, in his early days as a journalist, while working in Mumbai with *Dharmyug*, a Hindi weekly which was brought out by the Times of India group.

In 2014, the Janata Dal (United) nominated Harivansh to the Rajya Sabha from Bihar for a six-year term. Four years later, he was elected Deputy Chairman of Rajya Sabha as a candidate of the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA). On September 14th, 2020, the 64-year-old MP was re-elected to the post. As an MP, who has never gone into the well of the House to protest, Harivansh had appreciated the efforts of his predecessor and Congress leader PJ Kurien for his 'patience, calmness, wit, humour and commitment to run the House'.

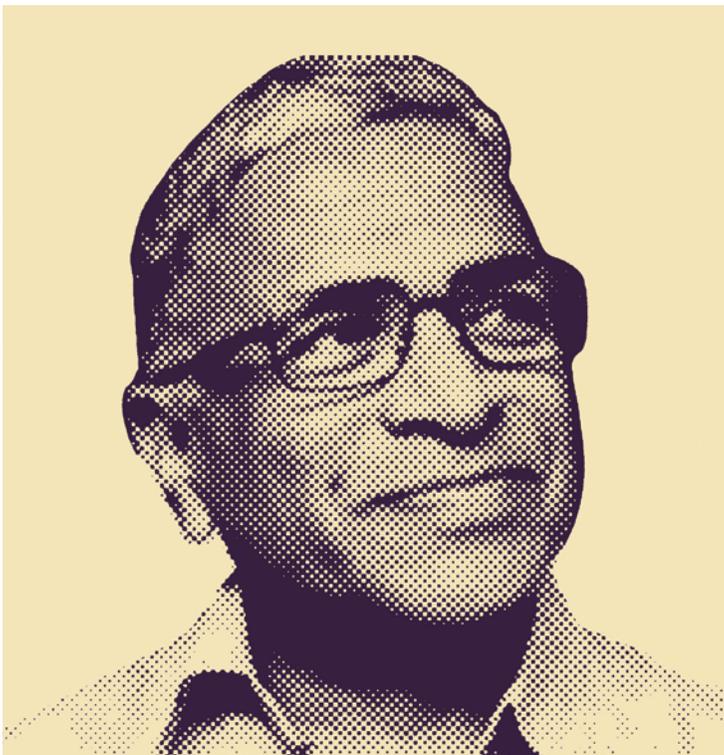
Harivansh is in the eye of the storm over the Bills being passed with a simple voice vote, when the members yell out 'ayes' or 'noes', after he rejected opposition calls for a division of votes, which would require actual voting. The opposition, which has raised doubts about the Government having the numbers for passage of the Bills, unleashed its ire on Harivansh seeking a no-confidence against him. Naidu, however, dismissed a 12-party motion for a vote of no-confidence against the Deputy Chairman.

Before joining politics, Harivansh had shuttled between journalism and other career options. After working with *Dharmyug Patrika* in Mumbai, he left for Hyderabad to work as a bank official. He did not like the job and returned to journalism. He worked with *Ravivar*, Ananda Bazar Patrika's Hindi weekly, in Kolkata. In 1989, he was offered the editor's job in *Prabhat Khabar*, which sold just 250-300 copies. A year later, however, he moved to New Delhi to serve as the then Prime Minister Chandra Shekhar's information advisor till 1991. He joined *Prabhat Khabar* again as editor in Ranchi. Harivansh visited offices of newspapers like *Malayala Manorama* and *Navbharat Times* to study their models, and turned the prospects of *Prabhat Khabar*, which is now among the top ten Hindi newspapers. He published a code of ethics for its reporters saying they will not accept gifts in their line of work.

The Session, cut shorter keeping in mind the spread of the coronavirus, has ended, but for the Lohaitwe, its memories are likely to cause concern for a long time. ■

By AMITASHAH

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH



## ANGLE



# A LESSON FROM BIHAR

## Why bureaucrats need a cooling-off period after retirement

By **MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI**

**T**HERE IS AN Indian bypass surgery for every good rule that exists or should be in the government book. Consider the idea of a cooling-off period for high-level bureaucrats before they join politics after retirement. In 2012, the Election Commission (EC) recommended that they not be allowed to enter politics for two years after they leave the service. This was in the light of what was being witnessed already. The Congress Government at the time shot it down. Being out of work is not a very good place to be in. It is worse for someone with extraordinary power to see the day he becomes meaningless fast approaching. He is easy fodder for temptation to avert that plight. No party in power will allow such a useful category go waste. We saw this phenomenon play out in Gupteshwar Pandey, former DGP of Bihar, taking voluntary retirement to, in all probability, join politics and fight the Assembly polls. In his case, forget the period the EC recommended, but even the three months required for IPS officers to take VRS was waived off.

For a man who has tried the same stunt earlier—and even retired to jump back into service—Pandey never quite got that foothold in electoral politics. He left little to chance this time. Sushant Singh Rajput, a film star, committed suicide in Mumbai and, in the curious success that opportunists who make bold moves get, Pandey

became a household name in his state. He turned the death into one of Bihari hurt and sentiment, engineered a case against Rhea Chakraborty and, with a little help from other co-conspirators, has just about turned all of Bollywood into target practice for any government agency. Pandey has not been coy about his political ambitions. Speaking to the news agency ANI, he said, 'People have been coming to me in large numbers from Begusarai, Sitamarhi, Shahpur and several other districts, telling me that if I wish to enter politics, then I should contest election from their district. Buxar is my home district where I was born and brought up. It'll be a decision by them. If they want me to, then I may enter politics.'

Earlier, you had the example of former Mumbai police commissioner Satyapal Singh who resigned to contest the Lok Sabha election in 2014. He became a minister of state in the HRD ministry and developed a reputation for refuting the theory of evolution. But Singh pales before what Pandey has pulled off—used his office to make himself a political heavyweight in just a couple of weeks.

Assume for a moment that the EC had got its way in 2012 and Pandey couldn't get into politics for two years. What he would be faced with is the possibility of the opposition coming to power, and/or a five-year wait until the next election. That would be a deterrent for most bureaucrats against reckless adventurism. ■

## IDEAS



## RESERVATION

There is trouble brewing in Maharashtra again. The issue of Maratha representation, which had appeared to be contained after the state government under Devendra Fadnavis had managed to pass their reservation quota through the Bombay High Court last year, is on the boil again. The Supreme Court has stayed reservation for the community and Maratha groups are now calling for a strike. Its validity was always going to be questioned. The community, estimated to be around 30 per cent of the state's population, is the state's most politically dominant group. They control most cooperative banks, farmlands, industries and educational institutes; even most of the state's chief ministers have been Marathas. The total number of reservations in the state already exceeded 50 per cent. Yet, the community has been demanding reservations for years, becoming particularly restless in the last few years. Uddhav Thackeray will hope he can conjure up something. ■

## WORD'S WORTH

**'If we keep adding more quotas, you dilute quota for somebody else'**

**ABHIJIT BANERJEE**  
NOBEL LAUREATE

## A BUNGALOW FOR MR YECHURY?

**C**PM CHIEF SITARAM Yechury is back at desperately seeking a 'ghonsla' for himself in Lutyens' Delhi after his party shot down his attempt to secure a third term in Rajya Sabha. Sita, as he is known among the 'friendly' media, was seen as close to Congress president Sonia Gandhi during the decade-long UPA rule—and often muscle-flexed in Manmohan Singh's Government as far as policy was concerned. Out of the reckoning now, after the ascent of Narendra



Modi in 2014 and his second General Election victory in 2019, Yechury's party is also out of power in West Bengal and Tripura, retaining only Kerala. Thus, Elamaram Kareem—one of the Rajya Sabha MPs suspended for unruly protests in the House on the farm sector reform bills—has approached the authorities, requesting them to allot 16 Janpath to him so that his commissar may inhabit it. The bungalow was occupied by the late Veerendra Kumar, who passed away recently.

Replete with the crucial servants' quarters, the bungalow has a special attraction for the CPM stalwart. The quarters are usually allotted by the party to fulltime workers, ensuring precious living space in the national capital from where they can operate. There's a spanner in the works, though. Veerendra Kumar's son, elected as Rajya Sabha MP in place of his father, has petitioned the Government that the bungalow be given to him. If that transpires, Yechury may well have to bid adieu to his plans for basing himself in Lutyens' Delhi. That would also mean a long daily commute from where the CPM general secretary currently resides.

## PILOT PRIYANKA

**E**VER SINCE PRIYANKA Gandhi was compelled by circumstances to jettison her entitled position in the Congress and start playing a more pro-active role, there has been a concerted effort to project her as politically sharp—and rather woke. The attempts to paint her as the author of a compassionate move to bus migrant workers fleeing Delhi and other metros to their hometowns and villages had backfired, exposed by the Uttar Pradesh government as politically motivated. Thereafter, there was an effort to show Priyanka as the real brains behind the rapprochement between Rajasthan Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot and his *bête noire* Sachin Pilot, a development that allowed the state government to

survive—at least for another six months. The truth is that every leader in the party and, more importantly, voters in Rajasthan know that it was the wily Gehlot's own decisive checkmate that saved his government. Gehlot's fast thinking resulted in his luring two of the core 18 MLAs with Pilot over to his residence. Then he told the media that the two had agreed to return to the Congress and support him. This news spread like wildfire and forced a rethink among the other 16 MLAs closeted together in Gurugram. Despite that, and the former deputy chief minister's performance during the trust motion debate, Pilot's MLAs are still eyed with suspicion



by the Gehlot loyalists. The state government has three more years in power that now promise big trouble, especially since the Pilot camp has opened the doors for direct communication with the BJP leadership. Should problems erupt again and threaten the state government, Priyanka Gandhi may have to shoulder most of the blame, since she is now raking in all the praise. What's likely to make matters worse is that, notwithstanding her much-vaunted 'piloting' of the man back into the party, Pilot has reverted to baring his teeth after the recent organisational reshuffle did not accommodate him—and for Gehlot's apparent failure to deliver on his promises.

## MISSING THE GOOD LIFE

**L**A DOLCE VITA IS much hankered after. And some bureaucrats are completely hooked. One such secretary, in a ministry concerned with the economy, had an easy life earlier. Chock-a-block with leisurely lunches at the Gymkhana Club, golf on weekends and, certainly, good wine. Then suddenly, all of that vanished and the gent has found it difficult to live the good life since. Worst of all, there aren't even those lazy, stretchable weekends. Even on weekdays, file-pushing tends to drag till midnight—and at times into the wee hours of the



morning. This change happened under Modi *raj*. Irked to no end at being chained to work with no play, which he had enjoyed in 'better' times, the secretary has been venting in WhatsApp groups, mostly made up of friends from his university days. His pet topics are the dislikes of the current dispensation and the secretary has rarely missed an opportunity to attack the work of other ministries. Of late, the frequency of venting his ire has spiked dramatically, especially after he was denied an overseas posting much sought after.

## BJD BLUES

**I**NSTANT PUNDITS WERE quick to describe the BJD's decision to oppose the farm Bills in Parliament as evidence of the party's fear of losing farmers' votes in Odisha. The BJD has supported many bills introduced by the Narendra Modi Government. But on the farm Bills, its stand meant a depletion of support for the NDA in Rajya Sabha. The snap analysis would have passed, except for the fact that there has not been even a street-corner protest anywhere in Odisha about the new legislation which are expected to dismantle laws binding harvest, storage and sale of farm produce. The only places where opposition to the farm Bills is shrill are Punjab and Haryana—among their rich kulaks. Despite the BJD's

opposition, the NDA had 36 more MPs in its support compared to those against the passage of the Bills. It is these numbers that actually forced opposition MPs to unleash trouble in the House. However, the real reason for the BJD's position on the Bills may have had nothing to do with matters in Parliament. The trigger for the party's rather circumscribed hostility seems to be a CBI raid on its vice president, Debi Prasad Mishra. The raids were related to the Rs 578 crore Seashore chit fund scam and his alleged entanglement with the case, in particular the Mahanadi Boat Project at Cuttack. The probe has been going on since 2013 but it had suffered a lull for a while. The CBI had also raided Mishra's properties in Cuttack, Bhadrak and Narasinghpur, forcing the BJD leadership into a deep sulk. But the party seems to be once again cosyng up to the Union Government by supporting other legislation.



## PRASHANT AT PLAY

**P**UBLICITY, MIXED with hyperbole, is oxygen to the likes of Prashant Kishor. More so, if such publicity can be orchestrated prior to key elections. Kishor has been a pro at leveraging the 'friendly' media to hype coverage of himself before polls, regional or national, to gain access to the lucrative accounts of political parties as well as to network with their chiefs. Kishor has now roped in his journalist friends to carpet-bomb the BJP leadership, including the party general secretaries, with news and interviews. The issues concern controversial topics and are aimed at showing the ruling party in a poor light, such as the distress of migrant workers in the lockdown, criticism of the PM Cares Fund, the RSS affiliate Swadeshi Jagran Manch red-flagging concerns about the farm Bills, fighting between the Lok Janshakti Party and the Janata Dal (United), the BJP's old ally, the Shiromani Akali Dal, snapping ties, and so on. This play is likely to drag until the Bihar, West Bengal and Tamil Nadu Assembly elections are over. ■



By Bibek Debroy

# A Dirge for Desire

## The many Gitas of the Mahabharata

**T**HE MAHABHARATA HAS a section known as 'Ashvamedhika Parva'. In the 18-*parva* classification, 'Ashvamedhika Parva' is the 14th. 'Ashvamedhika Parva' is so named because of a horse (*ashva*) sacrifice (*medha*). In 'Ashvamedhika Parva', there is a chapter known as 'Kama Gita'. This is a conversation between Krishna and Yudhishtira and I find 'Kama Gita' (consisting of a mere 21 *shlokas*) to be quite profound. Here it is and I will make a broader point after I have completed the rendering of 'Kama Gita'.

Vasudeva said, 'O descendant of the Bharata lineage! One does not obtain success by giving up external objects. Success may or may not be obtained by giving up physical objects. Even if one is freed from external objects, one may still hanker after the body. Let the dharma and happiness that result from this be the lot of the enemy. The word '*mrityu*' has two syllables. [*Mrityu*' means death and consists of the syllables '*mrit*' and '*yu*'.] The eternal *brahman* has three syllables. [*Shasvata*' means eternal, consisting of the syllables '*shas*', '*va*' and '*ta*'.] A sense of ownership has two syllables and represents death. [*Mama*' means mine and has the two syllables '*ma*' and '*ma*'. '*Namama*' is lack of ownership and has the three syllables '*na*', '*ma*' and '*ma*'.] A lack of ownership is eternal. O king! Both '*mrityu*' and the *brahman* are inside all creatures, though they are invisible. There is no doubt that they are fighting with each other. O descendant of the Bharata lineage! If it is true that the *atman* is indestructible and eternal, then no injury results if one strikes the physical bodies of creatures. Even after having obtained the earth with all its mobile and immobile objects, if a person has no sense of ownership, there is nothing else left for him to do. O Partha! But there may be a person who dwells in the forest, surviving on forest fare. If he still possesses a sense of ownership in objects, he is in the jaws of death. O descendant of the Bharata lineage! Behold the nature of external and internal enemies. If a person does not see these in creatures, he is freed from great fear. In this world, those with desire in the soul are not praised. But without desire, there can be no inclination towards action. It is because of desire that one often undertakes the rites of

the Vedas, donations, studying the Vedas and austerities. Know that vows, sacrifices, rules, meditation and yoga are not begun because of desire. That which is not undertaken because of desire is dharma. Something with rules as the foundation does not constitute dharma.'

Though what Krishna told Yudhishtira is part of the chapter known as 'Kama Gita', 'Kama Gita' proper starts now. Vasudeva continued, 'Those who know about the ancient accounts have chanted the Kama Gita in this connection. [*Kama Gita*' is something recited by Kama, desire personified. This is not an easy translation. But the sense is that desire cannot be conquered without non-attachment.] O Yudhishtira! Listen to that being recounted in its entirety.'

Kama said, 'No creature is capable of destroying me without using the proper methods. If someone knows my strength and tries to destroy me using weapons, I destroy him using those same weapons and manifest myself again. If he tries to destroy me through sacrifices that involve many kinds of *dakshina*, I become those mobile objects and the *atman* of that karma, thus manifesting myself again. If he tries to destroy me through the rites of the Vedas and Vedanta, I become the tranquil *atman* in those immobile objects and manifest myself again. If someone tries to destroy me through fortitude and the valour of truth, I become those sentiments and he is not able to comprehend me. If someone tries to destroy me through austerities and strictness in vows, I base myself on those austerities of his and manifest myself again. If a learned man tries to destroy me by seeking *moksha*, I base myself on his love for that state of *moksha* and laugh and dance. Amongst all creatures, I alone cannot be slain and am eternal.'

Krishna concluded, 'Therefore, you should desire to perform a sacrifice with many kinds of *dakshina*. O great king! Act in accordance with dharma, and *kama* will also be served by that. Perform a horse sacrifice with the prescribed kinds of *dakshina*. Perform the other different sacrifices, prosperous with offerings of *dakshina*. Do not look towards your slain relatives and be repeatedly distressed. You are incapable of again seeing those who have been killed in this field of battle. Perform great sacrifices, rich with offerings of

copious quantities of *dakshina*. You will then obtain fame in this world and go to the supreme destination after death.’

This ends ‘Kama Gita’. As I said, I find this is extremely profound in what it says about it being difficult to overcome desire. But I said I want to make a broader point. Hinduism has many major texts, some of the *sruti* variety and some of the *smriti* variety. Hinduism doesn’t have one single text or holy book. There are multiple texts. However, forced to choose a single text that encapsulates Hinduism, most people will mention the Bhagavat Gita. It is important. It may be important, but it is a *smriti* text. It doesn’t belong to the *sruti* category. Having said this, there are three texts (referred to as *trayi* or the three texts) that capture the essence of Hinduism, or the Vedanta variety of Hinduism: the Upanisads, Brahmasutra (composed by Badarayana) and the Bhagavat Gita. One shouldn’t form the impression that the Bhagavat Gita is the only Gita. Indeed, the qualification ‘Bhagavat’ does suggest there are other Gitas. There are other such ‘songs’. Not all of those Gitas are in the Mahabharata, but several of them are. The ‘Kama Gita’ is one of those Gitas in the Mahabharata. How many Gitas are there in the Mahabharata? It is difficult to answer that question, since ‘Gita’ is not clearly defined, except for the Anu Gita and the answer depends on how one counts a Gita. One possible list is Anu Gita, Atharya Gita, Rishabha Gita, Kama Gita, Dharma Vyadha Gita, Parashara Gita, Bodhya Gita, Brahmana Gita, Manki Gita, Yajnavalkya Gita, Vamadeva Gita, Vichaknu Gita, Vritra Gita, Shampaka Gita, Shanga Gita, Hamsa Gita and Harita Gita. I have mentioned several of these already in these columns.

The Bhagavat Gita is part of the Mahabharata. A tendency to look at it in isolation is common, but misleading. In Bhandarkar Institute’s Critical Edition, Section 63 is about the Bhagavat Gita. It is named after the Bhagavat Gita and is a sub-*parva* of ‘Bhishma Parva’. This has 994 *shlokas* and 27 chapters. Those who know a little bit about the Bhagavat Gita will be surprised. Isn’t the Bhagavat Gita supposed to have 700 *shlokas* and 18 chapters? Indeed, the Bhagavat Gita does have 700 *shlokas* and 18 chapters, but the

sub-*parva* named after the Bhagavat Gita has a little bit more than what we know as the Bhagavat Gita text. The first nine of the 27 chapters are about preparations and preliminaries. The 10th chapter of this sub-*parva* then starts with the famous words: ‘Dhritarashtra asked, ‘O Sanjaya! Having gathered on the holy plains of Kurukshetra, wanting to fight, what did my sons and the sons of Pandu do?’ The first nine chapters of the sub-*parva* seamlessly lead to the 10th chapter, which is the first chapter of the Bhagavat Gita. There is no break in continuity between the ninth and 10th chapters of the sub-*parva*. If one reads the Bhagavat Gita as part of the Mahabharata, and not as an independent text, I don’t think

there can be any doubt that the Bhagavat Gita is an integral part of the Mahabharata. It isn’t a text that was interpolated later. Lest we forget, *shlokas* from the Bhagavat Gita are also found elsewhere in the Mahabharata, sometimes with minor variations. Those other places are often those other Gitas. Therefore, I think the Bhagavat Gita should be read together with those other Gitas and together with what is said elsewhere in the Mahabharata. That’s the reason those other Gitas, including ‘Kama Gita’, are important.

Many years ago, MR Yardi did a statistical test on the Mahabharata and on the Bhagavat Gita. I will recommend two books of his, both published by Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute: *The Mahabharata: Its Genesis and Growth (A Statistical Study)* in 1986 and *The Bhagavadgita as a Synthesis* in 1991. On multiple authorship of the Bhagavat Gita, he published a paper, ‘Theories of Multiple Authorship of the Bhagavadgita’, in *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* in 1977-78. To quote briefly from his Bhagavat Gita book, ‘The question whether the Gita was composed by one or

more authors has been a matter of dispute among scholars. ... With the development of tests of homogeneity in the theory of statistics, it has now become possible to apply objective tests to the determination of authorship problems. A statistical study of the Anustubh style of the *adhyayas* of the Gita undertaken by this author shows that the variations of this style as between the 18 *adhyayas* are not significant to justify the assumption of its multiple authorship.’ ■



IT IS BECAUSE OF DESIRE THAT ONE OFTEN UNDERTAKES THE RITES OF THE VEDAS, DONATIONS, STUDYING THE VEDAS AND AUSTERITIES. KNOW THAT VOWS, SACRIFICES, RULES, MEDITATION AND YOGA ARE NOT BEGUN BECAUSE OF DESIRE. THAT WHICH IS NOT UNDERTAKEN BECAUSE OF DESIRE IS DHARMA



## Train of Thought

In what is billed to be a major project, over the last six months, Railway Minister Piyush Goyal has been working overtime to ensure that new coaches across the spectrum come with the hands-free advantage. There is a need for such touch-free coaches, particularly after Covid-19. Simply put, doorknobs, taps and other handles will go touch-free as copper-coated handles are slated to become the norm. Copper is known to repel the virus. All this, despite a soaring revenue deficit for railway passengers: Rs 1,060 crore in 2020-2021. But it is learnt that Prime Minister Narendra Modi insists on the new coaches as he wants passengers to be safe from infection. These are testing times for Goyal indeed.

## Defence Dividends

Following the Chinese aggression in Ladakh, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh's importance seems to have increased. Prime Minister Modi recently gave him several assignments. In Moscow, Singh met his Chinese counterpart and also participated in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation meeting, among other engagements. It is learnt that the Prime Minister is happy with Singh's performance. Singh, meanwhile, also maintains cordial relations with Home Minister Amit Shah.

## VIRTUAL DENIAL

In the recent Monsoon Session of Parliament, Congress leader P Chidambaram proposed a unique idea to Rajya Sabha Chairman M Venkaiah Naidu. In a letter, Chidambaram enquired if Parliament could organise video screening facilities for its members so they may participate in the proceedings virtually. With the pandemic raging, such a move could only help maintain social distancing during debates in the House. But as the grapevine says, although Naidu was not opposed to the idea, the Lok Sabha Speaker turned it down since there are many more members in the Lower House than in Rajya Sabha, entailing fresh logistics and security hassles.



## Picture This

In Bihar, Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) supremo Lalu Prasad has adopted a new strategy for the elections in October. In Patna, the RJD has started putting up new posters and banners but Lalu's image is missing. Instead, there are photos of his wife Rabri Devi and son Tejashwi Yadav, who is also leader of the opposition in the Bihar Assembly. In the last state elections when the RJD used Lalu's photo, arch-rival Janata Dal (United) termed it "battle royale", with the two patriarchs, Nitish Kumar and Lalu Prasad, pitted against each other. Lalu is not taking any chances this time and has clearly chosen to go with the next generation.

## State of Bihar

Senior Lok Janshakti Party (LJP) leader Ram Vilas Paswan is ill and in hospital. This may have an impact on the Bihar elections, since the BJP has said that the Janata Dal (United) has to accommodate LJP seats as it will not vacate any seat in the state this time round. It is learnt that Chief Minister Nitish Kumar is not quite keen on such a seat-sharing arrangement. With Paswan in hospital, his actor-turned-politician son Chirag Paswan has taken charge of the LJP. He has already declared that his party would be contesting 180 seats in the state elections, pitting candidates against the JD(U) but not the BJP.

## Bring to Book

A report suggesting Facebook was going easy on hate speeches by members of the BJP has become the subject of a political controversy. The Congress' Shashi Tharoor, who is also the chairman of the parliamentary standing committee on information technology, was in favour of summoning Facebook to Lok Sabha as he wanted more clarity from the social media giant. His comments fuelled a row with BJP MP Nishikant Dubey claiming that the chairman did not have the authority to act without discussing the agenda with members of the panel. Tharoor felt otherwise and went ahead with his plan. Members wonder what made Dubey pull the trigger—his party line or his own views. Since Law Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad had already come down hard on Facebook in the past, Dubey's outburst seems to have baffled the opposition.



## Case in Point

In January, Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan wants to visit Delhi to meet Prime Minister Modi. But before that, contentious issues between the neighbours need to be resolved. India has called for the appointment of an Indian lawyer or Queen's Counsel for Kulbhushan Jadhav to ensure a fair trial in the review of his death sentence. Harish Salve is India's natural choice for the job. For Khan to touch down in Delhi, a lot will depend on which way this case goes.

## WHERE THERE'S A BILL

Can the opposition go to court on the farm Bills issue? The buzz is that lawyer Prashant Bhushan got in touch with Trinamool Congress' Derek O'Brien and made a few suggestions to that effect. Ever since, O'Brien has been holding talks with other opposition leaders. Usually, the Biju Janata Dal and the YSR Congress support the Centre in Rajya Sabha. But on the farm Bills, they did not. Even the BJP's long-time ally, the Shiromani Akali Dal, parted ways over this. Opposition leaders are now looking ahead to Congress chief Sonia Gandhi's return after her medical check-up in the US so they can take concerted action.



# विकसित बिहार के 7 निश्चय



## निश्चय-1 आर्थिक हल, युवाओं को बल



- बिहार स्टूडेंट क्रेडिट कार्ड योजना के अंतर्गत कुल - 1,08,761 विद्यार्थियों के आवेदन स्वीकृत, कुल स्वीकृत राशि 2792 करोड़ है। इनमें से 102118 आवेदकों के बीच 1191 करोड़ रुपये की राशि वितरित।
- मुख्यमंत्री निश्चय स्वयं सहायता भत्ता योजना के अंतर्गत अब तक कुल 4,47,809 आवेदकों को 573 करोड़ ₹0 राशि का भुगतान किया गया।
- कुशल युवा कार्यक्रम के अंतर्गत अब तक कुल 10,04,147 आवेदकों को प्रशिक्षण दिया गया। अभी तक इस कार्यक्रम पर 702 करोड़ रुपये का व्यय हुआ है। कुशल युवा कार्यक्रम के तहत युवाओं को भाषा (हिन्दी/अंग्रेजी) एवं संवाद कौशल, बुनियादी कंप्यूटर ज्ञान एवं व्यवहार कौशल का प्रशिक्षण दिया जाता है।
- 500 करोड़ रुपए के वेंचर कैपिटल फण्ड का गठन तथा इन्क्यूबेशन सेन्टर की स्थापना-राज्य में युवाओं की उद्यमिता को बढ़ावा देने के लिए को लागू किया गया है। इसके तहत अब तक कुल 1,476 स्टार्ट-अप को इन्क्यूबेशन हेतु होस्ट इंस्टीट्यूट के साथ संबद्ध किया गया है।
- सभी विश्वविद्यालयों एवं महाविद्यालयों में निःशुल्क वाई-फाई की सुविधा- सभी 321 संस्थानों में वाई-फाई अधिष्ठापित एवं संचालित है।



## निश्चय-2

### आरक्षित रोजगार, महिलाओं का अधिकार

- राज्य सरकार के सभी सरकारी सेवाओं/संवर्गों के सभी स्तर के एवं सभी प्रकार के पदों पर सीधी नियुक्तियों में महिलाओं को 35 प्रतिशत क्षैतिज आरक्षण की व्यवस्था के तहत अब तक विभागों में कुल 3,535 महिलाओं की नियुक्ति। साथ ही पुलिस में कुल 4423 महिलाओं की नियुक्ति की गई है।

## निश्चय-3 हर घर बिजली



- निर्धारित समय सीमा दिसम्बर 2018 के 2 माह पूर्व ही सभी इच्छुक घरों को विद्युत सम्पर्कता प्रदान की गई है।



## निश्चय-4

### हर घर नल का जल

- ग्रामीण क्षेत्रों में 93,394 वार्डों में 153.31 लाख घरों में एवं शहरी क्षेत्रों में 1787 वार्डों में 9.12 लाख घरों में अर्थात् कुल 162.43 लाख घरों में आज तक जलापूर्ति चालू की गयी है जो राज्य के कुल लक्ष्य का 80% है। आज 1.62 करोड़ परिवारों के घर में शुद्ध पेयजल प्राप्त हो रहा है। 23,600 करोड़ रुपये से अधिक की राशि की योजनाओं पर कार्य हुआ है।
- पंचायती राज विभाग द्वारा 58,612 वार्डों (99 लाख घर) के लक्ष्य के विरुद्ध 55,333 वार्डों (92.41 लाख घर) में काम पूरा कर लिया गया है अर्थात् लक्ष्य का 93.4 % कार्य पूरा कर लिया गया है। इस महीने के अंत तक शेष कार्य पूरा करने का लक्ष्य है।
- लोक स्वास्थ्य अभियंत्रण विभाग द्वारा कुल 56,079 वार्डों (89.53 लाख घर) के लक्ष्य के विरुद्ध कुल 38,061 वार्डों (60.90 लाख घर) में कार्य पूरा कर लिया गया है जो लक्ष्य का 68% है। उल्लेखनीय है कि PHED द्वारा किये जा रहे 56,079 वार्डों में 30,497 वार्ड गुणवत्ता प्रभावित हैं (आर्सेनिक-5,085, फ्लोराईड-3,814, लौह-21,598) जिनके विरुद्ध अब तक 15,808 वार्डों (आर्सेनिक-2,529, फ्लोराईड-3,151, लौह-10,128) का कार्य पूर्ण हो चुका है। गैर-गुणवत्ता प्रभावित 25,582 वार्डों में से अब तक 22,253 वार्डों में कार्य पूरा हो गया है। अक्टूबर, 2020 तक शेष कार्य पूरा करने का लक्ष्य है।
- नगर विकास एवं आवास विभाग द्वारा अब तक सात निश्चय के अंतर्गत कुल लक्षित 2,135 वार्डों में से 1,496 वार्डों में कार्य पूर्ण कर लिया गया है। तथा 8,32,127 घरों के लक्ष्य के विरुद्ध 5,99,092 घरों को आच्छादित कर लिया गया है जो लक्ष्य का 72% है। बचे हुए वार्डों में शेष काम को अक्टूबर, 2020 तक पूरा करने का लक्ष्य है।

## निश्चय-5 घर तक, पक्की गली नालियां



- शहरी एवं ग्रामीण क्षेत्रों को मिलाकर कुल 1,18,031 वार्डों में से 1,16,218 वार्डों में कार्य पूर्ण हो चुका है। इस योजना पर अभी तक 14,200 करोड़ रुपये से अधिक की राशि व्यय हो चुकी है।
- पंचायती राज विभाग द्वारा 8386 ग्राम पंचायतों के 1,14,691 वार्डों में से 1,13,927 वार्डों में निश्चय योजना का कार्यान्वयन पूर्ण कर लिया गया है। इस योजना के कार्यान्वयन में कुल 12,400 करोड़ रुपए का उपयोग किया गया है। शेष कार्य इस महीने के अंत तक पूरा करने का लक्ष्य है।
- नगर विकास एवं आवास विभाग द्वारा नगर क्षेत्रों के 3341 वार्डों में से 2467 वार्डों में इस काम को पूरा किया जा चुका है। इन कार्यों पर अभी तक लगभग 1800 करोड़ रुपये की राशि व्यय हो चुकी है। शेष कार्य अक्टूबर 2020 तक पूरा करने का लक्ष्य है।
- ग्रामीण टोला संपर्क निश्चय योजना के तहत अक्टूबर, 2020 तक सभी संपर्कविहीन टोलों की संपर्कता प्रदान कर दी जायेगी, अब मात्र 186 टोले बचे हैं।



## निश्चय-6

### शौचालय निर्माण, घर का सम्मान



- सरकार का लक्ष्य है कि 2 अक्टूबर, 2020 तक बिहार को खुले में शौच से मुक्त कर दिया जाय। 15 अक्टूबर तक सभी को शौचालय निर्माण के भुगतान की कार्रवाई की जायेगी।
- शहरी क्षेत्रों में शौचालय विहीन परिवारों के लिए 2500 सामूहिक शौचालयों का निर्माण जारी।
- खुले में शौच से मुक्ति तथा पीने का शुद्ध पेयजल हो तो 90 प्रतिशत बीमारियों से मुक्ति मिल सकती है।



## निश्चय-7 अवसर बढ़े, आगे बढ़ें



- प्रत्येक जिले में अभियंत्रण महाविद्यालय, (सभी 38 जिलों में संचालित, 7 जिलों में पूर्व से भवन निर्मित, अन्य 7 जिलों में नये भवन का निर्माण कार्य पूर्ण तथा शेष 24 जिलों में भवन निर्माणाधीन)
- प्रत्येक जिले में पॉलीटेक्निक कॉलेज, (सभी 38 जिलों में संचालित, 19 जिलों में पूर्व से भवन निर्मित, अन्य 12 जिलों में नये भवन का निर्माण कार्य पूर्ण तथा शेष 7 जिलों में भवन निर्माणाधीन)
- प्रत्येक जिले में महिला आई०टी०आई० (सभी 38 जिलों में संचालित, 7 जिलों में पूर्व से भवन निर्मित, अन्य 8 जिलों में नये भवन का निर्माण कार्य पूर्ण तथा शेष 23 जिलों में भवन निर्माणाधीन)
- प्रत्येक जिले में जी०एन०एम० संस्थान (14 जिलों में पूर्व से भवन निर्मित, अन्य 8 जिलों में नये भवन का निर्माण कार्य पूर्ण तथा शेष 16 जिलों में भवन निर्माणाधीन)
- प्रत्येक अनुमंडल में ए०एन०एम० संस्थान (47 अनुमंडलों में पूर्व से भवन निर्मित, अन्य 30 अनुमंडलों में नये भवन का निर्माण कार्य पूर्ण तथा शेष 24 में से 22 अनुमंडलों में भवन निर्माणाधीन)
- प्रत्येक अनुमंडल में आई०टी०आई० संस्थान (सभी 101 अनुमंडलों में संचालित, 25 अनुमंडलों में पूर्व से भवन निर्मित, अन्य 16 अनुमंडलों में नये भवन का निर्माण कार्य पूर्ण तथा शेष 60 अनुमंडलों में भवन निर्माणाधीन)।
- इसके अतिरिक्त 33 पैरा-मेडिकल संस्थानों एवं 5 फार्मसी संस्थानों तथा सभी चिकित्सा महाविद्यालयों में नर्सिंग कॉलेज की स्थापना की जा रही है।



बिहार सरकार



By MEHR TARAR

# NO COUNTRY FOR WOMEN

## *Honour and shame in Pakistan*

IT HAPPENED SO long ago, it is a nightmare I remember only in its scariest bits. A story that I repeated to a few people over the years but is one of those things that I wish I could completely erase from my mind. I thought I had. Worse things happened to me before and after that event, things that created a storm so devastating within me, I became a different version of me that was never really me.

One day, I will write about those things. Maybe not. Some things remain locked in that half-forgotten part of the mind. A survival tactic, perhaps. An unvisited place covered with dust, cobwebs, white covering sheets. One day, it will be completely invisible.

It was a forlorn hill station in a cold month, barely any tourist anywhere. I was there with a couple of friends for a night. The place we were staying at was one of those government-run guest houses that seem unfriendly even in the nicest of lights. It was the first part of the 1990s. I was in my mid-20s.

Waking up early, we had some breakfast in the room. Or was it just tea? My friends left to get something from some nearby place; one of them told me to lock the door. Feeling comfortably sleepy, I didn't move. Suddenly, I felt a presence. A guest house staff member was inside the room. Whether he had lightly tapped at the door or had simply walked inside the room, I couldn't say. Harshly, I asked him to get out, saying that I would call the reception to have the breakfast dishes removed later.

He left the room, I slid deeper into the blanket for a few moments, or was it a few minutes, I couldn't say. Just as I was about to get up to lock the door, I felt as if someone was standing at the foot of my bed. I opened my eyes. It was the same man. He was looking at me with a strange empty expression that alerted and scared every sleepy bit of me.

As I shouted at him why he had come into my room again, unannounced, he moved. He attacked me. Trying to grab me into a fold that in no vocabulary is definable as an embrace, in a matter of a few seconds, I was screaming and cursing and even threatening him of dire consequences if he didn't stop, still on that bed trying to keep the blanket on me with one hand so that my bare calves remained hidden, and fighting him with the other hand.

I don't remember how long it was. Suddenly, he ran out of the room. I froze. Slowly, I stepped off the bed. I locked the room. Shaking uncontrollably, I waited for my friends to return.

That man had not touched anything in the room. Not a few thousand rupees lying on the mantelpiece, not anything else. He had entered that room to assault me. To rape me? He knew he was recognisable, being an employee of that guest house. He still attacked me. After running out of my room, he apparently vanished from the guest house. I don't know what happened to him after that.

There was no police report. It wasn't that I dreaded the attention of an investigation, the unease of answering questions about the intention of that man, where he had touched me, what I was wearing, who I was, what I was doing there, should my family be informed. It was just that I didn't even think of filing a report. Sexual assaults are kept a secret. Even the most violent ones. I learned



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**A LEGAL SYSTEM SUCH AS PAKISTAN'S WITH ITS SYSTEMIC WEAKNESSES IS UNABLE TO JUSTIFY THE ABSOLUTE, THE STRICTEST PUNISHMENT. A LEGAL SYSTEM THAT APPEARS IN ALMOST ALL CASES TO BE IMPOTENT TO PROVE THE GUILT OF A DEFENDANT BEYOND ALL REASONABLE DOUBT, SHOULDN'T EVEN TALK ABOUT PUBLIC HANGINGS, CHEMICAL CASTRATIONS**

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that as a teenager. I relearned it in my 20s.

For days, I had the half-circle of his steely fingers on my throat, the kind of marks that appear when someone is trying to choke you. The upper part of my right arm was bruised. For weeks, even the tiniest sound startled me. For months, I half-slept, terrified. For years, I remembered his eyes when I saw him standing at the foot of the bed.

The gang rape of a woman, mother of three, on September 9th, in Lahore, has taken Pakistan by its drooped shoulders, shaking it to its barely alive conscience. In a country where a number of women are murdered under the awful connotation of 'honour killing' every year, the outrage over every case that for one reason or the other catches media attention is almost hypocritical. The recent kidnapping, rape and murder of the five-year-old Marwa of Karachi, and the violent rape of the motorway victim in front of her children are merely two images of a gigantic landscape that is so horrific that there is an

almost helpless need to camouflage it in the outcry over public hangings and chemical castrations.

The motorway gang rape and dacoity would have gone unreported if the police had not finally arrived to the rescue of the woman after a passer-by made a call to the emergency police number 15. Her calls to the motorway emergency number were not responded to. The victim/survivor would have kept her pain to herself and her family, whatever little I could decipher from her comments to one female journalist whom she spoke to with the promise not to reveal her identity. Now that journalist regularly posts updates of the victim/survivor's condition and her questions to the police and government.

The highest officials of the Punjab police and the office of the chief minister of Punjab are in constant touch with the victim/survivor.

Why the victim/survivor did not want to report the rape, only she knows. Most rape victims whose cases become public

go through multiple trials: the unimaginable horror of rape, media reporting of rape, police investigation, and a trial in court. Familial and societal judgements become scarlet letters.

So much of that is under a noisy debate in Pakistan these days. The grief and anger over the motorway rape are mixed with outright fear: if this could happen to her, it could happen to anyone. This time, the victim/survivor is not a woman from a backward area. She was not raped in a dark room. She does not belong to that underprivileged part of society that despite its reluctance to make its 'shame' public, is forced to file a report when the violence of the rape makes immediate hospitalisation mandatory. The educated, the privileged, the independent-thinking Pakistan is justifiably traumatised that someone from their world was raped on a motorway after being dragged from her car, after being viciously beaten, after her children were threatened and beaten.

No one is safe. Not the five-year-old-Marwa who went to buy sweets from the nearby shop at 7am, or the mother of three

after her car ran out of petrol around midnight on a dark and deserted motorway.

No words suffice for even coming close to imagining the pain of the five-year-old Marwa who was abducted, raped and killed. I cannot begin to imagine the pain of the woman who was beaten, saw her children getting beaten, and was raped in front of her children by two men in the darkness of the forest off the motorway. I cannot begin to imagine the pain of any child, girl or boy, or a female, who is raped, and is killed, or is left alive to live with an invisible part of them dead forever.

A suspect in the Marwa case is under arrest. One of the two suspects of the motorway rape case is in police custody, while efforts to arrest the other are in full force.

The Lahore Capital City Police Officer Muhammad Umer Sheikh's comment on the gang rape sparked anger and elicited condemnation from the government and the opposition as well as almost every Pakistani who has a voice via social or

## PRIME MINISTER IMRAN KHAN'S IDEA OF A PUNISHMENT OF CHEMICAL CASTRATION FOR SERIAL RAPISTS IS A KNEE-JERK REACTION AT A TIME WHEN PAKISTAN HAS ONE OVERARCHING DILEMMA, CIRCA SEPTEMBER 2020: SAFETY OF CHILDREN, FEMALE AND MALE, AND FEMALES OF ALL AGES

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## THE BRUTALITY OF RAPE IS MIXED WITH THE IDEA OF 'HONOUR' AND 'SHAME' OF A FEMALE AND HER FAMILY IN SUCH A DEEP MIX OF RELIGIOUS ETHOS, CULTURAL MORES AND SOCIETAL BINARIES OF THE REPORTABLE AND WHAT-MUST-NEVER-BE-REVEALED THAT MOST CASES OF RAPE REMAIN NOT JUST UNREPORTED BUT UN-TALKED ABOUT. THE BRUTALISATION OF BODY BECOMES A SECRET OF 'SHAME'. IT IS NEVER TO BE REVEALED. NOT EVEN TO THE PEOPLE CLOSEST TO YOU

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electronic media. The CCPO, his words dipped in carelessness, talked to a TV channel expressing his 'surprise' why the woman decided to travel at night with her children, and that too without checking her petrol gauge, is a microcosm of mainstream societal mindset: it is a woman's responsibility to protect herself from getting raped.

The darkly jaded system of victim blaming is unchanged. She-asked-for-it is regurgitated in its many twisted forms. It does not have any expiration date. Only the names and the faces of perpetrators change, the same snigger, the same blame shifting, superimposing on one another in a blurry morality. The convoluted system is at a loss of pretexts when the victim is a five-year-old girl, an eight-year-old boy, a woman in her 70s, a woman who is with her children, a woman who is dead.

The CCPO has apologised for his insensitive words.

**O**UTSIDE THE WORLD of Twitter, the words of the CCPO come in the form of muted rebukes, as the loud exclamatory lament of almost every Pakistani: may Allah have mercy on everyone, why was she travelling so late at night? Why did she go out at night alone? Myriad questions, all manifestation of that etched-in-stone acceptance of male depravity and female '*majboor*' to exist in a world in which men do bad things and will do bad things, making it a female's 'obligation' to always ensure that she is 'safe'.

Who is safe? Which place is safe? What time is safe? What clothes are safe? What age is safe? Which environment is safe?

Member of National Assembly Shandana Gulzar, of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, the ruling party, said on a prime-time talk show on September 14th: '[You know what] the ugliest thing is... The NGO, War Against Rape, gave the statistics. When we tackle this issue in Pakistan, it will bring a revolution, [it will] produce resistance. Gynaecologists ask girls: who raped you? Eighty-two per cent of the perpetrators are father, paternal uncle, paternal grandfather, maternal grandfather, maternal uncle, aunt's husband, [victim's] brother. The mother brings the girl to the gynaecologist instead of taking her to a police station. The mother says that the father [of the victim] raped her, but that she can't leave her husband. So what does the mother do? She gets the pregnancy aborted. And the girl says: 'my father did not remove my *dupatta*

[sign of her honour]'. That her rapist father kept her 'honour'.

Should I re-ask: Who is safe? Which place is safe? What time is safe? What clothes are safe? What age is safe? Which environment is safe?

Much needs to be said, a great deal is being currently discussed. Much is to happen. All in the category of must, not should. Deeper inculcation of values at home. Parents as good role models. Sex education at a young age. The idea of consent taught at home. Stricter laws. Special courts. Strengthening of the legal system for prompt justice. Guarantee of convictions in open-and-shut cases. Gender-sensitisation courses for all law enforcement agencies. More female officers, doctors, lawyers, judges in every rape case. The state to be a party in a rape case to rule out the option of an out-of-court settlement, a forced pardon. No legal room for a pre-arrest bail for an alleged rapist. National sex offender database. Psychological and scientific evaluations and long-term studies of sexual offenders. Nationwide inclusion of courses on consent for pubescent boys. A national helpline, one number for the entire country. Mandatory immediate response of police to a distress call of a female.

Not much will change until the mindset changes. The government promises justice. The blatherskites of the opposition spout big words to underscore the government's inability to provide protection against rape. The populist demand for public hanging is an understandable reaction to a heinous crime, but it is morally and legally a non-starter. Despite my categorical repudiation of capital punishment, I empathise with the demands to have the strictest punishments for the most heinous crimes.

My objection is simple: in a country like Pakistan with its systematically flawed legal and justice dynamics, absolute punishments make little sense. A legal system such as Pakistan's with its systemic weaknesses is unable to justify the absolute, the strictest punishment. A legal system that appears in almost all cases to be impotent to prove the guilt of a defendant beyond ALL reasonable doubt, shouldn't even talk about public hangings, chemical castrations.

Prime Minister Imran Khan's idea of a punishment of chemical castration for serial rapists is a knee-jerk reaction at a time when Pakistan has one overarching dilemma, circa September 2020: safety of children, female and male, and females of all ages.

Prime Minister Khan, addressing a joint session of

parliament on September 16th, said: “[Most] sex offenders are repeat offenders. The suspect Abid [of the motorway gang rape] is on the run. He was convicted in an earlier gang rape. Whatever punishment he was given was obviously not *Ibraat-naak*, and ergo, he raped again. This rape is reported. How many such crimes he committed between his two reported gang rapes that were unreported? A very small number of rape cases are reported. Child abuse cases in which children are brutalised, and in rape cases of women, we can imagine the trauma and grief they [the victims/survivors] go through. We are preparing to legislate a bill that has an *Ibraat-naak* punishment. People should be scared. That if they destroy someone’s life, it would have consequences. *Insha Allah*, in a few days, we’ll present the bill.”

*Ibraat-naak*, loosely translated, is a punitive action so

**THE LAHORE CAPITAL CITY POLICE OFFICER MUHAMMAD UMER SHEIKH, HIS WORDS DIPPED IN CARELESSNESS, TALKED TO A TV CHANNEL EXPRESSING HIS ‘SURPRISE’ WHY THE WOMAN DECIDED TO TRAVEL AT NIGHT WITH HER CHILDREN, AND THAT TOO WITHOUT CHECKING HER PETROL GAUGE, IS A MICROCOSM OF MAINSTREAM SOCIETAL MINDSET: IT IS A WOMAN’S RESPONSIBILITY TO PROTECT HERSELF FROM GETTING RAPED**



stringent, it becomes a standard for deterrence.

Castration of a few rape convicts will not end the occurrence of rape when the majority of rape cases are not even reported. The privileged, the upper class, the upper middle class do not report rape. The brutality of rape is mixed with the idea of ‘honour’ and ‘shame’ of a female and her family in such a deep mix of religious ethos, cultural mores and societal binaries of the reportable and what-must-never-be-revealed that most cases of rape remain not just unreported but un-talked about. The brutalisation of body becomes a secret of ‘shame’. It is never to be revealed. Not even to the people closest to you.

The Sisyphean dilemma of making this world a safer place for children, for females, exists in its eternal loop.

I see it all around me. Women are defined in terms of daughter, sister, wife, mother. A female’s body, since birth, assumes

the connotation of a family’s honour. A woman’s character is narrowed into the barometer of a family’s shame. The idea is protection of a female as a daughter, sister, wife, mother. Females must be respected because they are someone’s daughter, sister, mother, not for themselves. The worst expletives have the words *ma* (mother) and *bahen* (sister) and the threat of sexual violence to them, turning their anatomy into points to assail and denigrate. Safety of females is tied to their relationships that describe them. Love and respect of women take a backseat to ‘protection’ of women. Millions of good, decent men become irrelevant when millions of men have selective morality vis-à-vis their behaviour towards females.

Roving eyes; hands moving to thighs, backs of females seated next to them; sexual innuendos in normal conversations; trivialisation of sexual crossing of lines; gaslighting; slut-shaming; victim blaming; looks-shaming; body-shaming; categorisation of females in brackets of ‘good’ and ‘bad’, ‘pious’ and ‘fast’; fake confusion about consent; the first comment about any female focusing on her looks; trivialisation of sex, there is so much that is so much a part of our societal fibre, it is not even seen as a deviance.

Having written about crimes against children and females for a few years, I feel a deep sense of redundancy in my words. What gives me some strength is our youth. When I talk to my son, my nephews, their friends, I feel there is hope in this world. Gender equality is not a debate for them, they take it as a given. Sexual or any other form of violence towards females, anyone in a vulnerable, weak position, is a red line their minds accept as a part of their DNA. Their stances are unequivocal. They consider females their equal, not a weaker being who needs protection. They reject

violence. They reject capital punishment. They reject punitive measures. They believe in the concept of moral rehabilitation. They believe in changing the world without adding more violence to avenge violence.

My niece, whom I love more than the daughter I don’t have, knows she is loved and respected. She does not need to be protected. She talks about her pain. She shares others’ anguish. Her empathy for every female in her world and beyond is her strength. The only armour that she proudly wears is the knowledge that her loved ones are always there for her. I want to believe in their idea of the world, their ideals of existence.

Perhaps their way will help me exorcise the ghosts that haunt every part of my scream-less nightmares. ■

*Mehr Tarar is a well-known columnist and author based in Lahore*



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# COVID-19

# THE SITUATION

## HOW WILL INDIA COPE?

By LHENDUP G BHUTIA



Migrant workers undergo Covid-19 detection tests at a bus terminal in New Delhi, August 18

# R G E

Photograph by T NARAYAN

**T**ill about a month ago, when Dr Farah Ingale would make her rounds at the Hiranandani Hospital in Vashi, she had been feeling hopeful. The early period of the pandemic, when the number of infections in the Mumbai region had risen so quickly that hospitals had begun to be overwhelmed, now seemed like a distant memory. The hospital, which lies in Mumbai's satellite city Navi Mumbai, attracts patients from the larger Mumbai Metropolitan Region. This is the area where the number of cases had remained high even as the pandemic had somewhat abated in Mumbai. But it was getting better even here.

By August, the beds reserved for Covid-19 patients in the hospital usually remained full, but if you came enquiring for one in the morning, she says, you would find it by evening.

“It (the outbreak) was slowly going away. I thought from now on there was going to be just a few cases, something manageable (for the city’s healthcare system). And then at some point, a vaccine would come,” says Ingale, director of internal medicine at the hospital. “I thought the worst was over.”

It wasn’t just her. Although Covid-19 cases had begun to spread in the interior of the country by then, several metros where the pandemic had first made such an impact were now appearing to improve. By June and July, the number of daily reported infections, hospitalisations and fatalities had appeared to stabilise in these metros. By August, it had improved even further. The peak, it was said, was behind us. In Mumbai, the city’s municipal board had begun discussing the closure of jumbo centres, each of which has the capacity to take in over 1,000 patients. Some 73 small nursing homes in the city, which were being used to treat Covid-19 patients, were asked to stop doing so.

All of this has changed in the last few weeks. Even while the virus has begun to surge in states and districts where previously it hadn’t made much inroads, large numbers of daily cases are being reported in several cities earlier thought to have crossed their peaks, leading some to characterise this as a ‘second wave’. Daily cases in the country now hover close to the one lakh range. Bengaluru and Delhi are again reporting daily cases in excess of 3,000. The Mumbai Metropolitan Region and the Pune region each add around 5,000 cases daily. Even Kerala, the state which was believed to have asserted some control over the pandemic, added over 5,000 cases on September 24th. India has already notched over 20 lakh cases in September (as of September 24th), more than any country ever did in a single month. In a few more weeks, India is expected to overtake the US for the largest number of infections.

In Mumbai, plans for closing down the jumbo centres have been dropped. Even 27 of the 73 nursing homes, previously told to stop taking in Covid-19 patients because of alleged poor management, have now been asked to do so again. In Vashi’s Hiranandani Hospital, waiting lists for beds reserved for Covid-19 patients have again crossed the 100 mark. Several districts and villages seeing a surge, like those in Maharashtra’s interior, are reporting such high numbers that healthcare systems are failing to cope. “I used to think things were getting better. But there’s a full-blown second wave going on,” says Dr Ingale. “Now I feel nobody can tell anything.”

**“don’t think we have peaked yet,” says Rijo John, a health economist who has been tracking the rise of cases in India. “If you look at the graph (of daily infections), we are still rising.”** As of September 23rd, India had crossed over 57 lakh total cases. According to John, by the end of this month, the country would have breached the 65 lakh tally.

One of the reasons offered for high figures across the country is that there is a greater rate of testing. But this is a flawed argument because a rising proportion of tests are returning positive results.

GETTY IMAGES



## A BEHAVIOURAL CHANGE IS OCCURRING WHEREBY CARELESSNESS SETTING IN, IS CAUSING AND KERALA, FESTIVALS LIKE GANESH CHATURTHI

As John points out, although India has been consistently adding over 90,000 cases daily, the number of tests conducted daily has not kept pace with that fact. If one takes an average of seven days, he says, the country has remained at the one million testing mark for around 19 days. “We should at least be doing two million tests daily. In fact, if you look at the last couple of days, where the number of daily reported cases is getting less than 90,000, the number of tests has actually been further reduced. This is not good. It might be good for a narrative, but the gap (between reported cases and the real picture) will widen.”

According to experts like John, we are not really getting the true picture of the surge in cases. Test positivity rates—the per-



An immersion ceremony after Ganesh Chaturthi in Mumbai, September 1

## THE RESUMPTION OF ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES, COUPLED WITH A THE CURRENT UPTICK IN METROS. IN MAHARASHTRA AND ONAM ARE BELIEVED TO HAVE INCREASED THE SPREAD

centage of people who test positive for the virus among those who have been tested overall—have consistently remained high across the country. Ideally, this rate should stay below 5 per cent. Anything above suggests that the country should be ramping up testing. But this has not happened. “Right now, India has a test positivity rate of about 9.3 per cent or so which is not good. Maharashtra, which adds close to 24 per cent of all cases in India, has seen test positivity rates of around 25 per cent. (It is currently nearly 20 per cent.) Some states like Goa, which has a test positivity rate of 30 per cent, are actually reducing daily tests,” John says.

Of late, the Government has begun to highlight India’s high recovery rates. The country has consistently seen around 90,000 or so

recoveries, or over 80 per cent, every day. But, as John points out, recovery rate percentage isn’t the metric one should be looking at. “It doesn’t really say anything because the base (of infected cases) is so high. Covid-19 has a low mortality rate, and it is even lower in India. So technically, even if you don’t do anything, many of these people will anyway be recovering,” John says.

In a few weeks, India is expected to overtake the US as the country with the highest number of coronavirus cases worldwide. More unlocking of cities, the beginning of festivals across the country next month where people will further intermingle, and the onset of winter, which some fear can lead to a bigger spread of the virus, will add to the burden.

When the national peak does occur, many experts point out it is likely to be a long and sustained one. “Every part of the country, we must understand, is in a different phase of the disease. So while it will go down in some place, it will begin to shoot up elsewhere, or there will be resurgence in some other part,” says Dr Jugal Kishore, head of the department of community medicine at Delhi’s Safdarjung Hospital. “So when the (national) peak comes, given the country’s large size and dense populations, it is most likely to stay high for a long time,” he adds.

The 1918 Spanish Flu, which Covid-19 is most often compared with, came in four waves across two years. The deadliest was the second

wave that began in the latter half of 1918.

Although it is suggested that countries in Europe and eastern Asia have begun to experience a second Covid-19 wave, there is no real clarity if this is really the case. Not everyone categorises the recent surge in cases in some Indian cities as a second wave either. The idea of a second wave, they point out, is much talked about but ill-defined. The first wave never really stopped and the virus is simply spreading into new populations in a given area or resurging because people have let their guard down.

“The virus was never really eliminated from a city like Delhi. It was just, maybe, a little suppressed,” says Kishore. “Many people who had stayed hidden indoors all these months are now going out

either because of the ‘unlock’ or because they don’t fear the virus any more. So when people start going out, the virus spreads,” he adds.

A behavioural change is occurring in many places, experts point out, where the resumption of economic activities coupled with a carelessness setting in is causing this current uptick in metros. In Maharashtra and Kerala, recent festivals like Ganesh Chaturthi and Onam—although muted but during which many people still gathered in close proximity and travelled around the state to meet families and relatives—are believed to have increased the spread.

“It’s unfortunate, but that is what happened. The virus spread during the festival,” says Dr Rahul Pandit, Director of Critical Care at Fortis Hospital in Mumbai’s Mulund area and a member of the taskforce advising the Maharashtra government on Covid-19.

What has the surge of the virus through all of September meant for an already battered economy? India’s GDP plunged

by nearly 24 per cent in the first quarter of this financial year. No other big economy has shrunk so much during the pandemic. In the same period, America’s GDP fell by 9.1 per cent. As the virus continues to spread, economists and global institutions have begun to further cut their projections for the country’s economic growth. Goldman Sachs now estimates India will see a 14.8 per cent contraction in GDP for this financial year; the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) claims the economy will shrink by about 10.2 per cent.

The pain has been so great that it is unlikely that strict controls can be re-imposed, even though infections are rising more swiftly than ever. Public transport has begun to resume operations. The Delhi Metro has restarted. Mumbai, for the moment, has kept its local trains reserved for a small fraction of commuters but is now considering letting go of its social distancing rules on buses. Rules about public gathering are getting looser too.

GETTY IMAGES

A market in New Delhi,  
August 26



**SEROPREVALENCE SURVEYS SHOW ONE IN FOUR PEOPLE IN AHMEDABAD WERE ALREADY EXPOSED. IN DELHI, 33 PER CENT SAMPLES TESTED POSITIVE. IN MUMBAI, 57 PER CENT OF THOSE LIVING IN SLUMS HAD ANTIBODIES**



**“The outbreak was slowly going away. At some point, a vaccine would come. I thought the worst was over”**

**– DR FARAH INGALE** director, internal medicine, Hiranandani Hospital, Vashi



**“It’s unfortunate, but that is what happened. The virus spread during the festival”**

**– DR RAHUL PANDIT** director, Critical Care, Fortis, Mulund



Restaurants are gradually expected to open soon as well. And the Centre has issued notifications telling state and municipal governments they cannot impose localised lockdowns without consulting the Union Government.

Most state governments are caught in a catch-22 situation. Madan Sabnavis, chief economist at CARE Ratings, points out that many of them would have liked to open up economic activities after they had a measure of the virus. But they are now so broke that they can’t help but open up. “Even if this will no doubt lead to a spike in cases, it is unlikely there will be localised lockdowns too. That’s just how bad it has become,” he says.

According to Sabnavis, after the first two poor quarters, with more economic activities being allowed, there had been hope that the next two quarters would bring some cheer. “There was a lot of pent-up demand. And when they first began unlocking, there was a bit of a boom. Sales of cars, electronics, everything went up. So it was looking good. But this month (with its increase in cases), has brought bad news,” he says.

Sujan Hajra, chief economist and executive director at Anand Rathi Shares & Stock Brokers, points out that this rapid increase in cases affects every aspect of the economy. “The pace of relaxations will no doubt become slower. So work in factories, offices and retail establishments will slow down. Many companies that were hoping they would be able to tide over will just become unviable and shut down. And the worst thing is, since it now looks like nobody knows how long this will go on, consumer sentiments will hit rock bottom. And everybody—companies, households—will stop spending.”

As cases surge, many wonder if herd immunity is not something that may eventually slow down, or perhaps even end, the outbreak. The concept of herd immunity lies at the heart of global efforts to stop the spread of the pandemic. This can be achieved through a vaccine.

But there is another, more dangerous, way. For the virus to wash through the population and naturally infect people. Pursuing such a goal with no vaccine would probably come at a stag-

gering cost of human lives, as infectious disease experts assert, and may not even occur anytime soon.

Still, many ask that if the disease makes its way through the population in a given area in the manner it is doing in India now, wouldn’t herd immunity in some areas of high infections be something that’s not far behind?

There is no fixed idea of when herd immunity might kick in for a virus like Covid-19. Some have estimated that about 60 to 70 per cent of a given population would need to develop an immune response to the virus. One group of researchers has estimated it could be even as low as 10 to 20 per cent, although most epidemiologists have claimed this unlikely. Most believe herd immunity will probably require 50-60 per cent to develop.

**S**eroprevalence surveys have found that many parts of India have already appeared to develop fairly high levels of antibodies. One in four people in Ahmedabad, it was found in a survey earlier this month, were already exposed to the virus. In Delhi’s last sero-survey, the results of which were announced last week, 33 per cent of the samples tested positive. Mumbai’s sero-survey, revealed at the end of July, was the most interesting. Conducted in only three wards in the city, although those who worked on the survey claim it would more or less be representative of the entire city, it found about 57 per cent of individuals residing in slums had already developed antibodies. About 16 per cent of those in non-slum areas were found to have developed antibodies. Taken together, this would make the seroprevalence reported in Mumbai among the highest in the world. Some wonder if the waning of the pandemic in Dharavi’s slum is not a reflection of the city authorities’ much-touted ‘Dharavi model’ containment measures but because the virus went through the slum’s population, it made them immune to it. A follow-up sero-survey in Mumbai, conducted a month later, has now been completed and is expected to be released soon.

One of the individuals involved in the sero-survey,



A gym in New Delhi,  
September 14

**IT IS SUGGESTED THAT EUROPE AND EAST ASIA ARE EXPERIENCING A SECOND WAVE. BUT THERE IS NO CLARITY. NOT EVERYONE CALLS THE INDIAN SURGE A SECOND WAVE. THE FIRST WAVE NEVER STOPPED AND THE VIRUS IS JUST SPREADING**

Sandeep Juneja, professor and dean of the School of Technology and Computer Science at the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR had partnered with the city's municipal board and NITI Aayog to conduct the survey), has come out with another interesting paper. This one—a collaboration among a few TIFR computer scientists—is a computer simulation model that factors in complicated things like the resumption of the city's crowded trains and buses, analyses when and how Mumbai could look to open up the city entirely. "These projections were developed taking into account a possible second wave that would happen when the city opened up," says Juneja.

According to the paper, if workplaces are opened gradually, about 33 per cent in September, 50 per cent in October and 100 per cent in November, with schools and colleges resuming in the first week of January next year, the second wave of infections and hospitalisations that would come from such a step would be much more manageable for the city's healthcare system.

The simulation model also finds that the city would have achieved herd immunity by around December this year or January next year. "By then we estimate that about 75 per cent in slums and 50 per cent in non-slum areas would have been exposed to

the virus. When you reach those numbers, you don't see so many new infections," Juneja says. "It does not mean that the virus will go away. But it will be small. Say, between 200 to 500 daily cases. Not like the 1,500-2,000 cases that we see now."

This model comes with a caveat. If, as some fear, exposure to the virus does not grant immunity and a high number of reinfections occur, then the idea of achieving herd immunity becomes much more complicated. There have, however, only been a few cases of confirmed reinfections globally. Most of the re-infected also appeared to develop a much milder version of the infection.

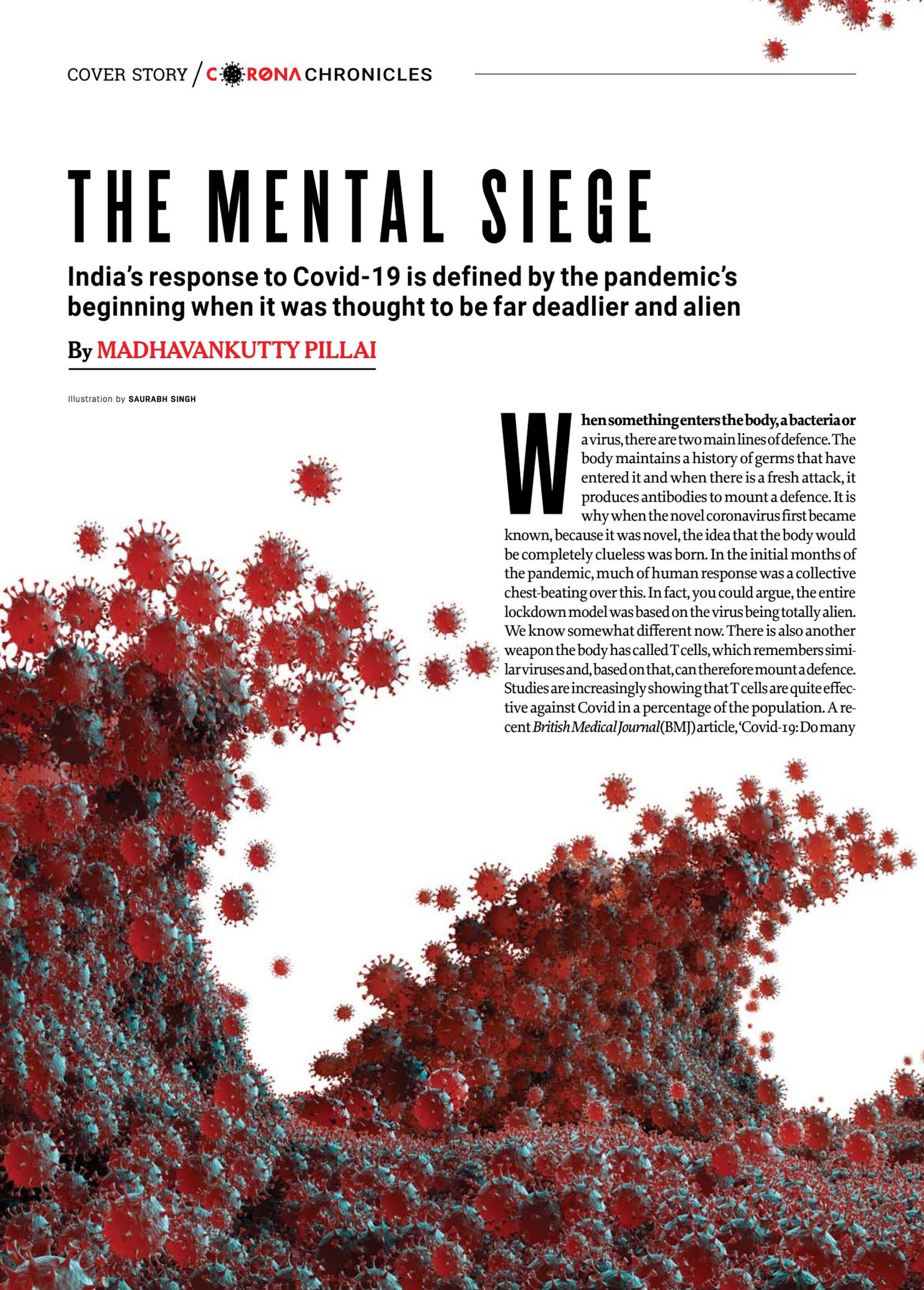
Kishore is hopeful that at some point certain pockets will begin to exhibit herd immunity. He believes there has been far too much panic, that economic activities and transport systems should be opened up, while the elderly and vulnerable are protected at home. "The virus is still only half-a-year old. So we don't know everything. But this theory that reinfections will stop herd immunity from happening doesn't make sense. If there were to be so many reinfection cases, our hospitals would be filled with the same people," says Kishore. "It's tough, I know, and it's going to look bad in the next few weeks. But if people are careful and wear masks, then it will slowly get better." ■

# THE MENTAL SIEGE

India's response to Covid-19 is defined by the pandemic's beginning when it was thought to be far deadlier and alien

By **MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI**

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH



**W**hen something enters the body, a bacteria or a virus, there are two main lines of defence. The body maintains a history of germs that have entered it and when there is a fresh attack, it produces antibodies to mount a defence. It is why when the novel coronavirus first became known, because it was novel, the idea that the body would be completely clueless was born. In the initial months of the pandemic, much of human response was a collective chest-beating over this. In fact, you could argue, the entire lockdown model was based on the virus being totally alien. We know somewhat different now. There is also another weapon the body has called T cells, which remembers similar viruses and, based on that, can therefore mount a defence. Studies are increasingly showing that T cells are quite effective against Covid in a percentage of the population. A recent *British Medical Journal* (BMJ) article, 'Covid-19: Do many

people have pre-existing immunity?’ said: ‘With public health responses around the world predicated on the assumption that the virus entered the human population with no pre-existing immunity before the pandemic, serosurvey data are leading many to conclude that the virus has, as Mike Ryan, WHO’s head of emergencies, put it, “a long way to burn.” Yet a stream of studies that have documented SARS-CoV-2 reactive T cells in people without exposure to the virus are raising questions about just how new the pandemic virus really is, with many implications. At least six studies have reported T cell reactivity against SARS-CoV-2 in 20% to 50% of people with no known exposure to the virus.’

The human body being able to mount a defence against the virus is important information. It is the difference between aliens from another planet coming to invade a country, as against from another continent. In the first, there is the terror of the absolutely unknown. In the second, it is regular warfare even if there is imminent damage. Shouldn’t the presence of a mechanism to deal with the virus lead to a review of the all-or-nothing approach? There are, however, not many signs of it. Inertia is very good at sapping courage. A mental siege, once donned voluntarily, is hard to shake off. In psychology, there is a phenomenon called anchoring bias, where, once an impression is formed, all facts are forced into it. In popular phraseology, you could call it wedded to an opinion. The only way to break out of being anchored is to be consciously aware of the bias and, when facts don’t fit, move away from the opinion. Otherwise, as is happening now, policies that made sense once upon a time, establish a stranglehold.

A prime example is international travel into India. At present, besides Government-run flights, travellers from only 13 countries can come through a mechanism called ‘air transport bubbles’, and even then, it is mostly restricted to Indians who want to return. When the virus first started spreading from foreign shores, it made sense to stop flights to not give it a foothold here. There is a lot of political slugfest happening in India and overseas about governments not stopping international flights early enough and, thus, being responsible for the disease. Much of the wariness that countries exhibit in throwing skies open again is dictated by that. But such a policy makes little sense when there are around 80,000-odd new cases daily in the country, the largest anywhere in the world. In the total number of cases, the US ranks higher but only because it has tested much more. In terms of daily new cases, it is half that of India. There is nothing that travellers from any other country in the world would add to the total count of infected cases in India that wouldn’t even be a drop in the bucket here. In fact, if anything, international passengers would be terrified of coming to India at this stage.

You see the same phenomenon in

Indian states arbitrarily imposing quarantine periods on those who come from other states. Some, like Karnataka, have woken up to this absurdity and done away with it. But there are others like Maharashtra, which is the Covid capital of India, imposing 14-day quarantines. Recently, they permitted inter-district travel, which meant anyone coming from Pune or Mumbai, two of the biggest hotspots in India, to anywhere else in the state, could do so freely. There is no threat from anyone coming from Assam or Odisha to Maharashtra that it doesn’t pose to itself. But the state government persists in the idea that it is possible to gain total control and monitoring domestic travellers plays an essential part in this. Such isolationism comes with economic costs. If industry and services have to revive in Maharashtra, then people from outside, who make up a large percentage of the workforce, need to return. And, given the two-week quarantine, many would choose to not do so. Most just won’t have the space required, especially the migrant labour who live in slums. They walked away when the lockdown was imposed and will only return if they are sure that the conditions to earn are back. Most states persist with the quarantine because the response is defined by outdated lessons learnt by rote too well.

**T**he disease, we now know, kills much less. Initially, its fatality rate was considered too high to not panic. As a *CNBC* article of March 3rd, when the pandemic began its worldwide spread, reported: ‘World health officials said Tuesday the mortality rate for COVID-19 is 3.4% globally, higher than previous estimates of about 2%. “Globally, about 3.4% of reported COVID-19 cases have died,” WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said during a press briefing at the agency’s headquarters in Geneva. In comparison, seasonal flu generally kills far fewer than 1% of those infected, he said. The World Health Organization had said last week that the mortality rate of COVID-19 can differ, ranging from 0.7% to up to 4%, depending on the quality of the health-care system where it’s treated. Early in the outbreak, scientists had concluded the death rate was around 2.3%.’

The world then was fixed on Case Fatality Rate, or the number of deaths among confirmed cases. That there would be such vast numbers of asymptomatic patients was not established at the time. In India, the case fatality rate is even now thought to be lesser than the rest of the world at 1.6 per cent. But it is still a misleading ratio because it doesn’t take into account all those who don’t get tested. That number, deaths in relation to total infected, is estimated around

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**FOR INDIA,  
IMPOSING THE  
STRICTEST  
LOCKDOWN IN THE  
WORLD WAS  
POSSIBLY THE  
WRONG THING TO DO,  
SIGNALLING  
PANIC MORE THAN  
COURAGE**

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Commuters on Delhi Metro after the resumption of service, September 14

0.5 per cent. That is about one dead for every 200 case. It is an open question, whether, if the same knowledge had been there at the beginning, would the response have been as severe.

The only country that refused to succumb to fear right from the beginning was Sweden and, while it saw greater deaths than its immediate neighbours, it navigated through the pandemic without any lockdown. It believed that in the long run, even the deaths wouldn't be greater. Lockdown, in their modelling, only postpones what is inevitable while also crippling the economy. As a second wave of infections run through Europe, Sweden might just be vindicated because it has not experienced the surge so far. An *Associated Press* report of September 21st said: 'Now, as coronavirus infection numbers surge again in much of Europe, Sweden—a country of 10 million people—has some of the lowest numbers of new cases and only 14 COVID-19 patients in intensive care. Whether this is due to the Swedish government's strategy, however, is still uncertain. Its health authorities—and,

in particular, its chief epidemiologist, Dr. Anders Tegnell—keep repeating a familiar warning: It's too early to tell, and all countries are in a different phase of the pandemic... According to the European Center for Disease Control, Sweden has reported 30.3 new COVID-19 cases per 100,000 inhabitants in the last 14 days, compared with 292.2 in Spain, 172.1 in France, 61.8 in the U.K. and 69.2 in Denmark, all of which imposed strict lockdowns early in the pandemic.'

For India, imposing the strictest lockdown in the world was possibly the wrong thing to do, signalling panic more than courage. But one can still say that in retrospect, everything seems simple. A catastrophe was anticipated and the best was done to avert it. But it was only postponed and, at least in terms of deaths, not nearly as dangerous as predicted. Unlocking in bits and pieces and refusing to let go of stumbling blocks in getting life back to normal, shows that the siege endures. ■

# THE FARMER UNFE

The farm sector reforms will end monopolies and give neglected

By SIDDHARTH SINGH



# TTERED

states a level playing field



AP

A farm on the outskirts of Amritsar

**T**HERE WERE DRAMATIC scenes in Parliament last week. On September 17th, Lok Sabha passed two farm sector reform Bills based on ordinances issued in June. That night, Harsimrat Kaur Badal, the lone Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) member in the Union Cabinet, quit as Minister of Food Processing Industries. The SAD's future in the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), as one of the oldest

alliance partners of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), was now under a cloud. Two days later, on September 20th, there was uproar in Rajya Sabha when the Bills were passed by voice vote in the Upper House. The opposition cried death of democracy.

The crescendo of voices rose suddenly, within days of the Bills being introduced in Parliament. This gave the opposing voices something of a synthetic quality to them as if this were an issue handy to beat the Government with. When the Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Ordinance, 2020; the Essential Commodities (Amendment) Ordinance, 2020; and the Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Ordinance, 2020 were issued on June 5th, there was not even a hint of protest in the air. Over the next two-and-a-half months, there were murmurs of protest in Punjab and Haryana but nothing of the kind seen since September 10th.

Thereafter, protests along National Highway 1 north of Delhi became routine. Farmers in swanky new tractors—very often without number plates—seem to have driven off straight from showrooms to protest sites on bridges, highways, roads and in front of office buildings. In Punjab, there is near unanimity across the political class against the Bills. The reasons are understandable but somewhat complex as these are entangled with the state's history since the mid-1960s. Something similar is at work in Haryana, even if at a significantly toned-down level. Elsewhere in India—across Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Bihar and from Madhya Pradesh (MP) to Chhattisgarh—there is agrarian peace. There are, to be sure, protests here and there but these are nothing compared to the new 'Punjab Problem'.

The three Bills that have been passed by both Houses of Parliament open up the traditional system of trade in agricultural commodities for competition from the private sector. India's food trade system—basically in commodities like wheat, rice, fruits and vegetables—revolves around the Agriculture Produce Marketing Committees (APMCs). These committees, created under various state laws, organise market yards where sale and purchase of these commodities take place. Over time, these APMCs became near-monopolies. Today, they levy market fee, brokerage charges and other imposts. All this is backed by state laws. As a result, there are significant frictions in agricultural markets that have a bearing on a number of economic variables like inflation, returns to farmers, agricultural growth and so on. Reforming the farm

sector by allowing private sector firms to invest in the farm economy along with contract farming has always been on the agenda of parties across the political spectrum. But in India's competitive politics, these reform efforts get derailed in the search for immediate political gains.

To cite an example, in its manifesto for the 2019 General Election, the Congress promised to repeal the APMC Act (item 11 in the 'Agriculture, Farmers, and Farm Labour' section); repeal the Essential Commodities Act, 1955 (item 21 in the same section) and modernise the sector by constructing warehouses, cold chains and food processing facilities (item 14). Similarly, back in December 2012, party leader Kapil Sibal, during a Lok Sabha debate on allowing Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), had rhetorically asked "What is the purpose of this policy? The farmer should get a higher price than he gets in the market, in the *mandi*. The farmers should get a higher price." And much like the uproar in Rajya Sabha on September 20th, he too was shouted down by the Opposition that December. Most other parties remain wedded to a statist outlook, changing their stance only when it suits them.

All of this was forgotten last weekend. The Congress, along with other opposition parties, vehemently denounced the Bills as 'anti-farmer' legislation.

The BJP Government did not repeal the old laws but merely opened them to competition. There are multiple reasons for that. For one, there is a question of choice: the party wants to keep APMC markets as there may be many farmers who want to continue selling their produce there. For another, there is the inherent danger of monopolisation in case of a single trading op-

tion, as the APMC system shows so vividly. Competition afforded by greater participation of private trade—shorn of the handicaps it currently faces—and letting the APMCs face the private sector have the potential to fetch better returns for farmers.

This, however, is not how the three Bills have been interpreted by commentators and politicians alike. The reasons are not far to seek: the APMCs have thrived in a statist environment without any competition from the private sector. Large companies—with money to invest in the modernisation of Indian agriculture—are routinely disparaged as "big corporates". The opportunistic nature of this politics can be seen from the way the Bills' aims are sought to be defeated. Many Congress leaders insist that it be written in the text of the Bills that private sector buyers who purchase directly from farmers will have to pay Minimum Support Prices (MSP) otherwise they will be prosecuted. This is as good as keeping the old system alive by subterfuge.

But none of this has swayed the Government in any way. It has held steadfast to this reform programme in the teeth of special interests. These interests, not surprisingly, are the strongest in Punjab, the locus of the current protests.

**O**NE CLUE TO THE vehemence with which the Bills have been opposed in Punjab and Haryana—as well as the muted reactions elsewhere—lies in the importance of the open-ended purchases of wheat and rice for the economy and finances of these states. This is especially true for Punjab, a fiscally hard-pressed state that ceased to be at the forefront of

Prime Minister Narendra Modi speaking about the farm Bills, September 21



Many analysts have painted a picture of doom engulfing Indian farmers at the hands of a government that has sold out farmers' interests to 'big corporates'. Such expressions lack any explanatory power. There are no giant agro or food corporations of the kind found in Western economies. What India does have is a clutch of retail companies and online aggregators



PIB



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Harsimrat Kaur Badal at her residence in New Delhi after she resigned as Union Minister of Food Processing Industries, September 17

**It is unlikely that farmers in Punjab and Haryana will see purchases by the government suddenly stop. But this system is rotting. It is expensive and has tied farmers to ecologically ruinous crops like rice in Punjab. Without competition, this state of affairs will continue. Punjab will continue to grow water-guzzling rice varieties and the Centre will continue to strain its finances**

India's economically developed states decades ago. The biannual affair when gigantic quantities of wheat and rice are purchased from the state injects huge sums of money into its economy, all funded by the Centre. It is a common mistake to assume that the cost of wheat (a rabi crop) and rice (a kharif crop) is just the MSP announced by the Centre, although that is the single-largest item in the bill. There are, in addition, costs of handling, storage and transport. But over and above these costs, the Punjab government imposes a Rural Development Fee (RDF) and a market fee for any purchases within market yards that fall under its APMCs. Each of these fees is levied at the rate of 3 per cent of MSP. As the MSP and the quantity of foodgrain bought by the Food Corporation of India (FCI) rise, so do these fees that go to the coffers of the state government. Conversely, any reduction in MSP or the quantum of purchases made by the Union Government reduces these sums flowing to the Punjab government. The result is an in-built incentive to keep arguing for ever higher MSPs and quantities purchased.

The quantities bought by the FCI—the gigantic government corporation that lies at the heart of India's food economy—throw light on this situation. Until August 31st, the FCI had bought 12.7 million tonnes of wheat and 5.3 million tonnes of rice, a total of 18 million tonnes of foodgrain. This was for the year 2019-2020. During this year, Punjab produced 18.2 million tonnes of wheat and 8.7 million tonnes of rice. Thus, the Union Government ended up buying close to 70 per cent of the wheat produced by the state and 61 per cent of its rice output. This is an enviable scale of support to a state by the Centre. This record purchase by the FCI is matched (in the case of wheat) only in the case of MP. In contrast, during the same year (2019-2020), the country's biggest producer of wheat, UP (output of 32 million tonnes) saw the FCI buy only 11 per cent of its output. If one looks at the data released by the FCI, it buys far meagre quantities from other states. This situation of almost exclusive purchases from Punjab and Haryana has become less skewed only in the last decade.

In 2019-2020, the MSP for wheat was Rs 1,840 for a quintal (100 kg) of wheat. Let us suppose just 1 quintal of wheat was purchased from Punjab by the FCI. The state government netted 3 per cent of MSP as RDF and another 3 per cent as market fee. At 6 per cent, the state government gets Rs 110 for every quintal of wheat purchased in an APMC market. If one calculates the money that flows to the state government through these fees, the sum is substantial. One does not have to exaggerate these sums but the fact remains that these are now part of the revenue calculations of a state that finds itself in a fiscal tough spot and where every rupee that comes to the government matters. If the monopoly of the APMCs comes to an end, this system will start eroding.

Historically, Punjab was an important source of food supplies for India after Independence. In terms of output, the state held the top rank for a long time and perhaps the only one where a substantial surplus was available for the Union Government to mop up. For three decades (1964-1994), Punjab served the needs of the country well. It became the single-biggest contributor to the Central pool of foodgrain. When the Green Revolution was initiated in the mid-1960s, India was a food-insecure country. Crop failures and volatility in output were common. It was important in such conditions to provide incentives to that group of farmers willing to produce more—and more importantly—part with their output to the government. Because of the relative scarcity of wheat and rice in comparison with what was needed for India's consumption, these incentives—a package of cheap inputs like fertilisers, water and price and marketing support for output—were essential. Soon enough, bumper stocks were the norm in government godowns.

Somewhere in the mid-1990s the situation changed. Other states began generating their own surpluses, making it economically more sensible to buy in a decentralised fashion from different states. This would not only reduce transportation and

handling costs that had become a substantial fraction of the economic cost of wheat and rice. These imbalances had become so large that in 2000, the Expenditure Reforms Commission (ERC) in its first report pointed out that purchases made by the FCI were 'excessive' and needed to be rationalised. But by that time India was in the middle of its 'coalition years'. Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee was committed to keeping the SAD within the NDA flock. His personal relations with Parkash Singh Badal were one matter but there were deeper political rhythms that made it essential for being patient with the SAD. Punjab had a history of secessionist violence and had barely become a 'normal state' a decade earlier. Then, in spite of the ERC warning of systemic issues, the memories of the food shortage decades led to systemic inertia. Punjab was an expensive proposition but India kept up with its demands.

Today, when all political parties and governments in the state remind everyone of the efforts of Punjab farmers to make the country self-sufficient in food, there is less patience with the claim. What were initially economic incentives to produce more food grain are today price-support mechanisms available mostly to farmers in Punjab and Haryana. This is the kind of support

that a farmer in Bihar or Chhattisgarh can only dream of. The cost to Punjab has no doubt been substantial: it is an ecological hotspot now. With its water resources near depletion and soils dependent on synthetic fertilisers, the state stares at an ecological disaster. Political reasons ensured that its efforts to diversify its cropping pattern came to naught within a couple of years after being launched in 2003. It would be less than accurate to describe it as a land of kulaks. The *Statistical Abstract of Punjab* (2019) states that nearly 33 per cent of landholdings in the state range from less than 1 hectare to roughly 1-2 hectares. Another 33 per cent are in the 2 to 4-hectare range. Landholdings of such size are a losing proposition with the farmers tilling them sunk in perennial debt. Only 5 per cent of landholdings—57,707 out of nearly 1.1 million—can be truly said to fall in the kulak class (10 hectares and above).

The pitiable state of these small and marginal farmers can be gauged by visiting any *mandi* in the state during the rabi and kharif selling seasons. It is painful to describe the anxiety of these farmers as they persuade officials and grain commission agents to pick up their produce. A bit more moisture, an unseasonal rain and a few

## THE ESSENCE OF THE FARM BILLS



### A. The Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Bill, 2020

- Provides a framework for contract farming
- Details the rights and obligations of farmers and buyers when a contract farming agreement is signed
- Provides a mechanism for settling of disputes between farmers and buyers in case such disputes arise

### B. The Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Bill, 2020

- Provides an alternative to the market yards established by local Agricultural Produce Marketing Committees (APMCs)
- This allows buyers—traders and companies alike—to pick up farmers' produce from the farm gate itself instead of the farmer taking it to an APMC controlled market yard
- The Bill explicitly allows inter-state trade in agricultural commodities
- Bans any state government from levying a cess, fee or levy on farmers and traders in a trade area
- Has a provision for modernising farm trade by permitting electronic trade platforms and price gathering platforms
- Does not close APMC market yards: Those farmers who wish to continue selling their produce there can still do so
- The question of dismantling the Minimum Support Price (MSP) mechanism does not arise as the APMC system is not being shut down
- Brings in much needed competition in the farm trade which was until now a monopoly in the hands of APMCs



Suspended Rajya Sabha members on the Parliament lawns, September 21

especially many with marginal holdings (less than 5 acres), who will prefer to grow wheat and rice. They will continue to sell in APMC *mandis*. One can be sure the government will be there for them. A system that has evolved over the last 55 years will not be stopped in one, two or even five years. Third, what will happen is a greater spread of purchases by the FCI and other government agencies to those areas where a marketing and buying infrastructure was never created. Bihar and eastern UP are two strong candidates where this old, Punjab-Haryana-type system may take root. This will give much-needed income and price support to poor and marginal farmers in some of the poorest districts of India. This should have been done a long time ago. But this is like

## Reforming the farm sector by allowing private sector firms to invest in the farm economy along with contract farming has always been on the agenda of parties across the political spectrum. But in India's competitive politics, these reform efforts get derailed in the search for immediate political gains

extra broken grains is all that it takes to reject what a farmer brings to the *mandi*. The Union Government, too, has its reasons to reduce such massive expenditures on these purchases. Yes, farmers in Punjab do manage to sell their crops and the state and Union governments do whatever they can to help these farmers. But to state that Punjab is a land of rich agriculturalists is a myth. Prosperity has come and gone from Punjab. Haryana is not very different.

IT IS UNLIKELY that farmers in Punjab, Haryana or elsewhere, where there is an FCI or a state agency purchasing network, will see purchases by the government come to a sudden halt in *mandis*. But it is also true that this system is now rotting. It is expensive and, more importantly, in the name of food security, it has tied farmers to ecologically ruinous crops like rice in Punjab and Haryana. There is ample production of rice in monsoon India and wheat in northern India (UP, MP, Punjab and Haryana) to quit worrying about it. Unless the present system is given competition, this ruinous state of affairs will continue. Punjab will continue to grow water-guzzling rice varieties and the Centre will continue to strain its finances to buy wheat and rice from a select few states.

Once the new system kicks in, it will change the situation—slowly for sure—in three ways. First, farmers will react to market signals to produce the kind of crops that are in demand. As India develops, the share of cereals in the food basket of an average citizen will decline and more nutritious items will see higher demand. Sooner or later, the message will reach farmers. Those in Punjab and elsewhere can be expected to produce different items. Second, there will always be a substantial fraction of farmers,

wishes having wings: a poor country can only afford that much extra bit of comfort for its farmers, even if that is just and fair.

Yet, in the days after the dramatic scenes in Rajya Sabha, many analysts and commentators alike have painted a picture of doom engulfing Indian farmers at the hands of a Government that is allegedly 'neoliberal' or has sold out farmers' interests to 'big corporates'. These expressions lack any explanatory power whatsoever. For one, there are no giant agro or food corporations of the kind found in Western economies. What India does have is a clutch of retail companies and online aggregators. These companies are least likely to be interested in going to farmers to buy wheat and rice directly. Rice millers who have converted themselves into sellers of branded rice have been doing that kind of trade for a long time. To begin with, they, and large flour millers, will be interested in the new system of direct buying. It would be doing violence to language to describe them as 'big corporates'.

There are large companies like Pepsi who have done contract farming for crops like potato in Punjab for a while. That system has worked in spite of the running propaganda against them for decades. The Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Bill, 2020 gives that system of buying and selling a legal framework. It will be a happy thing if this system expands in other states, with other companies showing some interest.

This new legislative framework will take some time to percolate to the ground and take root. But it is a travesty to describe the APMCs and the network of grain commission agents as a system that allows price discovery. Nothing could be farther from the truth. These were monopolies that lived off advantages available to no one else. ■

# MORE THAN

A new food atlas powered by the Ministry of Women and Child Development will help the country eat and produce

# IS

**the groundwater in my area sufficient for me to grow rice instead of wheat?**

What kind of vegetables was eaten seasonally in my area in the 1960s?

Is there enough data on micronutrients available in the soil in my area to address deficiencies, such as of zinc?

Now imagine one food atlas where all this information and more are available at the click of a button. The Poshan Atlas, a collaborative effort between the Ministry of Women and Child Development, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF), Harvard TH Chan School of Public Health and the Deendayal Research Institute (DRI), set up by Jana Sangh leader Nanaji Deshmukh, will soon be ready to be viewed on smartphones across the country by researchers, policymakers, farmers and consumers. At a time when food has become the subject of political debate, the atlas will restore data to its rightful place of primacy.

India has a double burden of malnutrition and obesity. India fares really poorly when it comes to feeding a diverse diet to children (only one in 10 children get an adequate diet). According to the fourth National Family Health Survey (NFHS) in 2015-2016, only 9.6 per cent children (6-23 months) are fed a minimum acceptable diet. This figure declines to 6.4 per cent for children under two years as per the Comprehensive National Nutrition Survey 2016-2018. Data also shows that 73 per cent of urban Indians are overweight while 5 per cent suffer from morbid obesity.

One solution which often gets highlighted, according to Shweta Khandelwal, Head, Nutrition Research, Public Health Foundation of India, is improving local

production and consumption of diverse and healthy food items such as traditionally consumed complex grains, locally grown fresh fruits and vegetables, and nuts. There is one challenge here though: lack of a compendium on agrofood along with environmental attributes of each region for stakeholders to help formulate/implement relevant multi-sectoral policies and programmes.

The Poshan Atlas, which hopes to address this gap, began as a question put by Minister for Women and Child Development Smriti Irani to a group of stakeholders when she took over: can food be used as medicine to address micronutrient deficiency as well as obesity because of high intake of carbohydrates? Can it be used as a preventive rather than a curative? What has now emerged is a Poshan Atlas, the first-ever database in the world to link comprehensive information on what foods are traditionally consumed, what crop varieties are currently grown and, given agro-ecological contexts (such as soil organic carbon content and ground water availability), guidance on how a greater diversity of crops could be encouraged in a particular district to promote dietary diversity and nutrition.

The aim of the Poshan Atlas, says Khandelwal, is to create one of the first open-source databases that link agricultural data at the district level. When fed into an online portal, Poshan Atlas will allow users to visualise key indicators, compare these across various filters (such as among states or years) and see correlations. The portal can be used to generate impact at various administrative and geographical levels by creating a feedback loop between policy and its implementation. There will also be an app, a digital tool to access this database and plan relevant public health and

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH



# A MOUTHFUL

istry of Women and Child Development  
better, reports **K A V E R E E B A M Z A I**





**“The aim of the Poshan Atlas is to create one of the first open-source databases that link agricultural data at the district level”**

**SHWETA KHANDELWAL**  
associate professor,  
Public Health Foundation  
of India



**“For Poshan Atlas 1.0, the biggest issue is creating one single consumable format for all the data, which has varying formats and different years of study”**

**SRIVALLI KRISHNAN**  
senior programme  
officer, Bill and Melinda  
Gates Foundation

nutrition interventions.

There are global databases which help in knowing what people consume and produce such as FAOSTAT and FoodData Central (by the US Drug Administration). Private US labs are also collating such data. But the Poshan Atlas is unique in that it will incorporate data from multiple sources such as the agricultural surveys by the Ministry of Agriculture under the Improvement of Crop Statistics Scheme; soil health and properties through the Soil Health Card; groundwater table through the Central Ground Water Authority; the traditional cropping patterns since 1966 before the introduction of the Green Revolution through an innovative database for data for 571 districts in 20 states developed by the Tata-Cornell Institute and the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics; as well as the Livestock Census conducted by the Department of Animal Husbandry, Dairying and Fisheries.

This data will then, in Poshan Atlas 2.0, be overlaid with household food expenditure data (a proxy for consumption) from National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), malnutrition data from NFHS and micronutrients data from a UNICEF survey. For Poshan Atlas 1.0, as Srivalli Krishnan of BMGF calls it, the biggest issue is creating one single consumable format for all the data, which has varying formats and different years of study. Giving due credit to all the agencies will also be a challenge. This work will be carried out by the DRI, which has received a grant of Rs 1 crore from BMGF and Harvard.

The Poshan Atlas will help address all sorts of questions, from policymakers to farmers. Policymakers could understand through the atlas whether they need to address iron deficiency in any particular area in midday meals and take-home rations, which they could do possibly with provision of fortified spinach or millets. Farmers could have queries such as what to grow on their plot for household consumption which could address the micronutrient deficiency given the soil and groundwater conditions. Krishnan who has a doctorate in crop genetics and plant rotation believes the data will ensure transparency, mak-



## HOW A NATION EATS HAS FROM POLICYMAKERS TO

ing solutions a political.

Poshan Atlas, says Khandelwal, will be unique especially given the huge diversity at a subnational level. She was one of the experts invited for planning sessions in January and February by the Ministry of Women and Child Development and the Harvard India Research Centre. Some of them were later invited to participate in a session with the Minister herself to share their ideas on improving the processes and outcome reporting for this Atlas.

In India there are a few centres of excellence studying how Indians eat like the Tata National Institute of Nutrition Centre and Technical Assistance and Research for Indian Nutrition and Agriculture (TARINA) which is associated with Cornell University and Emory University, among others. The National Institute of Nutrition (NIN) is the result of an MoU signed in 2016 by Tata Trusts with the Indian Council of Medical Research towards establishing a Tata-NIN Centre for Excellence in public health nutrition within the NIN campus in Hyderabad. It is intended to serve as a knowledge hub to inform policy actions for improving nutrition outcomes as well



(L-R)  
Debasree Chaudhuri,  
MoS, Women and  
Child Development;  
Hari Menon, India  
Director, Bill & Melinda  
Gates Foundation;  
Rabindra Panwar,  
Secretary, Ministry of  
Women and Child  
Development; Union  
Minister Smriti Irani;  
and Bill Gates at the  
launch of Bharatiya  
Poshan Krishi Kosh in  
New Delhi,  
November 18, 2019

## CONSEQUENCES FOR POLICIES BUT IT ALSO DEFINES WHO WE ARE. FARMERS, THE POSHAN ATLAS WILL ADDRESS EVERYONE'S QUESTIONS

as to compile and analyse data generated under periodical surveys on health and nutrition in the country. TARINA works in Bihar, Odisha and Uttar Pradesh, primarily with NGOs, and integrates nutrition-based objectives into field projects. It works on better market systems for farmers, changing behaviour patterns for better nutrition and diversifying production. But while these efforts are good, they are not enough for a country as vast and disparate as India.

**P**oshan Atlas has the potential to collate all our food-related information and traditional resources, and help preserve ancient, time-proven, commonsensical knowledge about eating and farming rules that have stood the test of time. Nutritionist Kavita Devgan says it will not just help preserve and bring forth “our way” of eating, suited to our genetic make-up, but will also encourage more research in the field to help make these more mainstream. “Done right it can be a game changer for our country’s healthy quotient, because I have always believed that sticking to our roots is the best way to

provide right nutrition to our mind-body-soul,” she adds.

The Atlas is also intended to ensure availability of traditional recipes, benefits of using medicinal herbs and how its intake can prevent disease or help as cure, provide information about nutrition and tips on improving lifestyle. Nutrition education is abysmally low in India, and data poor and scattered. Sometimes consequences of surveys can be the opposite of what is intended. Scholars point to a survey of pregnant and lactating women in rural India last year, where some of these overworked and undernourished women were being advised more work, less food by elders in the family.

Information on a lot of these parameters has been more or less collected by NSSO and NFHS, but the Government would do well to strengthen these organisations and surveys, while also working on the Poshan Atlas. How a nation eats has consequences for policies but it also defines who we are, which makes data collection and interpretation so important especially at a time when what you eat can get you killed. There are several myths

about India’s dietary habits, not the least of which is that we are a primarily vegetarian country. Data from NSSO, NFHS and India Human Development Survey indicate that only between 23 per cent and 37 per cent of India is vegetarian. But even within this dataset there is tremendous variation, by gender, caste, religion and region.

And by economic class. NSSO data from Household Consumption of Various Goods and Services in India 2011-2012 show the richest 5 per cent of the urban population spent Rs 2,859 per head per month on food, about nine times more than the bottom 5 per cent of the rural population. Even what they spend on differs: the richest 5 per cent spend around three-and-a-half times more on pulses than by the poorest 5 per cent; and on vegetables, they spend around 3.8 times more. On eggs, fish and meat, the multiple is 14.5 times; on milk products, 23.8 times; on fresh fruits, a luxury, 61 times.

With more detailed data available to all, it can only get easier for the Government to ensure Indians, especially those at the bottom of the pyramid eat more and eat better. ■

A childcare centre  
in Mumbai

# THE ABANDONED

Orphans are being thrown out of shelters even as parents face a shortage of children for adoption

By ULLEKH NP

**I**N MARCH, AN orphanage on the outskirts of Hyderabad in Ameenpur asked a teenage girl, who alleged she was raped, to leave the institution following the lockdown. Police said that the 14-year-old, whose parents had died years ago, may have been subject to repeated sexual abuse at the orphanage. Finally, she was forced to return to her relatives who had put her in the orphanage in 2015. Shortly, while at her relatives' home, she had to be admitted to a hospital due to the injuries she had sustained from repeated rapes. The girl died in a government hospital last month, bringing to the focus, yet again, multiple jeopardies children face in orphanages in India, especially when

relatives and even their parents are too uncaring to pay a visit even after years.

All this is an outcome, avers Bengaluru-based child-rights activist Smriti Gupta, of our officials not "defining the word 'caring' by family" of children forced to live in government-run childcare centres, also called shelters and orphanages. The inadequate definition of 'caring' means that children are not freed from the clutches of their indifferent parents and not placed for adoption. While it is true that poor parents, especially migrant workers, do place their children in shelters and maintain warm ties with them, Gupta rues the policy of prioritising parents and not the kids.

Gupta is the CEO of the meaningfully titled charity organisation 'Where

Are India's Children?' Her argument is that the mindset of lawmakers and officials is to focus on what parents want, notwithstanding their dubious record as uncaring ones. Her organisation's title verbalises her own vision and purpose. "I had made up my mind as a student that I would not have children of my own, but would adopt them. I didn't want to marry either, but then when I was doing my master's in electrical engineering, I met my husband and Cupid struck. I told him we would adopt children, and he readily agreed," says this former US-based employee of Wikimedia Foundation, the parent company of Wikipedia. Both her children are adopted. It was when she decided to adopt the second one, after the first one turned seven, that

GETTY IMAGES

she realised it was a cumbersome process, mostly because new rules stipulated that prospective parents would be allotted options by the Central Adoption Resource Authority (CARA), a statutory body that falls under the Ministry of Women and Child Development.

Yet, in the CARA pool, there were very few children compared with those living in childcare institutions. So, while many parents want to adopt, there are very few children available. That was the trigger for Gupta to launch her NGO to help identify more children who needed to get adopted and live with normal families. "The Hyderabad girl should have been in the adoption pool," she says with a whiff of regret.

Over 30,000 parents in India are waiting to adopt while the 'pool' has barely 2,000 children. According to the Government, the CARA, which maintains this pool, functions as the nodal body for adoption of Indian children and is mandated to monitor and regulate intra-country and inter-country adoptions. Its website says, 'CARA is designated as the Central Authority to deal with inter-country adoptions in accordance with the provisions of the Hague Convention on Inter-country Adoption, 1993, ratified by the government of India in 2003.' The new rules came into force in 2013.

When Mumbai-based Jyotsna Nair adopted her daughter more than seven years ago, these new rules were not yet implemented. This meant that she did not have to apply to the CARA, which works closely with agencies and NGOs that offer shelter for lakhs of abandoned and orphaned children in India. Nair was lucky to choose and adopt a child from an agency within a few months of her applying for adoption. "Back then we had to deal only with the agency that runs orphanages. Of course, my husband and I had to furnish all documents, including academic qualifications and financial status, to be able to adopt our child, but we had to deal only with the agency," says Nair, an HR professional whose husband is a paediatrician. Though her own experience of meeting her daughter as an infant is the stuff of adoption fairy tales—the baby instantly stopped crying as Nair picked her up, and

they hugged one another for minutes in silence at first sight—Nair has nightmares about the faces of the other children at the orphanage. "They look at you with such terrible longing; even at such a small age, they are able to recognise that these couples who walk into the agency are their ticket to a better future."

The new CARA rules make adoption safer, more transparent and eliminate overcharging by unscrupulous agents, but since there are far fewer children in the CARA pool results than the demand, parents have to face delays and hardships, often travelling afar to find a child.

Unlike earlier, with agencies unable to directly offer children for adoption, the

**2,000  
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30,000 PARENTS**

price parents end up paying for greater transparency is that children are denied a chance to reach a new family, Gupta states. A fallout is that childcare centres have to raise funds for children who are not able to join new families. Numbers confirm the tragedy: a 2018 Government report said over 55,000 children from child shelters can be brought into the legal adoption pool but continue to languish in shelters. A study by Mumbai

NGO Catalysts for Social Action recommends that 22 per cent of the 4 lakh kids now in shelters be evaluated for consideration in the legal adoption pool.

The problem stems not from the new CARA rules but from shelters that are designed and incentivised to house children, not find them families. Another roadblock is that parents, although they may rarely visit their wards in orphanages, refuse to 'surrender' the child and endorse that their child can be adopted, which is a legal prerequisite.

Chandra Devi Thanikachalam, the Chennai-based official of the Indian Council for Child Welfare, which evaluates children and parents for adoption, admits that demand is disproportionately higher than supply. Unlike Gupta, she doesn't fault parents for not surrendering their children despite not being caring enough. "Poor people, too, have a right to family. It is also understandable that parents do not want to give away their children. The mindset change will take long to come into effect," she says.

Thanikachalam suggests that the foster-home programme envisaged under the Juvenile Justice Act can be an alternative to adoption. She points out that the concept is a huge success in the West where people offer their homes and finance children's education while they remain mere foster parents. This does not cause mental fatigue and heartbreak for the biological parents either because they don't have to let go of their children completely.

In India, however, such schemes throw up numerous challenges. First, not many parents in line for adoption would want to offer just foster care. Secondly, children who get accustomed to higher socio-economic households find it extremely difficult to adjust when they return to their biological parents. There is also a risk of psychological trauma for children from poor backgrounds selected to reputed boarding schools and often dispatched for exchange study programmes abroad.

Families may still squirm at adoption, but India is miles ahead in access to creative solutions for the willing.

Gayatri Abraham founded Padme,

an organisation that focuses on women's welfare, 14 years ago. For years now, the family counsellor has been helping parents and children, besides others, in pre-adoption and post-adoption stages to come to grips with the whole exercise. "Our effort has been to bridge the emotional disconnect among other stakeholders—the medical community, special educators, developmental pediatricians. For adoption to work from point A to Z you have to bring everyone together and address the missing links," she says. Padme offers help even with specialised services such as resources for adopting children with special needs. Abraham says that the CARA has got its act together as regards documentation and legal processes, and her area of expertise is to promote dialogue among people from India and abroad to streamline the process. Padme works closely with the CARA and other government agencies to evolve strategies for domestic as well as international adoption. Abraham also notes that "the best interest for the child is to be with his or her family or with an adopted family". She frequently conducts workshops in which she brings experts from fields connected with adoption and parental guidance to ease the process and to help people understand adoption procedures. While many Indian parents are becoming more mature in their choices, she says, most are still averse to adopting older children and those with special needs. Before the CARA rules came into effect, parents were obsessed with the skin colour of children. Abraham admits that it will be a while before people's attitudes progress.

A Union Government official close to the matter tells *Open* that the CARA is headed in the right direction and will achieve more cohesion and integrate its activities with the help of NGOs and other official agencies. "Of course, there is a lot of improvement that is in order. But we are on the right track and are looking at a comprehensive campaign to overhaul mindsets and revolutionise adoption so that more children will benefit in the future. There is far greater transparency than one could ever imagine," the official says.

The optimism is common in official circles. However, of those who spoke to *Open*, one who is in the process of finalising their plans says, "Implementation of central plans in many orphanages are far from satisfactory."

Radha and Manas (named changed for privacy) in Mumbai were looking to adopt when they finally got a call from an orphanage in Telangana. They rushed to the spot, a forlorn outpost of sorts for these metro dwellers. Anticipating a family-bonding moment, they had also

**AN NGO STUDY  
RECOMMENDS  
THAT  
22 PER CENT  
OF THE  
4 Lakh  
KIDS NOW IN  
SHELTERS BE  
EVALUATED FOR  
CONSIDERATION  
IN THE LEGAL  
ADOPTION POOL**

taken their son along. But their tale of woes started the moment they reached the orphanage where they met a girl who could hardly walk. The shelter in-charge was away. The couple and their son returned later to pick up the girl for a medical test before confirming adoption. "They sent a lady with us when we took the girl to a paediatrician who after examining the child said that she is undernourished and needs treatment," Manas says. The couple agreed to bear the cost of treatment at a private hospital and returned. The orphanage said it would get back with the paperwork.

As nobody from the shelter got back within the deadline, the couple lost their opportunity to adopt the girl. "Finally, the blame fell on us. We were accused of discriminating against a child despite us expressing our readiness once the girl is treated and a medical certificate is obtained as is mandatory in adoptions," Manas adds, emphasising that there is a huge gap to be filled between word and deed. As with many central schemes, this one spearheaded by the CARA also faces numerous odds, he says. The official that *Open* spoke to, however, said, "We cannot tolerate parents being biased about any child over one reason or the other. That is all."

The likes of Abraham and Gupta have shown that charity organisations and NGOs are trying to fill the gaps in society and governance. "We need NGOs only because the Government isn't doing its job," says Gupta. They have also displayed out-of-the-box thinking with the aim of uncluttering the process of adoption in India. For instance, Gupta and her team have created a technology solution to track visits by parents to orphanages to measure 'caring'. "Our aim is to use technology in a better way to auto-flag children for adoption," she says. "Verified tracking is not there now in most places. Besides, tracking ensures safety of the children. The app we have developed for this purpose can integrate itself with the existing Government system," Gupta adds.

She has also started a petition on *Change.org* called Safe Surrender, asking media organisations to make a change in reporting child abandonment. "In every such news report, the media should include information on how parents or guardians can safely surrender a child at an adoption agency. This small change can create massive public awareness and prevent future child abandonment and death," says Gupta.

It is a cause for worry that more orphans and abandoned kids are not making it to the legal adoption pool. Each passing day, yet another child's dream to join a family and rewrite their future goes up in smoke. ■



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# THE SOCIAL SOUTH

**With high literacy and internet reach, the southern states are driving demand for videos in regional languages**

By V SHOBA

**O**N SEPTEMBER 12TH, Tamil YouTuber Madan Gowri dropped a 14-minute-24-second video that is among his most emotional till date. Opening with 19-year-old aspiring medical student M Jothi Sri Durga's suicide in Madurai—"four km from where I sit," he says, visibly distressed—a day ahead of the National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test (NEET), Gowri, 27, admits to his 3.99 million subscribers that this video is a departure from the usual. "I make some videos for monetisation, some to garner views and others to engage with fans and answer their questions, but this one is for my conscience." In the next few minutes, he piercingly reconstructs the pressures that must have eaten away at Sri Durga's courage to face an examination that would, in one fell swoop, determine the course of her life. "Her voice note to her mother, where she says, 'Amma, I will miss you,' really broke me," he says in the video, which has over 680,000 views and counting. The comments section becomes a forum for youth besieged by similar anxieties. Gowri is neither a newsman nor a social justice warrior. A YouTube star in infotainment—a fast-growing category in online video—his social capital is driven by listicles, parallel universe theories and obscure bits of Tamil history. But his influence over Tamil youth, he knows, extends well into the real world. "I hate the word influencer," he says, over a call from Madurai, where he lives and works out of a small studio. "Tamil is one of the most

advanced digital spaces in the country. Ninety per cent of my viewers can speak English, which is why I use English words liberally. But they prefer to consume content in their mother tongue out of a sense of linguistic attachment," he says. Politically unaligned, Gowri does not shy away from discussing issues like Hindi imposition and NEET that occupy social centre-stage in the state.

A mechanical engineer who started YouTubing in 2016, before Jio set off a Cambrian explosion in digital media, Gowri overcame the classic cold start problem—"The aim was to hit 10 subscribers and I had to create a fake account to reach even that target"—by taking up issues that were weighing on the Tamil mind. It took Gowri hundreds of takes to produce his first video. Today, he is a public speaker with opportunities in television and cinema open to him. He also launched a channel in English four months ago—with 275,000 subscribers at the time of going to press—to address issues of national and international interest.

In the interim, the world around him has changed just as rapidly. The Jio-led data revolution and cheaper smartphones have bridged the gap between rural and urban India, especially in more developed states like Tamil Nadu and Kerala. A report by the Internet and Mobile Association of India and Nielsen for 2019 goes so far as to say that for the first time in history, there are more rural internet users in India than urban. While this may seem overly optimistic,

data available with the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India confirms that Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh—states with sizeable rural populations—have the highest tele-density among the large states.

For mobile-first broadband users, video content in their mother tongue is often their window to the internet. According to YouTube, the largest platform for accessing videos in regional languages, as many as 93 per cent of all viewers prefer watching content in Indian languages. "In India, Hindi is the most preferred language to watch videos on YouTube, followed by Tamil, Telugu, English, Kannada and Bengali," YouTube revealed in an email. The Google subsidiary added that 37 per cent of viewers prefer to watch content in a language other than Hindi and English. While Hindi remains the single largest language on the platform, regional content markets are exploding faster than ever before.

"The big languages are Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and Bengali. Gujarati, Kannada and Punjabi, too, are growing fast. All of these languages are far from maturing. There is a lot of headroom for growth and new trends emerge with every new million or so people who get online," says Satya Raghavan, head of content partnerships for YouTube India. "Last year, farming-related content emerged as a major category on YouTube for the first time, indicating interest among rural viewers, especially in states like Punjab and Kerala where farming is a way of life," Raghavan adds. Despite the fact that YouTube is the



Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

FOR MOBILE-FIRST BROADBAND USERS, VIDEO CONTENT IN THEIR MOTHER TONGUE IS OFTEN THEIR WINDOW TO THE INTERNET. ACCORDING TO YOUTUBE, HINDI IS THE MOST PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO WATCH VIDEOS, FOLLOWED BY TAMIL, TELUGU, ENGLISH, KANNADA AND BENGALI

single biggest repository of traditional media and entertainment—T-Series, which was already the most subscribed channel on YouTube, has recently become the first channel to earn more than 100 billion lifetime views—43 per cent of all video consumed on the platform in India is learning-based. “Over sixty per cent of the 265 million users in India come from outside the big metros,” Raghavan says. “Educational and DIY content is driving some of this growth.”

For quite some time now, the un-

certainty of what pops up on your YouTube page has not been very radical. It is a warren of your passions, built of the bricks of your preferences in news and your taste in entertainment. It is when you log out of the filter bubble and take a walk in the cultural commons that you are fully exposed to the gale force trends sweeping the internet. The trends page is a window into a factory of culture that forms and dissolves at breakneck speed online. In India, it usually features professional cricket and anodyne

music videos, film trailers, mega-serial episodes and TV news debates on hot-button issues. To be sure, there is a growing presence of ‘independent’ or community-generated videos by the likes of A-list Hindi roaster Ajey Negar *aka* Carry Minati, travel vlogs, episodes from original web series, and the occasional tech unboxing video, DIY hack or beauty tutorial. At first glance, content in Hindi, the most spoken language in India, with over 500 million conversant in it, seems to rule the roost, but videos in Tamil, Malayalam and

Telugu, trending slightly further down the list with millions of views, have become the norm rather than the exception.

In the open arena of the internet, competing on an equal footing with an IPL practice session featuring Viral Kohli, Diljit Dosanjh's latest, and a Himesh Reshammiya dialogues mashup by Yashraj Mukhate, music producer and meme-maker of *Rasode Mein Kaun Tha* fame, is a pathbreaking web series by Malayalam channel *Karikku*, which crossed five million subscribers earlier this year with just 73 episodes under its belt. Millennial characters whose lines have become part of pop culture, a mix of scripted and slapstick humour, and consistent production quality have made the channel "outperform"—to quote actor Unni Mathews, who is part of the *Karikku* team. "Out of a pool of 35 million Malayalam speakers, we have managed to reach over 5.45 million," Mathews says.

Rubbing shoulders with *Karikku* on the trends page is Coimbatore-based channel *Nakkalites*, whose three-year journey mirrors trends in Indian social media. It was in the aftermath of demonetisation and amidst the politically-charged *jallikattu* protests in Tamil Nadu that K Rajeshwar and Prasanna Balachandran founded a channel for political satire. "We quickly realised that the market for lifestyle and entertainment content was much bigger," says Rajeshwar, 27, over a phone call. What started in 2017 with a small crew of amateur actors and a string of comedy videos about relationships is today a channel with 3.07 million subscribers. At every step, *Nakkalites* was quick to



**farming is a way of life"**

**SATYA RAGHAVAN** head of content partnerships, YouTube India

pick up on broad trends in social media, among them a longing for the world as we found it. And so, they rode the nostalgia wave with a mini-series titled *Back to School*—the 10 episodes together have crossed 100 million views, and a second season is in the works—and stormed the rural market with *Ammuchi*, a slice-of-life series set in the lush villages around Coimbatore. With another channel, a sitcom, and a soon-to-be-launched OTT app, the *Nakkalites* crew of about 50 is busier than ever. "We have worked with brands like Swiggy, LG, Gillette and TVS, and there are sure to be more opportunities in the future," says Rajeshwar. "Internet video is not a talk-down medium, however. Everyone is a distributor, and content is therefore king. You cannot let an investor dictate terms."

Telugu, Tamil, Malayalam and Kannada together make up 45 per cent of all content on Sharechat, the largest Indian-language-only social media app. Its new product, Moj, is one of the two major con-

tenders trying to fill a TikTok-sized hole in Indian social media. Two-and-a-half months since the Indian Government banned the Bytedance-owned social network, users continue to miss its egalitarianism and its ribaldry, perhaps in equal measure. Moj and MX Player's TakaTak have each promised creators from TikTok a new home with a large userbase and a larger music library. It is too soon to tell if their algorithms are as addictive as TikTok's For You page. "We have 160 million monthly active users across Sharechat and Moj," says Berges Y Malu, director, public policy, music partnerships and communications, at Sharechat.

**T**HERE IS LITTLE crosstalk among the 15 languages on Sharechat, Malu points out. "People who open the app in one language don't tend to access it in another, with the exception of Hindi. This is especially true of Tamil and Telugu, which are self-sufficient universes that don't care about what is happening in Hindi. There is enough content and more in these languages," he says. Popular content across south India includes movie dialogues with extended emotions of love and friendship attached, and political memes. "The adoption of social media, across cities and smaller towns, is more uniform in the south. Post the ban, though, Hindi has emerged as a fast-growing language on our platforms," Malu says.

Facebook, which has a userbase of 328 million in India—about half of all



**"In terms of adoption and consumption, Telugu, Tamil, Bengali, Marathi and Gujarati are major languages for us, and we have also seen a surge in user base across languages like Assamese and Bhojpuri. Many internet journeys in India begin with us and it is a privilege and an opportunity to see this up close"**

**SAKET JHA SAURABH** head of entertainment partnerships, Facebook India

mobile internet users in the country—entered the 15-second snackable video space with Instagram Reels in August. While Facebook declined to disclose the language-wise split of Indian users on its platforms, it has been extending features like ad breaks and fact-checking to several Indian languages, indicating a surge in regional content. “The perception that Instagram is an app for English speakers is far from the truth. Trends on Facebook and Instagram are not just reflective of but also causative of the language trends in India,” says Saket Jha Saurabh, head of entertainment partnerships at Facebook India. “In terms of adoption and consumption, Telugu, Tamil, Bengali, Marathi and Gujarati are major languages for us, and we have also seen a surge in user base across languages like Assamese and Bhojpuri. Many internet journeys in India begin with us and it is a privilege and an opportunity to see this up close.”

At the other end of the value chain on Instagram is the influencer, a ubiquitous cultural force capable of upending traditional advertising models. But even here, regional affinities matter. “Languages and identities are useful differentiators on Instagram, where there are many celebrities and influencers,” says Peter K, a 25-year-old creator from Chennai who has over 583,000 followers on the platform and 17,000 on Moj. “Out of work and desperate, I had started posting short comedy sketches and motivational videos shot on my Redmi phone in 2018. It was the overwhelming support of the Tamil community on Instagram and TikTok that was my confidence-booster. Now I’m a full-time entertainer—I act and make content for TV channels,” Peter tells me over the phone, even as I pull up his latest video, a quick sketch-cum-promotion for a unisex apparel store. “The type of content that works in Tamil is emotional yet funny, youthful yet value-based. It is not a market that is into BGM [background music], miming and posh gimmicks,” Peter says.

Social media fame rests lightly on Milkuri Gangavva’s shoulders. The 59-year-old unlikely star of the Telugu-verse, with an elfin face that crinkles

when she smiles, is an irreverent foil to the absurdities of modern life. *My Village Show*, a YouTube channel launched in 2016 by Srikanth Sriram from Lambadipally in Telangana’s Jagtial district, has popularised a rural counternarrative of community. Gangavva has since crossed into the mainstream, sharing screen space and a house—she is a *Bigg Boss Telugu Season 4* housemate—with celebrities. “It was only in 2017 that demand for video started picking up, and we improved production quality in response to feedback,” says Sriram, 29. Today, nearly every video of theirs goes viral—one of them crossed 34

Azzeh, of the JordIndian duo from Bengaluru whose music video *Smoke shisha play FIFA* was the viral supernova of 2018. “Our viewers are predominantly from India—78 per cent—especially from Bangalore, Chennai and Kerala, followed by Mumbai,” says Azzeh, 30. “Both Beep [the Indian half of JordIndian, Vineeth Kumar] and I have a noticeable accent. We think in English, but we speak Bangalorean. That’s the extent of diversity we have in India.”

“There is a market for content in every language—it’s about creators stepping up to the challenge,” says Vikram Aditya, the bank manager behind the eponymous



**“Telugu, Tamil, Malayalam and Kannada together make up 45 per cent of all content on Sharechat. Tamil and Telugu are self-sufficient universes that don’t care about what is happening in Hindi. There is enough content and more in these languages”**

**BERGES Y MALU** director, Sharechat

million views—and they routinely collaborate with TV channels. “We spend Rs 80,000-90,000 on making a single video. We are limited only by mobile broadband speeds,” Sriram jokes. “When we go to Hyderabad, we quickly upload and schedule a bunch of posts to take advantage of the speed.” With villagers’ reactions to trending topics, comedy sketches and infotainment, the channel may look like it has achieved self-sustaining momentum, but Sriram has bigger plans. “We want to launch a village news show. About 20 per cent of our viewers now use subtitles—we launched them last year—so we continue to expect growth outside of our core Telugu-speaking audience,” he says. What they won’t sacrifice is the local Telangana flavour and dialect.

“Even in an English sketch, a local touch adds interest and makes you appeal to specific geographies,” says Naser

infotainment Telugu channel. “A good YouTuber is a storyteller first, and then, a motivational speaker,” says the resident of Devarakonda in Telangana’s Nalgonda district. After a successful 40-episode retelling of the Mahabharata, Aditya has launched *Akhanda Bharatam*, a series that he says will bring heroes from Indian history to the fore. The first episode, with a million-plus views, opens with Aditya narrating the story of an eight-year-old boy who steals a bun out of sheer hunger, but gives it up to feed a dog. In classic *Jataka* fashion, a hand touches his shoulder, and who could it be but Bharatamata, here to comfort him with stories of Chandragupta and Gautamiputra Satakarni. She names him Sethu, the bridge between the past and the future. “You think it is a dry subject?” Aditya asks me over the phone. “Listen to me in Telugu and you will change your mind.” ■

CINEMA

# The Ar

Swara Bhaskar does not hold back her political views. She tells **Divya Unny** how she strikes a balance between art and activism



Photo GETTY IMAGES

“

NO ACTOR IS KEEN ON CULTIVATING A CONSTITUENCY THAT HATES YOU DILIGENTLY. BUT IN MY

# gumentative Actor

**E**LEVEN YEARS AGO when Swara Bhaskar walked into the Hindi film industry as a rank outsider, her only dream was to make it as an actor, on her own terms. She cared little about the length or the glamour or the supporting nature of the roles that were offered to her in the initial years of her career. She simply performed with utmost integrity and grit. “I was almost about to leave Mumbai, when *Tanu Weds Manu Returns* came my way. And everything changed,” she’d said to me in an interview in 2016. Today, more than a decade after she entered cinema, we see a woman who is a lot more than the sum of all the parts she has played in cinema. Vociferous, unabashed and undeterred by political correctness, Bhaskar is among those handful of actors whose opinions often get the better of her.

Speaking from her home in New Delhi where she’s spent much of the lockdown, Bhaskar is currently basking in the light of two web shows, *Flesh* (ErosNow) and *Rasbhari* (Amazon Prime Video), that she’s headlined, which released within a month of each other. She plays a teacher with a split personality disorder in one and a cop who fights against human trafficking in *Flesh*.

The shows have received muted acclaim, but for her it’s work that’s available at a time when the future of cinema on the big screen is ambiguous. “We are living in a time where everything seems a bit uncertain. Thank god for OTT platforms that really keep the ball rolling and hope alive, not just for actors but for everyone who is responsible for

the making of a film or a show. You feel like, even though it may be a while before theatres reopen, there’s space for us to keep creating. We don’t have to stop, we just have to keep working. Despite all the noise and controversy around *Rasbhari*, my performance has been praised. And similarly for *Flesh*. It’s validation each of us could do with right now, because everyone’s feeling a bit anxious about getting back to work full time,” she says.

Bhaskar has spent the last few months rescuing stray animals, contributing towards relief work for migrant labourers in Delhi, completing a chapter in a book that isn’t about Bollywood and taking baby steps towards turning producer for a feature film that she’s written herself. She assures us that it wasn’t about being overproductive during the lockdown, as much as it was about continuing to feel connected with the reason she became an artist. “I think at this point both personal and professional growth has been extremely important and many of us have been growing and discovering things about ourselves we otherwise wouldn’t have. The pandemic has almost pushed us against the wall and we strive to survive. I feel like I’ve been on an overdrive trying to juggle multiple things, but I’m grateful for that because it’s given me the chance to reconnect with family and made me really count my blessings which we as humans would often take for granted in our everyday rut.”

Despite the fact that she hasn’t had a feature film release since her biggest hit *Veere Di Wedding* in 2018, few would say that Bhaskar has been missing from

action. Her Twitter handle provides a window into her world as she writes on the importance of mental health, parliamentary democracy and due processes. She’s consistently been in the news for taking her own stance on the many political and social upheavals India has been facing. Among the few actors who fearlessly stand up for what they believe in, Bhaskar realises that her career as an actor has also parallelly built her image as an activist. “Well, every time I’ve spoken against an issue, it’s been to protect our basic right to opinion and freedom to live life on our own terms. Be it the beef lynching or the Kathua rape case or speaking up against the implementation of CAA and NRC, I only speak from a place of conviction because for me these are very serious issues, and I still want to live in a world where democracy is not being butchered to death,” she adds.

Bhaskar has always vouched for the fact that good talent can thrive within the industry, and her own struggle to make it without a godfather is testimony to the same. However, for her, the nepotism debate is a shallow one at the moment. “I think it’s not fair to name one or two people for nepotism. The audience and the media is as much responsible for it. The star system is not something that Karan Johar has invented. At best he has learnt to use it to his advantage. I find it a very shallow understanding of the industry and its economic structures to just say that star kids are favoured. If you do an analysis of the success rate of outsiders, it is more than that of star kids. There is a whole list of star kids who did not make it and a large number of outsiders who did.

Yes, there are many things that are problematic in the industry, but the problem isn't originating with one or two people and this needs to be understood. If my film is a superhit tomorrow, Karan will cast me and that's just the economics of it because this is a business and everyone needs to survive."

Unlike most of her peers who stand back and ride the popular wave, in an attempt to protect their celebrity, Bhaskar chooses to do the exact opposite. It's taken a toll on her professionally, but it's a path she has chosen. "After *Veere Di Wedding*, in an ideal trajectory I should have been flooded with more offers. That film made 100 crores and it was my most popular work. But what happened? I lost a few endorsements that were on the brink of being signed or renewed after I campaigned for six candidates from the Aam Aadmi Party in the last general elections. Another brand terminated my contract and the termination letter said it was because of my participation in the anti-CAA-NRC protests. There are multiple people who have told me that producers have not backed the idea of casting me because in their eyes I'm too controversial. It wasn't easy for me, but so be it. It's what I have chosen and I won't stand down just to protect myself or my work. What I am speaking for is much larger than that. It's about standing up against a totalitarian regime and protecting our basic rights. If we are heading towards being a society where we are punishing people for having opinions, then nobody is going to be safe," she adds.

Her army of online haters is growing every day. She isn't too popular for her opinions and is at the receiving end of endless rape and death threats. As a liberal, she's learnt to be unfazed by incessant trolling. "Actors are supposed to be liked, right? No actor is keen on cultivating a constituency that hates you diligently. But in my case the constituency that hates me also ends up only popularising my name, bringing me an identity, making me known for what I believe in. They are adding to the whole persona. These days I'm just like, 'Go for it,'" she says.



GETTY IMAGES

CAMPAGNING FOR AAP INA DELHI (ABOVE); IN A SCENE FROM *FLESH*



**S**HE REALISES THAT at times her activism speaks more than her work as an actor and she's okay with it. She feels like her art gives her the strength to stand up for what she believes in. In the last few years her definition of success has shifted from a personal one to one that affects society at large. "We are forgetting that we are from a country of artists like Majrooh Sultanpuri who was in jail for over a year for speaking against the then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. Muhammad Ali was banned from boxing for three years at the top of his career because he was against the Vietnam War. He never regained his lost form. So I believe everyone who is standing up today is creating history one way or another. If I have to make sacrifices for it, I just see it as collateral damage now," she says.

She's been a risktaker from the

very beginning, and it shows. Her first film *Niyati* never saw the light of the day, but she continued to chase her dream to be an actor. She played the heroine's friend in two of her most popular films, *Tanu Weds Manu* (2011) and *Raanjhanaa* (2013), and still stood out as an ace performer. In 2015, when she gave her first solo hit *Nil Battey Sannata*, many had advised her against playing the mother of a teenager. But she did—and successfully so. She was trolled for a masturbation scene in *Veere Di Wedding*, but she held her own. She even called out one of Bollywood's biggest filmmakers Sanjay Leela Bhansali in an open letter for making *Padmaavat* (2018) which she thought propagated archaic traditions that disempowers women. She clearly gains strength from her steadily growing public persona as an activist and pours it all into her work. In her forthcoming Netflix show *Bhaag Beanie Bhaag* she plays a politically incorrect struggling standup comic, and in her next short film *Sheer Qorma* she plays a woman in love with a woman.

Bhaskar's stories and the characters she plays have never really toed the line and notwithstanding the number of films she does, what's definite is that she's going to continue standing up for what she believes is right. "I'm the classic example of the outsider who made it and I'm not scared of losing it all. It's not just me. Journalists, students, social workers are all suffering today, many of them behind bars for speaking up. Be it through my work or otherwise I'm not going down without a fight—that's certain," she adds. ■

# REBEL

# ARIVU

## Singing against casteism

By Dipti Nagpaul



▲ VIPIN TATAD

ARIVU ▼

## When

Arivarasu Kalainesan looks back at his formative years, he can see that while other children were taught to be confident, his circumstances instilled in him a sense of inferiority. "From a very early age, my family taught me to be careful... of what I say, where I walk, who I play with. School, a space that is meant to be inclusive, reminded me of my caste for the smallest of my mistakes. I was teased for my dark complexion by friends, my appearance alienated me. With no means to fight back, I would cry to my mother, tell her that my very birth is wrong," he says about his time in Arakkonam, a town on the outskirts of Chennai.

Today, however, that reality is behind him. Each time the 29-year-old takes the stage as Tamil rapper Arivu, he undergoes a transformation. Laced with anger, his voice climbs an octave; his body language is assertive as he belts out songs that talk about fighting against the caste system. "The stage is my place for debate, it's my ideological battlefield where I present my pain and ask why the omnipresent oppression of my people has been invisibilised for centuries."

The Chennai-based anti-caste rapper believes this transformation is hard-earned—the consequence of a battle that raged within. "Throughout my college years, I tried to hide behind my



**THE STAGE IS MY PLACE FOR DEBATE, IT'S MY IDEOLOGICAL BATTLEFIELD WHERE I PRESENT MY PAIN AND ASK WHY THE OMNIPRESENT OPPRESSION OF MY PEOPLE HAS BEEN INVISIBILISED FOR CENTURIES"**

**Arivu** Tamil rapper

poetry. My art would become the mask I wore to hide my caste identity, and I did succeed to an extent. My upper-caste friends would praise me for my poetry, respect me for my art but it did not change their mindset about caste," recounts Arivu. It was only after he was selected as a member of The Casteless Collective, a group of anti-caste musicians brought together by acclaimed Tamil filmmaker Pa Ranjith and led by musician Tenma, in 2018 that Arivu decided to assert his caste identity. "It has shaped my voice as an artist."

In the two years since, the Tamil rapper has gained both fame and acclaim for his work. Arivu made his commercial debut first as a lyricist with 'Urimayai Meet-pom' (a song from the 2018 film *Kaala*, starring Rajinikanth) and then also as a singer with *Vada Chennai's* 'Mathiya Seraiyila'. While he continues to be associated with The Casteless Collective, last year, Arivu launched the album *Therukural* as an independent musician. What remains central to his work is his call for equal rights for all and, most importantly, the annihilation of caste.

This assertion fuels the growing tribe of anti-caste rappers from Dalit communities across India. Among Chennai-based Arivu's contemporaries is 26-year-old Sumeet Samos, a multilingual rapper mixing Hindi and English with his mother tongue Odia. Samos, who goes by the name of Da-Lit Boy, is a graduate from Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University and has been active since 2018. Back home in Tentulipadar, a village in Odisha's Koraput district, Samos has used his time during the pandemic to focus on music, releasing six songs, several of which highlight the prevalent practise of casteism. In the song *Jaati*, for instance, Samos says, "Jaati hai ki jati hi nahi." "Here, I quote Ambedkar where he speaks of caste-based discrimination as a monster that our people are unable to escape," he explains.

While Ambedkar and his ideology are central to the music of several

anti-caste rappers, they cannot be simply clubbed together. Their approach to music and what they hope to achieve through it differ. They also have their own politics and ideologies.

Take Gurkanwal Bharti aka Ginni Mahi, who rose to fame in 2016 for her song 'Fan Baba Sahib Di', a devotional track of sorts dedicated to Ambedkar. But it is her rap track 'Danger Chamar' that brought Ginni into national prominence. With this song, she not only asserts her identity but also subverts the image of the Chamar community, perceived to be a 'danger' in Punjab. As the hook of the song goes: "Qurbani deno darde nahin, rehnde hai tayyar; haige asle to wadd Danger Chamar" (The real Danger Chamars are

those who don't fear sacrifice).

The 22-year-old's father, Rakesh Mahi, who also manages her career, says the family belongs to the community that follows the teachings of Sant Guru Ravidas and lives by Ambedkar's ideology. The popular singer, who switches between rap, pop and Punjabi folk, started singing in her teens and was the first to arrive on the scene. She is currently pursuing her higher education in music and hopes to explore commercial Hindi music in future. "Since we belong to the Chamar community, Ginni's songs do address caste but if you look at her music on the whole, at its heart is the message, 'Equality for all,'" Rakesh Mahi points out.

For a majority of the rappers, their music feeds off the anger towards the oppression of an entire people and their own personal experiences. It is what made Hirandas Murali take on the avatar of Vedan (hunter). The Thrissur-based artist, who works as a daily-wage labourer, dropped his debut track 'Voice of the Voiceless' on YouTube in June this year. The song, which attacks caste and class discrimination and land grabbing by upper castes, has over 12 lakh views. "Who are the slaves and the lords of the irrigated fields? Who fenced them into thousand fragments? How many kinsfolk were decimated? Spines stooping, heads hanging, for how much longer?" he sings.

For these young, fearless voices that want to tackle the issue head on through music, rap may seem like the perfect fit. But both Samos and Arivu say that the genre is in fact incidental. "Having grown up without a television, I had no exposure to film songs or independent music. My only exposure

was to the music of resistance in folk form. But once, while I was reading my poetry out loud, I did so with the anger and sorrow I had felt while writing it. That is when my friends pointed out that my style of recitation is similar to rap," Arivu recounts.

The incident pushed him to explore the genre and in the process, discover his favourite



## AS I EXPLORED INTERNATIONAL NAMES LIKE TUPAC SHAKUR, I STARTED TO NOTICE THAT THEIR MUSIC WAS ABOUT THEIR REALITIES—RACE, POVERTY, INEQUALITY

**Vipin Tatad**

rap in Hindi and Marathi



artist, Kendrick Lamar. Samos, too, had a similar experience. As anger bubbled over after an incident of discrimination he experienced at a mall in Delhi, he recorded a “rant” to vent his feelings and posted it on social media before he hit the bed. “By the time I woke up, it had over 10,000 views. My friends called me up to say that I should rap more often.”

For Ambedkarite artist Vipin Tatad from Maharashtra’s Amaravati, however, the genre came first. Drawn to the camera and video editing, Tatad had been brushing up his skills with wedding videos since high school. In 2016, an amateur rapper friend requested him to shoot a video, thereby introducing Tatad to the genre. “His rap was dedicated to Amaravati city. When he performed it, the song fell short in length. I pitched in with some lyrics that I also lent voice to,” the 24-year-old recounts.

The song went viral, inspiring Tatad. As with all other skills he had acquired, the musician turned to the internet in order to hone his amateur rapping. That is when he learnt that the genre has political roots. “Until then, I had only heard Indian rap artists like Honey Singh. But as I explored international names like Tupac Shakur, I started to notice that their music was about their realities—race, poverty, inequality.” Having grown up in Bhim Nagar, a slum that had for years been overlooked even as the government spruced up the city’s infrastructure, he could relate to the music. “The exposure taught me that real rap is supposed to highlight my reality.” Tatad, who had never witnessed Ambedkarite heroes, artists or culture projected in the mainstream, wrote ‘*Samasya*’, which he shot in the bylanes of his slum. The song was released in 2018 by Raptoli, a five-member music collective he is now part of. Mixing Hindi with a dash of Marathi, he releases his songs on Raptoli’s YouTube channel, which has more than 3,500 subscribers.

This lack of representation in popular culture that Tatad speaks of is also an aspect that drives Arivu’s music. “Not only have our histories been invisibilised but also our cultures,” he rues,

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**Sumeet Samos**  
rapper from Odisha



pointing out that Dalit and Adivasi beliefs and practices, their music and food have rarely been depicted with dignity. “What Pa Ranjith has done for our communities through his films like *Madras*, *Kabali* and *Kaala*, I wish to do with my music,” adds Arivu. Samos believes that Arivu, with his significant commercial success, has already been contributing in the direction. He cites the independent video that Arivu shot for ‘*Theevira Vyaadhi*’ from the Tamil film *Gypsy* (2020). In the song, the artist can be seen in a jacket with Ambedkar painted at its back and his quote, ‘Indifferentism is the worst kind of disease that can affect people’, written on a blackboard behind.

These musicians acknowledge the limitations of singing in their languages but they believe that their dialects also enrich their songs. Often passed off as crude or unpolished by the mainstream, their languages are replete with expressions and metaphors that encapsulate their people’s lived experiences. “Take the song ‘*Desia Pila*’. In our dialect, the phrase is used for someone from a slum. Now that cannot be translated without losing its impact. But I do pepper my songs with lines in Hindi and English for a bigger outreach,” says Samos, who considers college freshers his primary audience. “Dalit is not a homogeneous identity. The culture

varies across regions and states but certain experiences will be common. Like the struggle to fit in an urban environment among English speakers when they first join college. I want them to know that they are not alone.”

Like Samos, Tatad too, falls back on the poetry—and rhythm—of Maharashtra’s rich culture of *lokshahirs* or people’s poets, who travel and sing songs about social issues to the mere beat of a *daf*. Arivu believes that one’s own culture can nurture music more than international hip-hop. “After all, the history of percussion instruments in India, made using animal skin, is directly connected to caste hierarchy,” he points out, adding that at a recent performance by The Casteless Collective, the artists used traditional percussion instruments like the *parai* (frame drum). The group often uses folk music forms like *gana*. “I am a rapper and my uncle is an ‘*oppari*’ [funeral lamenting] musician in Arakonam. From the sorrow in our words to the beats of our genres, there is more in common between our music than most can imagine.” By including artists, genres and instruments that have been disregarded as inauspicious by upper castes, The Casteless Collective creates music that finds a wider audience beyond caste barriers in the hope of bringing them into the mainstream.

In a country where caste barriers are difficult to discuss, let alone break, making anti-caste music does not come without its share of hate. Most of the artists ignore the trolling, choosing to engage only with those who seem willing to debate. But these instances of engagement, even if few, are what these musicians are working hard for. Recently, during an Instagram Live session hosted by Samos, Arivu referred to his upper-caste friends from college. He pointed out that nothing much has changed—they disagree with his politics but follow and respect his music. As an artist, he says, it is his responsibility to help such people understand the other point of view. “So every song I write is my way of creating a discussion with them. My art, thus, becomes the means to bridge the gap that exists between us.” ■

# KILLER INSTINCT

From metaphysical thrillers to Agatha Christie redux

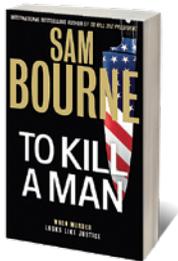
By Shylashri Shankar

**H**OTSHOT LAWYER NATASHA Winthrop, tipped as a future president of the US, is brutally assaulted in her own home. She manages to kill him. When he turns out to be a rapist and wanted murderer Jeffrey Todd and CCTV images show the outline of a person opening the front door to let him in, the question is whether Natasha is the victim or the aggressor? Natasha is arrested and questioned. Her internet searches show that she had frequently visited questionable sites that dealt with BDSM and rape. Enter political trouble-shooter Maggi Costello whom Natasha hires to find out the truth. As Maggi scours through Natasha's mail and other

personal documents, she discovers worrying indications of a dark past and layers of lies. More assaults on sexual predators in other geographies raise the question of whether these attacks are linked.

In the world of MeToo and the 'he said, she said' nature of evidence, the central question revolves around how to bring sexual marauders to justice. Sam Bourne's thriller is firmly ensconced in the tradition of Frederick Forsyth with whom he shares a background in journalism

and a similar method of taking topical issues and turning them into moral dilemmas. Here the questions are: if victims turn into aggressors, is that morally alright? When is murder justice? If law doesn't work for you (the conviction rate in rape cases in the US is less than one per cent), should you take the law into your own hands? Where does it leave you in relation to guilt? These are the grey areas created by unequal power between men and women and the breakdown of the processes to bring rapists and sexual harassers to justice. Bourne, the pseudonym of a *Guardian* journalist, has written a taut thriller that manages to be as fastpaced as it is firmly embedded in the issues raised by the MeToo movement.



**TO KILL A MAN**  
Sam Bourne

Quercus  
448 Pages | Rs 399

**T**HIS IS GRISHAM'S second outing in Camino Island, and one can see that he has enjoyed writing this series. The main protagonist is the wind—Leo the hurricane—that first meanders along on the high seas and suddenly and swiftly strikes Camino Island. Facing an emergency evacuation, Bruce Cable, the bookseller who was the main suspect in the previous book, decides to hunker down with his assistant while most of the residents including the writers in his coterie scramble to get out.



**CAMINO WINDS**  
John Grisham

Hodder & Stoughton  
304 Pages | Rs 399

In the destruction

wrought by Leo, a writer-friend Nelson is an apparent victim. However, Nelson's injuries—being whacked with the same branch several times—point to a murder rather than an accident. The secretive Nelson writes thrillers and his new manuscript is in his computer. It is up to Bruce and his assistant and the writer-friend (Bob Cobb) who found the body to figure out who killed Nelson. Cobb, who is a paroled convict, says he spent the weekend with a mysterious blonde woman who had wanted to meet Nelson. She disappeared during the storm.

The motive for the killing could be hidden in the pages of the manuscript, which the trio finally read. Here Grisham brings his traditional trademark elements—corruption, medical malpractice, mafia-style killers and nursing-home irregularities—into the story. Grisham's craft is evident in the passages on island life and the hurricane, and the slow buildup to the murder. Fans of Grisham who

want a simpler and less heart-pounding read for a lazy Sunday afternoon will probably enjoy it.



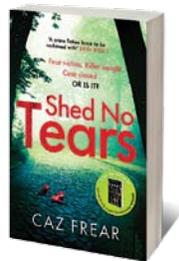
**A** BODY IS FOUND in a muddy field in Cambridgeshire. It turns out to be a girl, Holly Kemp, who was last seen six years ago entering the house of a convicted serial killer, Christopher Masters. The serial killer, now dead from an attack in prison, alternated between saying 'yea' and 'no' to Holly's murder. When DC Cat Kinsella and her fellow murder investigators DC Luigi Parnell and Ed Navarro examine the skeleton, several discrepancies show up that cast doubt on Masters' guilt. The modus operandi is different from the other victims: Holly's skeleton shows that she was dressed when she was shot in the head, and she is not buried with the other victims who were interred elsewhere. The investigation is reopened and the witnesses and suspects are re-interviewed.

The eyewitness who saw Holly with the serial killer is a teacher with a lilywhite background who is strangely precise about the details. The trail leads to several suspects including a boyfriend, a crime boss and a shop assistant.

Soon discrepancies crop up in the initial investigation conducted by the first team whose officers now occupy high positions.

The initial investigation was led by now DCI Tessa Dyer, a dynamic, no-nonsense cop who seems unconcerned that one of her early cases is being re-investigated. As Cat digs deeper, she realises that her own colleagues may have something to hide.

Frear has written a police procedural that asks difficult questions of the police force. Cat is a refreshingly snarky cop with an unusual background—her father is a criminal, a fact that she has hidden from her colleagues and boss. Her love life is complicated too because her boyfriend is the brother of a murdered victim in an earlier book where her father was involved. A twisty, racy, tension-filled thriller not to be missed.

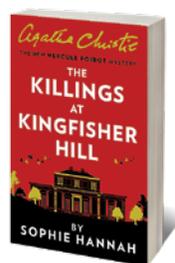


**SHED NO TEARS**  
Caz Frear

Zaffre  
321 Pages | Rs 98 (Kindle)

**I**N THIS NEW outing for Poirot, he embarks on a luxury bus from London to Kingfisher Hill, an exclusive gated community where a murder has taken place in the Devonport residence. The eldest son, Frank, has been murdered and his brother's fiancée (Helen) admits to the crime and will be executed in 10 days. Frank's brother (Richard) summons Poirot to prove that Helen is innocent. Accompanied by a not-so-bright Scotland Yard Inspector Catchpool, Poirot has to solve several puzzles: why is one of the passengers terrified and says she will be murdered if she sits in a particular seat? Why does another passenger confide in him that she has murdered the man she loved? What is their connection with the Devonport family? How are the American friends of the family involved? As Poirot and Catchpool sift

Illustrations by SAURABH SINGH



**THE KILLINGS AT KINGFISHER HILL**  
Sophie Hannah

HarperCollins  
352 Pages | Rs 399

through a bewildering set of clues and stories in this closed-room murder, more bodies pile up. The core of the book is about what one would do when love is threatened. Agatha Christie was often accused of having flat characters but one thing she excelled at was giving us a flavour of the social milieu in a tongue-in-cheek fashion. Hannah however writes from a modern perspective, which means that the social boundaries between employer and maid, Englishmen and Americans are fuzzy, and the



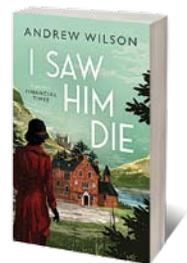
humour that comes from a clash of cultures and sensibilities is missing. The setting and the era are murky and give the book an 'anywhere' and 'anytime' feel that detracts from its charm. Miss Marple, I can see in a bus (Agatha Christie's *Nemesis*) but not Poirot!

Where Hannah excels is in her depiction of Poirot. Her writing in this book, the fourth in the series, settles into the character more easily and captures Poirot's vanity, intelligence and fastidiousness. It has a convoluted plot, many unreliable characters with bewildering stories and a couple of surprising twists—all of which require a complete suspension of disbelief.

In *The Writing Style of Agatha Christie*, Evelyn Hepburn writes that Christie generally has two main threads in her books. One thread involves the murder, while the other, a subplot, 'involves a psychological trickster: a character that intentionally creates fear and chaos for the other

characters'. Usually this character is not the murderer; rather, it is an individual with a hidden vendetta against the rest of the party. See if you can find the trickster in this cosy read for a rainy afternoon.

**I**N CONTRAST TO Hannah's Poirot, Andrew Wilson's series with Agatha Christie as the main character is firmly embedded in the 1920s. In *I Saw Him Die*, also the fourth in the series, Christie is asked by the British secret service to help in finding out who has sent a threatening note to murder Robin Kinmuir, one of their former operatives, who now runs a hotel in his ancestral home in the Isle of Skye (Scotland). They expect the attempt to be made by one of the guests. Robin was responsible for a failed mission that led to the deaths of 11 operatives. Christie, who is preparing to marry her second husband, agrees reluctantly to accompany Davison, also a secret service agent, as his cousin. They meet the host who is 'a difficult and promiscuous' man, his nephew and the nephew's artist friend, an actress who



**I SAW HIM DIE**  
Andrew Wilson

Simon & Schuster UK  
397 Pages | Rs 563 (Kindle)

is Robin's mistress, a striking botanist with twin sisters who write romances, a handsome and mysterious man who is not what he seems and a cheery doctor. Robin is killed the next day, and the nephew-heir confesses to shooting him in the leg after mistaking him for a grouse. However, after the doctor, a close friend, examines Robin, he announces that it is murder. Enter Hawkins, a policeman sent from the mainland who too may have things to hide. Christie and Davison have to find the killer who will strike again and again. Wilson uses several motifs favoured by Christie in her books: embedding clues in sentences and nursery rhymes so that they seem almost invisible, using her expertise in poisons to figure out the solution, unveiling backstories that somehow seem plausible in that setting and using the dramatic wildness of Skye to vivid effect. Where both Wilson and Hannah fall short is in their depiction of policemen as slow-thinking and quick-to-accuse investigators who are invariably wrong. Hannah's Inspector Catchpool (also the narrator) is too dimwitted for a Scotland Yard man; she could have used Inspector Japp who takes no nonsense from Poirot. Wilson's Hawkins, though portrayed as a person who can see into your soul, doesn't act that way.

Despite this quibble, I would highly recommend reading Wilson's series. It is wonderfully atmospheric and captures the spirit of Christie's voice and era. ■

# Muscle Power

Bodybuilding and middle-class aspirations

By Basav Biradar



Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

IN THE 1980S, the delightful ‘Sunday Ho Ya Monday Roz Khao Ande’ jingle by the National Egg Coordination Committee was one of the most popular ads on Indian television. An ad in this campaign featured a half-naked bodybuilder with a thick moustache flexing his muscles; seemingly built by consuming eggs. A lot has changed since these pre-economic liberalisation days. As per a Deloitte India report, the wellness and fitness industry’s worth in India crossed \$1.1 billion in 2017. This growth, enabled by the ever-increasing disposable incomes of the middle class and rapid urbanisation has also created a great demand for fitness trainers. For crores of lower-middle-class men, the job of a fitness trainer has become a vehicle to achieve socio-economic mobility. But is the bodily capital—of having a muscular body and possessing the knowledge of how to build one—sufficient for these men to overcome the limitations of sociocultural capital (family, caste) and be accepted as middle class? *Muscular India: Masculinity, Mobility and the New Middle Class*, an exciting new book by anthropologist Michiel Baas, attempts to answer these questions and more through an ethnographic study of the lives of trainers and bodybuilders across India.

During his decade-long research, Baas met, became friends with and interviewed personal trainers with upper-middle-class clients, floor trainers in a neighborhood gym and bodybuilders across India’s metros. In a thrilling introduction, he dwells on how the popularity of the transformed bodies of the three Khans—Salman Khan in *Pyaar Kiya To Darna Kya* (1998), Shah Rukh

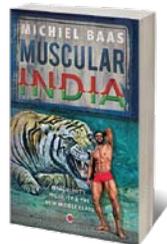
Khan in *Om Shanti Om* (2007) and Aamir Khan in *Ghajini* (2008)—and the launch of the Indian edition of the *Men’s Health* magazine (2007) gave birth to a new ideal of the Indian male body. Baas argues that the promise of transformation, set against the background of a rapidly transforming urban India, led to a ‘rapid growth in gym memberships and demand for personal training’ amongst the 30-crore strong middle-class India. Interviews with trainers reveal that although the trainer-client relationships inside the gym are that of equals, gaps remain in their outside lives. Add to this the reluctance of the older middle class to accept these new entrants and the negative associations attributed to muscular bodies in a society infamous for violence on women and the complexities of the Indian context are evident.

In the chapter on bodybuilding, Baas briefly traces the history of bodybuilding in India from the Eugen Sandow’s visit in 1904-1905 to the inefficient contemporary system marred by the proliferation of federations across the country. He

writes evocatively about the struggles of bodybuilders to meet the financial needs of their families while keeping up with extreme workout routines and investing in protein supplements. Despite their harmful effects, the use of growth hormones and anabolic steroids seems to be rampant in the sport and the grim accounts of the bodybuilders almost make their consumption sound inevitable. Perhaps, the most intriguing and less-known subject is the chapter on sex and desire in which Baas writes on the sexual capital of a muscular male body and also its exploitation.

Baas intersperses narratives of his interactions with the trainers and bodybuilders with scholarly analysis; this constant shifting of styles can be taxing for some readers. Passages where he describes the intimate time spent with these men, such as his journeys with Shivam, conversations with Manish and Selvam and the Ganapati Visarjan procession in Mumbai with Vijay are delightful and subtly lets us in into their complex world of aspirations, anxieties and insecurities. Apart from extensive field research, Baas analyses Bollywood and published works—both scholarly and otherwise—to develop his arguments thus resulting in copious notes and a very helpful bibliography.

*Muscular India* does a great job of breaking down (some of) the complexities of internal middle-class hierarchies and is a significant addition to the study of contemporary Indian middle class. Baas’ decision to publish his research for popular consumption is commendable and will hopefully encourage other eminent researchers and scholars to follow suit. ■



**MUSCULAR INDIA**  
MASCULINITY, MOBILITY AND  
THE NEW MIDDLE CLASS

Michiel Baas

Context  
328Pages | Rs 699

# The Rooster's Revenge

An absurdly comic and uncannily contemporary novel from Kerala

By Palash Krishna Mehrotra

UNNI R'S STORY collection, *One Helluva Lover*, introduced us to his trademark style, which combines wit and sarcasm ('the only creature on earth that protests through sarcasm is the human being') with an unflinching fealty to his milieu of rural Kottayam. His first novel, *The Cock Is the Culprit*, bears the hallmarks of his writing, even as it explores allegory and gossip as literary devices. The Malayalam original sold 10,000 copies within 100 days of its release.

It's a riveting tale ('all tales are lies in the final analysis'), set in small precise chapters, absurdly comic and uncannily contemporary in its references. It's a modern folk tale that takes in its arc the rise of fascist politics, hypernationalism, religious parochialism and habitual, insidious, unselfconscious patriarchy, lynch mobs, the refugee crisis, police brutality and the untrammelled power of the state, all rendered with a characteristic lightness of touch. In its final summation, this is a story about the essential dumbness of the human race, especially the male of the species.

Unni's village is a throbbing microcosm of religions and ideologies, cosmopolitan and provincial at the same time. It's a fishbowl that flows into the ocean. At the heart of this novel is a mischievous elusive rooster that crows hideously at all times of day. Tensions arise in the village because the rooster's crowing is not whimsical; instead, it seems to deliberately choose the most opportune moments to disrupt proceedings spearheaded by self-important local pillars of society: communists, patriots, the priests of temples, mosques and warring

church factions. The invisible rooster pricks each balloon with his beak. It's not just the big guns the rooster is after: 'The same horrid cackle was heard when people tried to consult astrologers, when husbands yelled at wives or beat them, when men indulged in post-orgasmic neglect of their wives or lovers, and when they bragged about their family's eminence.'

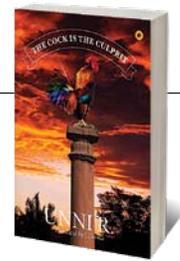
Aside from the rooster, who belongs to a deaf nonagenarian, the central protagonist of the novel is Kochukattan, who tries in vain to be the voice of reason. He dreams of going to Saudi; in his head he's always aboard an aeroplane, even when he goes to the toilet. He worries about the impending changes in landscape: 'What will I do every morning in Saudi? They don't have coconut trees, only palm trees.' His grandfather never believed in 'a life lived in debt to the gods', a life lesson that Kochu—neither a Nair or a Nambuthiri—has

internalised in good measure.

His nemesis is the phony patriot, Chaaku, who claims to be an army man but is rumoured to be a sackdealer. Chaaku, a paranoid Trump-like figure, lives behind high walls in mortal fear of imagined foes. He celebrates Saddam Hussein's execution by cooking 'a nice sweet payasam' and bursts crackers when America invades Afghanistan. His idea of America is drawn from Hollywood films. The foil is provided by Kurup saar, a village venerable, a former revolutionary who now believes that 'he has to worship in every puja, from nirmalayam at early dawn to athaazapuja at night'.

At one point in the novel, Unni mentions a sign in a toddy shop warning its customers to refrain from talking politics in the bar. If the writer were present in the bar, he would never be thrown out for breaking this rule. The pub landlord would be fooled into thinking this was a nutty village writer who seemed a little too obsessed with roosters and, perhaps, Calvino's folktales.

The book is also wonderfully produced, each chapter being preceded by black-and-white illustrations by Riyas Komu. Komu deploys old matchbox covers and simple silhouettes (Sisyphus rolling a boulder) to hint at what lies in store for the reader. J Devika, who translated Unni's short stories, again gives us a readable translation that at times throws up the odd awkward sentence, which tries to be a little too faithful to the original: 'Twist and tangle needlessly'; 'Catching the promise of the promise'; and 'he knock-knocked on the door'. ■



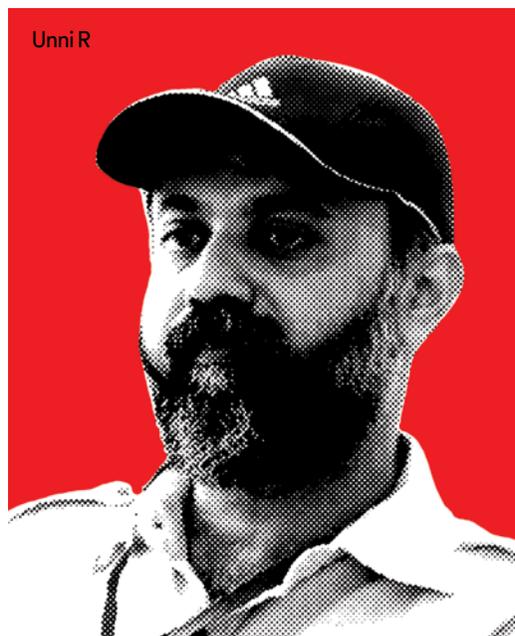
THE COCK IS THE CULPRIT

Unni R

Translated by J Devika

Eka

118 Pages | Rs 399



Unni R

# 'I Want a Black Kid to Have the Opportunities I Had When I Came to This Country'

**A**rnold Schwarzenegger is a classic rags-to-riches story. A bodybuilder from a small town in Austria, he went on to become one of Hollywood's biggest stars, who served as Governor of California from 2003 to 2011. Of late, he has been promoting veganism. He is always ready to talk cinema and politics.

**Given the current situation in America and the coming election, if you were president, what would you change?**

Well it's such a hypothetical question to answer but I think that since the timing now is such, America is searching for a way to create more equality, I would say this is a priority right now...and it has been since I came to this country. I want to make sure that a black kid that is in Philadelphia or in Baltimore can have the same opportunities that I had when I came to this country. I enjoyed a great education system, I enjoyed that I could get a loan, I enjoyed that I could buy apartment buildings and get into real estate. I got an easy good credit rating. All of these kind of things is not equally available for minorities and especially for blacks and so that would be one of my main issues, not just talk about it but to sit down with Democrats and Republicans and do work on equal housing opportunities, equal criminal justice system and the voting rights so that everyone can vote and not have the polling places of blacks close down so that they make it more difficult for them to vote. America does not even have an anti-lynching law, so that is horrible.



*Arnold Schwarzenegger*

So those are the kind of issues I think that are really pressing today. But then of course there's all the other issues that America has been falling behind because of our politicians being lazy and being locked into their system. We have to build new infrastructure in America, we have to go and do immigration reform, we have to have healthcare reform where everyone is insured and no one has to worry about that and everyone pays their fair share.

**If Donald Trump gets reelected what do you think will be the effect on climate change?**

Well you know America doesn't work that way where we rely only on one person. So, it just happens to be that he is not seeing it the same way as we do when it comes to the

importance of clean air, clean water and clean soil. And to create a greener environment, I think it is important for people to look very closely at California and they will see firsthand that California has managed to have the strictest environmental laws but they at the same time have the most successful economy. We passed the Green Building Initiative and the Low Carbon Fuel Standard and all those kinds of laws that really moved California forward.

All they have to do in America is... Washington has to copy California and then they will go and have the most successful kind of a future and we will really truly reduce greenhouse gasses in America and therefore all over the world and also inspire countries. So I think that's why we are going to the

environmental conference in Vienna in order to inspire other countries, to tell them that now is the time when we go and put all this stimulus money into these various different countries to rebuild our economy green and not to go back the old way. If you have a choice today to invest in a dial phone, in the old system of dial phone or if you want to invest into a cellphone you would invest into the cellphone not in the old technology of a phone that needs to have landlines and stuff like that. So I think the same is true with energy, we have to invest in solar, in wind, geothermal and those kind of technologies, electric cars, hydrogen cars and so on. So that just shows you the huge success that is there by creating jobs, green jobs, rather than the dirty fossil fuel jobs. ■



**RAJEEV MASAND**

## Wrapping Up

Story goes that **Sanjay Dutt** has offered to complete shooting his two under-production films before he must retire temporarily from public life to undergo treatment for his health. A few weeks ago, the actor was reportedly diagnosed with cancer, and while tabloids suggested that he may be at an advanced stage, the actor's family has refrained from revealing details of his diagnosis.

Dutt is expected to complete both the Yash Raj Films project *Prithviraj*, based on the life of Prithviraj Chauhan, in which **Akshay Kumar** plays the titular role, and another film for the same banner, namely *Shamshera*, a dacoit drama starring **Ranbir Kapoor**. According to sources, Dutt has already been filming *Shamshera* at Mumbai's Film City; he is believed to have only a few days' work left on the film. For *Prithviraj*, he will join Akshay on the set when the *Padman* star returns from Scotland where he is currently filming *Bell Bottom* with **Huma Qureshi, Lara Dutta and Vaani Kapoor**.

All plans for a third *Munnabhai* film are said to be on hold for the moment; in any case, director **Rajkumar Hirani** is currently working on a project with **Shah Rukh Khan**. Dutt had been looking forward to making a new *Munnabhai* film; he's said he's been in contact with Hirani for updates on a potential script.

## Lonavla Calling

**Asha Bhosle**, who has been spending time with her son **Anand** and his family at her Lonavla bungalow since early days of the lockdown in March, was pleasantly surprised to discover that some of her Mumbai friends were also isolating in the neighbourhood. **Javed Akhtar** and **Shabana Azmi** had also come to their own property nearby, and reportedly, the two families caught up over meals a few times. Asha, whose culinary skills are the stuff of legend, is believed to have whipped up some of her specialties on

these occasions.

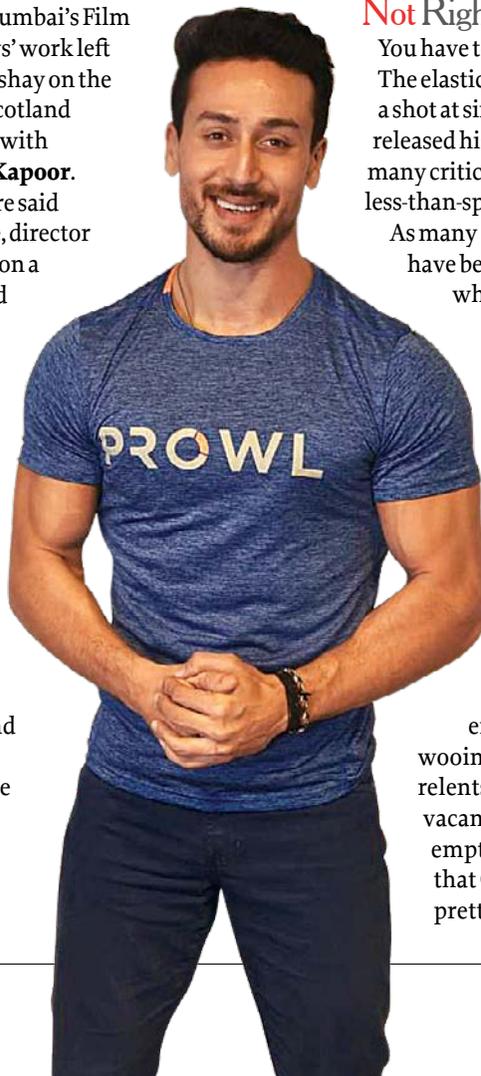
The legendary songstress also caught up with actress **Tanuja** who has a home close by and who had also got away from the city to spend time in quietude. The Mangeshkar sisters have remained close to the **Samarth** family for years; not only have both Asha and **Lata Mangeshkar** lent their voices for songs filmed on Tanuja and her late sibling **Nutan**, but also for songs featuring Tanuja's daughter **Kajol**. In fact, Kajol has been in regular touch with Asha over the years, and even after she moved to the suburbs following her marriage to **Ajay Devgn**, she frequented the singer's south Mumbai apartment over lunch.

## Not Right Now

You have to hand it to **Tiger Shroff** for trying. The elastic-bodied, nimble-footed star has taken a shot at singing. Earlier this week, the actor released his first single 'Unbelievable', which, as many critics pointed out, is a fitting title for the less-than-spectacular song.

As many as three composers and songwriters have been credited for working on the song whose pithy lyrics go something like this: 'My hands all over your body/ let me grab that waist/ need to have that taste girl.' Tiger's voice, to be fair, may be the least offensive thing about the track, as are his dance moves that are totally on point.

The video, directed by his *Student of the Year 2* director **Punit Malhotra**, is shot in moody black-and-white tones and conjures up a scenario in which Tiger, playing a hotel employee, seems committed to wooing a pretty coworker. When she relents, they take their romance to a vacant suite, an abandoned ballroom, an empty pool—making the point, perhaps, that Covid-19 has hit the hotel industry pretty bad? ■



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