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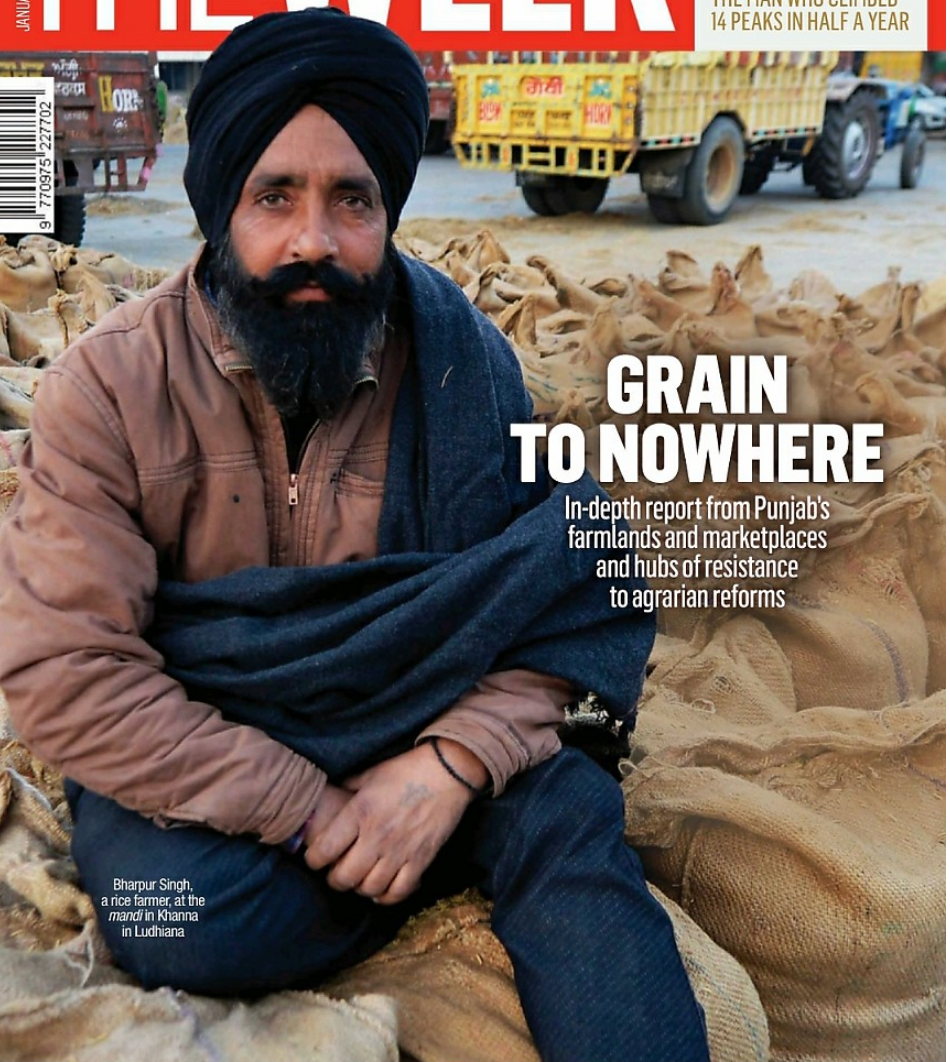
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THEWEEK



GRAIN TO NOWHERE

In-depth report from Punjab's
farmlands and marketplaces
and hubs of resistance
to agrarian reforms

Bharpur Singh,
a rice farmer, at the
mandi in Khanna
in Ludhiana

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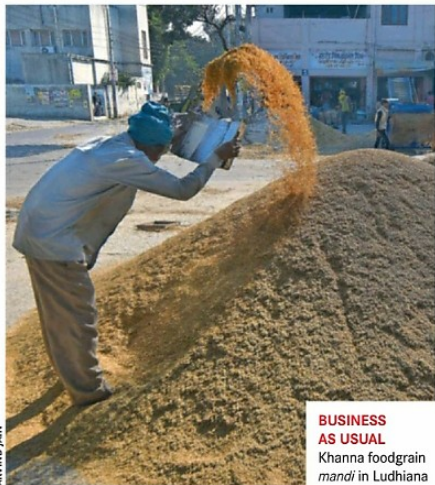
While many blame bats for the pandemic, they are crucial for the survival and well-being of human beings

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COVER PHOTO ARVIND JAIN \ COVER DESIGN BINESH SREEDHARAN

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Thank you for the treat

The anniversary special double issue of THE WEEK was a sheer delight to read. It was also a visual treat. Both the issues had so much to offer. As a distressing 2020 came to an end, this was exactly what I was looking for.

The first issue on India's eventful maritime history was so revealing and comprehensive. Today, retelling India's naval history is significant and strategically important.

Why didn't we officially record our maritime past? Why did we neglect coastal traditions? All that would have been of so much help today.

I am sure Indians were one of the first people to navigate the seas. We, too, would have had explorers like Columbus and Vasco da Gama.

We must continue to highlight our cultural superiority, and there has to be a deeper attempt on our part to understand and appreciate India's rich maritime history ('Tied to the tide', September 27).

Devender Tokas,
On email.

I was enraptured going through THE WEEK's anniversary special double issue. I, especially, enjoyed

the volume on India's maritime past. In my opinion we should focus more on such issues, which give a fresh

perspective. The illustrations for this package have come out well.

Hannah Mariam,
On email.

The lessons that 2020—anus horribilis, the year of the apocalyptic pandemic—has taught us are many, and were precisely and eloquently listed in your story ('Autobiography of an unrepentant year', December 27).

In his recently released book, Nobel Prize winner Paul Nurse defines life and its intricacies. He underscores our special responsibility to care for all forms of life. To counter the challenges that the human race faces, it is vital that we live in harmony with nature. This is one of the sacrosanct lessons that the pandemic has bared. Life throws up several questions and challenges and it is prudent not to search for all answers.

The mask may have shielded our smiles, but our sense of humour should be our strength.

Biju C. Mathew,
Thiruvananthapuram

The issue on India's maritime past made for an interesting read. I also enjoyed reading the second cover

story on how we found refuge in humour during the pandemic.

I liked the cover illustration by Bara Bhaskaran.
Denshiya Selvaraj,
On email.

2020 was a bad year, but it has taught us valuable lessons as we move forward. We are all survivors. The year taught us to be humble and generous. But, in the process, sadly, some of us became self-centred.

Gaurav Trivedi,
On email.

Good old days

The graphics on the phenomenal progress in communication media, from telegraphy to present internet era, turned me nostalgic ('The .in revolution', December 27).

As an octogenarian I looked back to the year 1944, when I was ten.

My father was a postmaster and the office was manned by him and an attendant. Back then, the telegram was the fastest mode of communication—operated by tapping a key emitting sound in two notes, as dot and dash in Morse code for different alphabets, and continued tapping for a pause.

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Out of inquisitiveness I memorised the binary code and learnt to tap them out, too. The place was a busy commercial centre and there was a flurry of telegrams every day. Suddenly, one day, my father fell acutely sick, and, with his guidance, I managed to send an express telegram to the head office seeking immediate assistance. This instance remains etched in my memory till date.

Now, electronic media has taken giant strides in the field of telecommunication. Storage and transmission through analogue, via internet using spectrums of different wavelengths, has emerged in the form of computers, mobile phones and laptops.

Internet usage has become universal, occupying all commercial and business centres. Apart from *ashleelta* (vulgarity), as an offspring of digital revolution, an element of dehumanisation has seeped in.

With the advent of artificial intelligence and robots we can soon foresee humans and machines dancing together.

B. Gurumurthy,
On email.

Bad year for Modi

2020 was not a good year for Narendra Modi ("Stainless steel", December 27). Modi's calculations went wrong on the day he said, "Mahabharat was won in 18 days,

but the war against coronavirus will take 21 days." Thereafter, Modi and team had a plan to announce a vaccine on Covid-19 for August 15 ahead of other countries. But it got leaked and the idea was shelved. Finally, the farmers' protest has taken Modi by surprise. His government was not prepared for it.

The length to which the government has gone to convince farmers shows that the entire issue could have been better managed from the beginning. This issue is not going to settle anytime soon. Good luck.

Aparajitha Basu,
Kolkata.

An elected government is working on the mandate of the people to frame policies and implement it for public welfare. If every policy requires public opinion and an all-party approval, no decision can be taken.

Ramakrishna Devajana,
Bengaluru.

Let's follow Sood

Sonu Sood has ignited the flame of hope in the hearts of citizens of our beloved country ("The road home", December 20).

With his acts of kindness, a number of like-minded friends have joined hands with him, encouraging many more to follow the just path.

Let's make it a habit to contribute our bit to provide happiness to those who have little or no means of survival.

Surinder Pal,
On email.

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POINT BLANK



He just laughs all the time. I don't know what's so funny, must be my batting.

Matthew Wade, Australian cricketer, on cricketer Rishabh Pant

Good or bad, governments must be changed. That is why, in many countries, there are term limits on presidents and prime ministers. A sense of permanence is the cause of the beginning of a downfall.

P. Chidambaram, Congress leader

Earlier I gave the slogan 'Go corona, corona go', and now corona is going. For the new coronavirus strain, I give the slogan, 'No corona, corona no'.

Ramdas Athawale, Union minister

If the BJP believes in God, then farmers are an incarnation of God. The government should not annoy them and should listen to them.

Naresh Uttam Patel, Samajwadi Party leader

Of late, the BJP is trying to break the spine of Bengali culture. They are trying to break the Bengali pride, erase our history, change the geographic boundary and hit the political ideology with violence.

Mamata Banerjee, West Bengal CM

It is true that it is the kind of age there is nothing much left to achieve in sports. But then, someone like Leander Paes won a grand slam at 42. Roger Federer is another case in point.

S. Sreesanth, cricketer, 37, on his comeback in domestic cricket



We may well have 10 new strains of a virus in 2021. How much of your life do you put on hold? What about your dreams, your emotions or your needs? How long will you press a pause button, given that even the much-touted vaccine comes with its own super scary side effects? The journey of life is yours to live, not yours to live in fear.

Pooja Bedi, actor and columnist

MILESTONES

REVOLUTIONARY RISE

Arya Rajendran, a 21-year-old BSc mathematics student, became the youngest mayor in the country after she was sworn in on December 28 in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. Arya started her political journey as a member of Balasangham, a children's organisation affiliated to the Communist Party of India (Marxist).



THE DECADE'S BEST

Indian skipper Virat Kohli won the International Cricket Council's Sir Garfield Sobers Award for male cricketer of the decade and ICC Men's ODI Player of the Decade. Former captain M.S. Dhoni won the ICC Spirit of Cricket Award of the Decade.



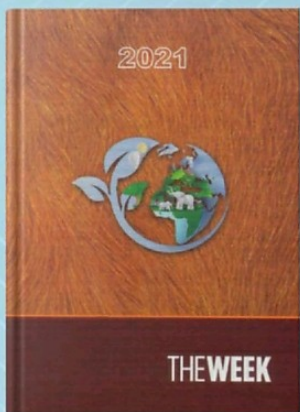
TECHNOLOGICAL LEAP

Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated India's first driverless train (for Delhi Metro) on December 28. The fully-automated train started its operations on the 38km-long Magenta Line connecting Janakpuri West and Botanical Garden.

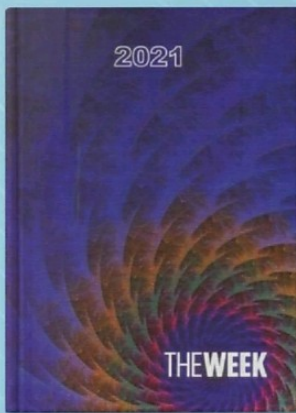
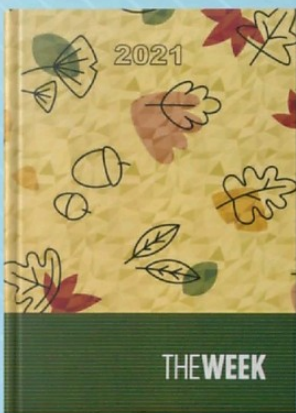


WORD PLAY

Psychologists say that the **Internet of Behaviours (IOB)** is something to watch out for. An extension of the Internet of Things, IOB refers to capturing the "digital dust" of people's life from a variety of online sources, by both public and private entities, in order to influence behaviour. Recent research says that by 2023, 40 per cent of people worldwide will be tracked and influenced digitally by IOB. Sounds scary? Welcome to new-age totalitarianism.



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THE BIG PICTURE

HIGH JINKS!

Captain Ajinkya Rahane and debutant Shubman Gill walk off after securing India's fourth Test win at the Melbourne Cricket Ground, making it India's most successful away venue. Leading a depleted side, Rahane scored a century to become the man of the match. He also became the first recipient of the Mullagh Medal, a tribute to former cricketer Johnny Mullagh, who was the captain of the 1868 Aboriginal team. This was Australia's first sports team to tour internationally.

PHOTO BY AFP



Digital loan sharks

Even as there is good news of the arrival of vaccines against coronavirus, there is another virus from India's northern neighbour that may need a legislative antidote when Parliament convenes for the budget session.

The digital loan apps that have been ravaging lives are not exclusively from China, but the Telangana Police have identified a large number of such apps developed by the Chinese. Following cyber-bullying of defaulters and a spate of suicides by those who had borrowed at exorbitant interest rates, there have been crackdowns in various states. In late December, the Reserve Bank of India cautioned people against sharing their personal details with such apps and against borrowing what seemed to be easy money from unverified sources.

The harsh methods loan sharks use to recover money digitally have caused widespread misery, and have not been widely reported. A Mumbai Police officer describes it as cyber blackmail; the borrower's family and friends receive calls and messages abusing the defaulter.

Just as only a small portion of blackmail cases is reported to the police, many fail to report that they were lured by offers of easy money. Parents have shivered seeing messages telling them they had given birth to cheats, while friends of defaulters have inquired whether they are in need of help.

Usury is as ancient as barter. It is a sin in many religions and, even recently, research has been published describing the practice of lending at exceptionally high interest rates in ancient India.

But, despite the government's tall claims on protection of personal data, the racketeers have easily mined borrowers' information. In some cases, they have accessed bank account details of the defaulters, including details of deposits and borrowings from regular banks and employers.

While banking laws insist on rigorous procedure for granting licences to lend to general customers

or to accept deposits (look at the travails of Sahara India Pariwar, which is accused of operating as a non-banking financial company without licence), the micro-lending apps escape legal regulation as their operations are treated as loans from individual to individual. There is also the argument that there are good app-based lenders who go through the Reserve Bank's Know Your Customer (KYC) norms. But, the KYC itself has been more of a formality than a rigorous norm, even to some banks.

There are also arguments that the current laws are enough to handle the shadowy operators. However, even though Indra Gandhi had initiated a crackdown on unauthorised money lenders during the Emergency, the business has endured into the 21st century.

While the usurious money-lenders in rural and urban areas have had a good time during the economic slowdown, so have big companies with fancy attributes engaged in the same business.

They offer loans without physical security, knowing that digital data

and familial links can be used by what are known as "recovery agents". Auto-financing companies usually hire these recovery agents to stop cars on roads, eject the defaulter from the driver's seat and take away the vehicle.

The hyperactive Enforcement Directorate, which has courted controversy over raids on political persons, may perhaps swing into action against the app operators, some of whom seem to have dubious sources of money, including from money laundering and even proceeds of heinous crimes like drug-running. The ministries of home, finance, information technology and law need to sit with the Reserve Bank to handle these digital lending apps, just as some of these institutions had got together ten years ago to handle the suicides caused by micro-finance companies that operated physically outside the legal boundaries.





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THE DESERT CALLS

Many foreign diplomats could not go home this holiday season. But this may come as a fillip for domestic tourism. For instance, the German Ambassador to India, Walter J. Lindner, is using the break to explore every bit of Rajasthan. He visited the Sambhar Salt Lake near Ajmer and the rat temple at Bikaner, and pored over the restored murals at Shekhawati. The pictures he shares on social media have drawn much praise. Looks like Incredible India has got yet another brand ambassador.



AGE GAP

After the local body elections in Kerala, in which the BJP's tally came nowhere near its claims, party leaders had many justifications to explain its lack of growth in the state. The pick of the lot went to Smitha Menon, state president of the party's Mahila Morcha. To prove that the youth were attracted to the BJP, she said that there were many 19-year-olds who contested as BJP candidates in the elections. Little did she know that 21 is the eligible age for contesting elections.

NO (BROTHERLY) LOVE LOST

Parth Pawar, son of Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar, is eager to make his mark in politics. He could contest in the upcoming Pandharpur-Mangalvedha bypoll. There is talk in the NCP camp that Parth, who lost in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls, wants to emulate his MLA cousin Rohit, in whom he sees a competitor. It is said he had been feeling left out since his 2019 defeat. It would be interesting to see if Sharad Pawar decides in favour of Parth or gives the ticket to a local leader.



ILLUSTRATIONS JOB P.K.



DEAD MEAT

Former Karnataka chief minister Siddaramaiah is getting into trouble over matters of his palate. Two years ago, he was criticised for feasting on fish before his visit to the Sri Manjunatheshwara temple in Dharmasthala. A few weeks ago, he irked his own party leaders by supporting beef consumption. More recently, when Siddaramaiah sat down to have chicken for lunch in his hometown on December 27, one of his followers reminded him it was Hanuman Jayanti. He promptly asked the follower if he knew the exact date of birth of Hanuman, telling him not to worry about such things. Needless to say, the devout are once again after the Kuruba strongman.

BOVINE RIGHT

Of all the ways in which Uttar Pradesh's state Congress chief Ajay Kumar Lallu is protesting in the state, the most innovative one occurred when he arrived in Jhansi carrying an earthen pot on his head. It contained the ashes of a cow, Lallu claimed. The Congress has clubbed its demonstrations for support to the farmers' campaign with the plea to save cows from mistreatment in the state. Lallu said he wants to scatter the ashes in Chitrakoot's Mandakini river, to give the cow the respect it was denied in life.



Saffron heat in J&K

The BJP, with 75 seats, has emerged as the single largest party in the District Development Council elections in Jammu and Kashmir. It secured the largest vote share, followed by the National Conference (67), the Peoples Democratic Party (27) and the Congress (26).

The Narendra Modi government's quick decisions and stern actions have put some order in the perpetually chaotic valley. Winning 72 seats in Jammu and three seats in Kashmir shows that the BJP is on a firm footing. The successful conduct of elections, devoid of violence and lawlessness, is the biggest win after the abrogation of Article 370 of the Constitution.

After threatening to boycott the DDC elections, the regional political parties voted for democratic restoration in the valley so that they could stay relevant.

A measure of the BJP's strong presence in the Union Territory can be had from the fact that 11 political parties, led by big regional leaders like Omar Abdullah and Mehbooba Mufti, with the backing of the Congress, had to come together to take a stand against the BJP's agenda of development.

It was for the first time that any election was being held in Jammu and Kashmir after the abrogation of Article 370, and the major takeaway is that people are urging for change in the newly formed Union Territory. People of Jammu supporting the BJP and people of Kashmir supporting independent candidates over the People's Alliance for Gupkar Declaration is all the evidence we need.

The results have been disheartening for the

PDP and the National Conference, which were exploiting the valley for a long time. Maintaining the special status of J&K was nothing but a talisman to keep the Kashmiris in a state of euphoria over being different from the rest of the country. People did not have a choice earlier, and hence had voted for these parties.

The DDC results have once again highlighted communal polarisation in Jammu and Kashmir. The BJP won 86 per cent of 56 seats in the entirely Hindu districts and 2 per cent of 152 seats in the entirely Muslim districts. The Gupkar Alliance won 57 per cent seats in the entirely Muslim districts and just 4 per cent in the entirely Hindu districts.

Still, DDC elections are very different from assembly polls or Lok Sabha polls, and it was the first election to the council, so no comparisons can be made.

Decades of religious and territorial unrest will take some time to subside, but the start is overwhelming. The trust which the people have put in Prime Minister Modi and the support they have shown to his

policies are the reason for a different political arrangement today.

It is too early for the Gupkar Alliance to celebrate as they have designed their own doom. Since development was never on their agenda, Jammu has soundly thrashed them. And their footing in Kashmir is only temporary, given the fact that they won seats on the basis of bringing Article 370 back, which is next to impossible now.

Spring may be a little further away, but Jammu and Kashmir's frozen politics is thawing with saffron heat.





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Courting trouble

A CBI application in the Supreme Court could derail Mamata Banerjee's quest to retain power

BY RABI BANERJEE

ON DECEMBER 23, the Central Bureau of Investigation submitted a 271-page application in the Supreme Court, claiming that the constitutional machinery in West Bengal had collapsed and alleging that Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee was involved in the 2013 Saradha scam. The Supreme Court had asked the CBI to investigate the case; initially, a special investigation team headed by Kolkata Police Commissioner Rajeev Kumar had probed it.

The application also sought custodial interrogation of Kumar. The CBI accused him of not investigating the Saradha scam case and of even returning crucial documents and laptops to the prime accused.

Banerjee could have a troubling January as the apex court is also set to hear a handful of other cases related to the state administration. This includes a case the BJP filed regarding "rampant violence" during the 2019 elections.

The application, a copy of which THE WEEK has, details the alleged mistreatment CBI officials faced

while investigating the multi-crore Saradha scam. In February 2019, the state police had stopped CBI officials from interrogating Kumar. "[This] clearly points [to] the concerted institutional connivance [in the state] and a complete breakdown of the rule of law and constitutional machinery," read the application.

In an interview with THE WEEK (issue dated January 3, 2021), West Bengal Governor Jagdeep Dhankhar had also claimed such a "breakdown of the constitutional machinery". He said he had flagged it in a report to the Centre.

The CBI's application comes weeks before a full bench of the Election Commission is scheduled to visit the state. Sudeep Jain, the deputy election commissioner who recently visited north and south Bengal, reportedly told his officers in the state: "The commission would not accept a single deviation from the rule."

The state BJP, meanwhile, does not want the upcoming assembly elections to be held under the Trinamool's administrative control.

Said BJP national spokesperson Raju Bista: "The state administration should in no way control a single officer during the elections. If that means imposition of President's rule, then so be it."

As for the Saradha scam, the CBI said in the application: "[There is] a larger conspiracy between highly placed state authorities and companies under the investigation, which requires full and thorough investigation by the CBI; [the investigation] is being deliberately scuttled by the concrete efforts of the state authorities/contemners."

The agency also brought up the 93-page letter Trinamool leader Kunal Ghosh, an accused in the case, had written to it in 2014; he had then called Banerjee the "biggest beneficiary" of the scam. The CBI also cited the interrogation of Ghosh by the Enforcement Directorate in 2013, which seemed to have revealed more information. Importantly, under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act, confessions or statements made before an ED official are admissible in court; this is not the case with other agencies.

The CBI also claimed that, despite the gravity of Ghosh's allegations, the state police made him withdraw his application for recording his statement, under Section 164 of the Crim-



The CBI's application comes weeks before a full bench of the Election Commission is scheduled to visit West Bengal.

inal Procedure Code.

Asked about this, Arindam Das, senior advocate at the Calcutta High Court, said: "Of course, the state police is liable to answer why Ghosh's statement was not taken when he wanted it to be taken during his long stay in police custody."

Quoting the ED's interrogation, the CBI said in the application: "[The] West Bengal chief minister and the promoter of Saradha Group Sudipta Sen had [a] very good relationship. [She] used to talk to Sen using [Ghosh's] phone. It is submitted that call detail records of two numbers of Sen, spanning one year, revealed that Ghosh and [he] had contacted 298 times on one number and 9 times on the other number."

The CBI said that the ED investigation revealed that Sudipta Sen and Alchemist Group chief K.D. Singh—who was accused in a money laundering case and later became a Rajya Sabha member (with Trinamool's support)—funded the 2011 state elections "to the tune of crores of rupees." Kunal Ghosh said that Rajat Mazumdar (former Bengal IPS officer) and

Mukul Roy (currently BJP national vice president) were the key players in this election funding by Saradha group Ponzi companies," said the application. "[A] minimum of 205 candidates were given Rs25 lakh each in cash, other than the overall expenditure."

In the application, the CBI also cited the ED interrogation of another witness—Safiqur Rehman, a senior employee of Saradha Group, had reportedly told the ED: "When [the] chief minister contested [the assembly election], Sudipta Sen was forced to sponsor all the (Durga) pujas of Bhawanipur, Kolkata."

The CBI also claimed: "More than ₹6.21 crore has been paid [from] the chief minister's relief fund (for disasters) to Tara TV, which was a media company under the Saradha Group." The agency said it had sent letters to the state chief secretary in this regard, but the responses were "evasive."

In another startling accusation, the CBI said that, apart from the Saradha Group, several other companies such as Rose Valley Group, Tower Group, Pailan Group and Angel Agro Group had paid lakhs of rupees for Banerjee's paintings, "steered by certain persons linked to the highest state authorities."

Ghosh said that the CBI submitting

STATE OF BOTHER

Mamata Banerjee on her dharna following the CBI raid on the Kolkata Police commissioner's residence in February 2019

SALLI BERA



PHOTOS: SAIL BERA

PUSH COMES TO SHOVE

Kolkata Police detains CBI officers who came to question the Kolkata Police commissioner, in February 2019



the application was a judicial matter that should not be discussed now. "I want Mukul Roy to be arrested," he said.

Roy was not available for comment, but the state BJP said in a statement: "The law would be same for everyone. The CBI would have every right to interrogate Mukul Roy again if the need arises."

The application also detailed how the Bengal police "harassed and tortured" CBI officers on February 3, 2019. On February 4, the CBI had filed a contempt petition in the Supreme Court against top state officials, but had not given details of the "harassment".

CBI officer Tathagat Vardan and CBI (East) Joint Director Pankaj Srivastava have attached letters describing their experience, along with the CBI's application.

Said a CBI source: "Our prime intention was not to focus on the assault. Our intention was to bring the issue of custodial interrogation of Kumar to the apex court. Once the court accepted that prayer, we are

highlighting our harassment issue so that hindrances can be eradicated."

Interestingly, Srivastava was moved out of Kolkata to Delhi earlier this year; he is overseeing the investigation from there. When asked why such a step was taken, a home ministry official told THE WEEK that the state police had attacked Srivastava's family, including his wife and young child. "They cannot live there without fear," said the source. "The child has had psychological problems since that evening."

The application also described in detail how CBI officers were detained by the state police. When Vardan and other CBI officials reached Kumar's home, a security personnel asked them to accompany him to a state police vehicle parked across the road. There, the CBI officers were whisked away in the vehicle.

The CBI alleged that Kolkata Police officers held senior CBI officer V.P. Singh "by the throat". The CBI apparently asked K. Jayaraman, additional commissioner of Kolkata Police, for protection, but it was not granted.

The Central Reserve Police Force was then deployed to control the situation.

In another allegation, the CBI said that the Intelligence Bureau had, in 2009, written to the Bengal chief secretary, warning him of several Ponzi companies. The CBI later asked the chief secretary about this, but apparently got no reply. "Saradha chit fund [operated] from 2008 to 2013," said the application.

The CBI also alleged that Banerjee defended the Kolkata Police's actions. "[Shortly after the violence,] the chief minister visited the residence of Kumar [and] described him as one of the best police officers in the world," said the application. "She delivered a provocative public speech terming the CBI action illegal. Thereafter, she staged a *dharna* at Metro Channel, Kolkata, which was attended by top police officers in uniform."

Banerjee has been in a fight with the Centre for long. Now, she could be looking at another battle. All eyes are on the Supreme Court. ●



Brexit and English Covid

It was not meant to be this way. But then, such are the ironies of fate, its twists and turns that mock. On New Year's Day, the United Kingdom embarked on a historic journey as an "independent" nation, breaking free from the European Union. It was "Onward Ho", travelling far and wide, under a brand-new identity—"Global Britain"—restoring imperial grandeur, spreading opportunities, championing international causes, cutting lucrative trade deals with nations near and distant.

But on the eve of this new journey, Britain was isolated as never before. Following the detection of the "English virus", an extremely contagious variant of the novel coronavirus, nearly 50 countries pulled up their drawbridges to deny entry to British citizens, goods and flights. Perversely, it was as if the UK leaves the EU, but the world leaves Britain.

Even the nations within the kingdom—Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland—shunned the English. The irony was biting—the mutant virus was discovered in England, the "imperial-nostalgic" birthplace of Brexit. And Britons were banned just when they were readying to go forth into the world. Throughout 2020, Brexit and Covid-19 unfolded as parallel stories in Britain, neither impacting the other.

David Gauke, a former Tory lord chancellor, observed, "as in a TV series finale, the two plots are finally brought together."

In England, Brexit-induced bottlenecks were expected at the borders, especially in the English port of Dover, the main hub for trade with the EU, through France's Calais port. But a few days before Brexit, the variant virus created havoc in Dover. As France blockaded Britain, some 10,000 trucks, laden with vegetables and fish, were stranded for days. With no money, food, water and toilet facilities, angry drivers scuffled with police. Some 8,000 military personnel were brought in.

Supermarket shelves emptied and tempers

frayed. Lufthansa sent planeloads of fresh food to Britain—humanitarian gestures that contradicted the Brexiteer demonisation of the EU. The English love to blame the French for their misfortunes. But PM Boris Johnson had to plead with French President Emmanuel Macron to allow the flow of goods. Macron did, and his decision demonstrated how interconnected, mutually dependent and globalised the world is. Macron was appeasing his French supermarket owners and connoisseurs. Lockdown or no lockdown, langoustines—those delicious lobsters fresh from Britain—are to be savoured, not sacrificed at border crossings.

Every crisis has silver linings. The Dover disruption, a preview of the catastrophic consequences of a no-deal Brexit, finally nudged the UK and EU to sign a trade deal. Global Britain's first export seemed to be this mutant virus, which sneaked into Europe, Canada, Japan and even Australia.

The virus variant probably exists elsewhere, but it was detected first in England because British scientists have excelled in sequencing the coronavirus genome. Regular Covid-19 tests cannot detect viral mutations. They can only be identified by analysing the vast genetic data in each sample, using specialised machines.

The silver lining for Britain is that these discoveries form the launchpad for a profitable new life sciences industry. The UK's regulatory system is now independent of the EU, so the government plans to offer fast-tracked approvals to drug manufacturers for innovative medicine. The game plan is for the UK to emerge as a post-Brexit creativity hub. Johnson's clarion call: "unleash the animal spirits".

Rousing rhetoric hides not Global Britain's shaky start. But that's no reason to believe it cannot steady its course. Fate is fickle; it tricks and tempts. But the Brits, they are tenacious and tough.



The dying lake

Bhopal's Upper Lake could vanish, thanks to poor management and a detrimental city development plan

BY SRAVANI SARKAR



Haseen taaron ki aankhon se bahaa, aab

Qile ke pass us paani ka talaab
(The water shed from the eyes of beautiful stars/ that lake near the fort)

POET INAYATULLAH KHAN

'Naadaan' described Bhopal's Upper Lake thus in 1785. The lake has found reference in other literary works, too, like in poet Basit Bhopali's 1950s couplet, where he wonders, "*Talaab ka paani hai ki chandni sayyal* (Is it the lake's water or liquid moonlight)..."

It is not just *shayars* (poets) of yore, but also today's young who cannot stop gushing about the lake. Ananya Choudhary, 12, is a regular visitor to the lake. "This is such a beautiful lake and so many people get drinking

water from it, too," she says. "I want it to remain safe and beautiful so that future generations can also see the lake and benefit from it."

With a catchment area of 361sqkm and spanning Bhopal and Sehore districts, the Upper Lake or Bada Talaab is the capital's lifeline. It provides drinking water to one-third of the city's population. Together with the Lower Lake (Chhota Talaab), it is a designated wetland (Bhoj Wetland) and a Ramsar site. The lake got the international tag owing to its biodiversity and for being a habitat of the endangered sarus crane.

As per popular lore, the lake was commissioned by Raja Bhoj in the first half of the 11th century. But historian Syed Ashfaq Ali, in his *Bhopal:*

Past and Present (1969), attributes its construction to Kalyan Singh, the king's minister. *The Imperial Gazetteer of Central India* (1908), too, states the same, but credits the construction of a bigger lake—Tal Lake near Bhojpur—to the monarch, who reportedly filled it to ward off a curse. But a report on Malwa and adjoining districts by British administrator Sir John Malcolm, who was made in-charge of central India in 1818, suggests that the now non-existent Tal Lake "might be of an earlier date". Likewise, Shyam Munshi, in his 2017 book, *Bhopal: Sif Nakh-e-Qadam Reh Gaye*, says that the Bhopal lake was built by Gond rulers, much before Raja Bhoj's time, and that it was the Bhojpur lake that was com-



MUJEEB FARUQUI

FAITH BANK

People take a dip in the Upper Lake for a religious ritual

to four decades.”

Experts say that the lake is shrinking, getting shallower and its water quality worsening owing to sedimentation, encroachment and inflow of untreated sewage from nearby settlements. For several years, there has been rampant illegal construction on the northern side of the lake. In July 2014, the central zone bench of the National Green Tribunal (NGT) directed the state to ban all construction within 300m of the full tank level (FTL) of the Upper Lake, but to no avail.

“What is more shocking is that in the name of development, even the Bhopal Municipal Corporation and other government agencies have encroached upon the lake,” says environment management expert Pradip Kumar Nandi, who was closely associated with the Bhoj Wetland Project on the Upper Lake. The state tourism department, for instance, constructed a boat club on the lake’s southern side and an entertainment park along its spill channel. This led to an increase in commercial activity. The Bhopal Municipal Corporation (BMC) leased out land near the boat club for restaurants and food joints and also installed the state’s largest musical fountain near the boat club, without assessment of their impact on the lake.

Recently, the BMC constructed a 2.5km-long walkway from Khanu-gaon to Karbala along with a wall on the edge of the lake, part of which was within the full tank level. Following protests, Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan visited the site and ordered the demolition of the wall. After a brief halt, the BMC went ahead with the construction and extended the wall to VIP road.

Moreover, the flow of untreated sewage water continued even after the implementation of the sewerage scheme in 23 wards under the Bhoj Wetland Project. All because the BMC did not connect the houses

What is more shocking is that in the name of development, even the Bhopal Municipal Corporation and other agencies have encroached upon the lake.

—Pradip Kumar Nandi,
environment
management expert

with the main line.

There is also concern that the BMC put up faulty FTL demarcation pillars in 2012-2013. Following heavy rains in July 2016, the water level in the lake rose to 1,662.20ft (less than the FTL of 1,666.80ft), but many pillars got submerged. This indicates faulty demarcation. The NGT, in July 2016, ordered the BMC to properly demarcate the FTL for defining the ‘no construction zone’ around the lake. But many pillars were again found submerged during the monsoon in 2019 and 2020.

What has irked environment experts and citizens the most is the draft Bhopal Development Plan 2031. The Bhopal Citizens’ Forum has challenged it in the High Court. The draft plan proposes to expand the planning area from 601.06sqkm (as in BDP 2005) to 1,016sqkm through inclusion of villages falling in the catchment area. The plan ignores various encroachments around the lake and rather proposes relaxation of rules for construction in the catchment area, say experts.

Also, a 45m-wide road is proposed over and across the Upper Lake on the southern side, which will destroy the thick vegetation around the lake.

missioned by the king.

The current dispute surrounding the lake, however, has little to do with its past and everything with its future. According to various studies quoted in an unpublished draft report by the CEPT University in Ahmedabad, the lifespan of the lake could be anywhere between 21 years to 555 years. Based on the varying figures in the studies, the report—submitted to the state government in 2015—puts the average lifespan of the lake at 222 years. As writer Shams Ur Rehman Alavi says, “It is depressing to think that a lake that has survived for 10 centuries and gives so much to the residents of Bhopal could be facing a threat just because of bad management and planning in the last three

Objection has been raised against the draft plan misrepresenting an area on the banks of the lake—currently being used illegally as a “marriage garden,” along the Bhopal-Indore Road—as a residential area, and allowing “permissible activities” on the 24m-wide road. The forum has called this a clear attempt to regularise the marriage garden “at the cost of life and ecology of the lake”.

IPS officer Arun Gurtoo, who filed the PIL on behalf of the forum, says that Bhopal’s unique climate, temperature balance, tourism attraction and even its significant drinking water needs are closely linked to the Upper Lake. “Unfortunately, people have not realised its importance,” says Gurtoo, who retired as director general of the state’s Lokayukta police establishment. “More unfortunately, the people in powerful positions are least bothered.”

A member of the State Wetland Authority, Abhilash Khandekar is worried about the threats being posed to the lake by government agencies. “I appeal to the chief minister to save the lake as without it, Bhopal’s identity will be under threat,” he says.

Nandi, who is director general of the National Centre for Human Settlements and Environment, an NGO, has a few suggestions to save the lake, starting with imposing restrictions on activities in the catchment area and preventing encroachment within the buffer zone and flow of untreated sewage water into the lake. Also, regular de-silting and de-weeding should be done, he says. Historian Rizwanuddin Ansari, citing a project on a manmade lake in Belgium, suggests creating a 50ft-wide green belt or park around the lake, so that it works as a ‘green barrier’ against encroachments. ●

INTERVIEW



Bhopendra Singh,

minister for urban development and housing, Madhya Pradesh

Government is committed to conservation of Upper Lake

Q/What is the government doing to tackle encroachments, flow of untreated sewage water and drying up of feeder rivulets to the Upper Lake?

A/Demarcation of full tank level of the Upper Lake has been completed. The Bhopal district administration and the Bhopal Municipal Corporation regularly undertake anti-encroachment drive around the lake. We will ensure that such drives are taken up more stringently. Steps are being taken to ensure that sewage does not flow into the lake. A sewage project is underway in the city, which will prove beneficial for the lake.

Q/The recently published draft of the Bhopal Development Plan 2031 allows more construction around the lake, thereby reducing the green belt.

A/As per the rules, a public hearing has been conducted on the draft BDP 2031. Further process according to the rules is underway. The government will approve the plan only after looking into the pros and cons. If there are any objections to the draft plan, then they would be redressed keeping in mind the conservation of the lake.

Q/The Upper Lake is a wetland, a Ramsar site and is home to many birds and other life forms. But the conservation efforts do not match up to its importance.

A/The Wetlands (Conservation and Man-

agement) Rules, 2017, have been notified under the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986. The draft BDP 2031 will be reviewed in the context that the Upper Lake is also part of the Bhoj wetland. Provisions will be made in the draft plan for the wetland area according to the advice of the Madhya Pradesh State Wetland Authority.

Q/According to a draft report by the CEPT University in Ahmedabad, the lake might cease to exist in 200 years without proper conservation. Will the government take remedial steps?

A/All steps will be taken to conserve the Upper Lake, and wherever necessary, provisions will be made in the rules. The government has already initiated steps in this regard. Experts have been nominated on the State Wetland Authority from the fields of hydrology, fisheries, wetland ecosystem, landscape planning, socio-economy and other co-opted members. The conservation plans will be taken up with their guidance only.

Q/What other steps does the government propose for conservation of the Upper Lake?

A/As of now, the BDP 2031 has not been approved. The state government is committed to conservation of the Upper Lake. The chief minister has also accorded priority to lake conservation. All factors will be taken into consideration before approving the BDP draft. ●

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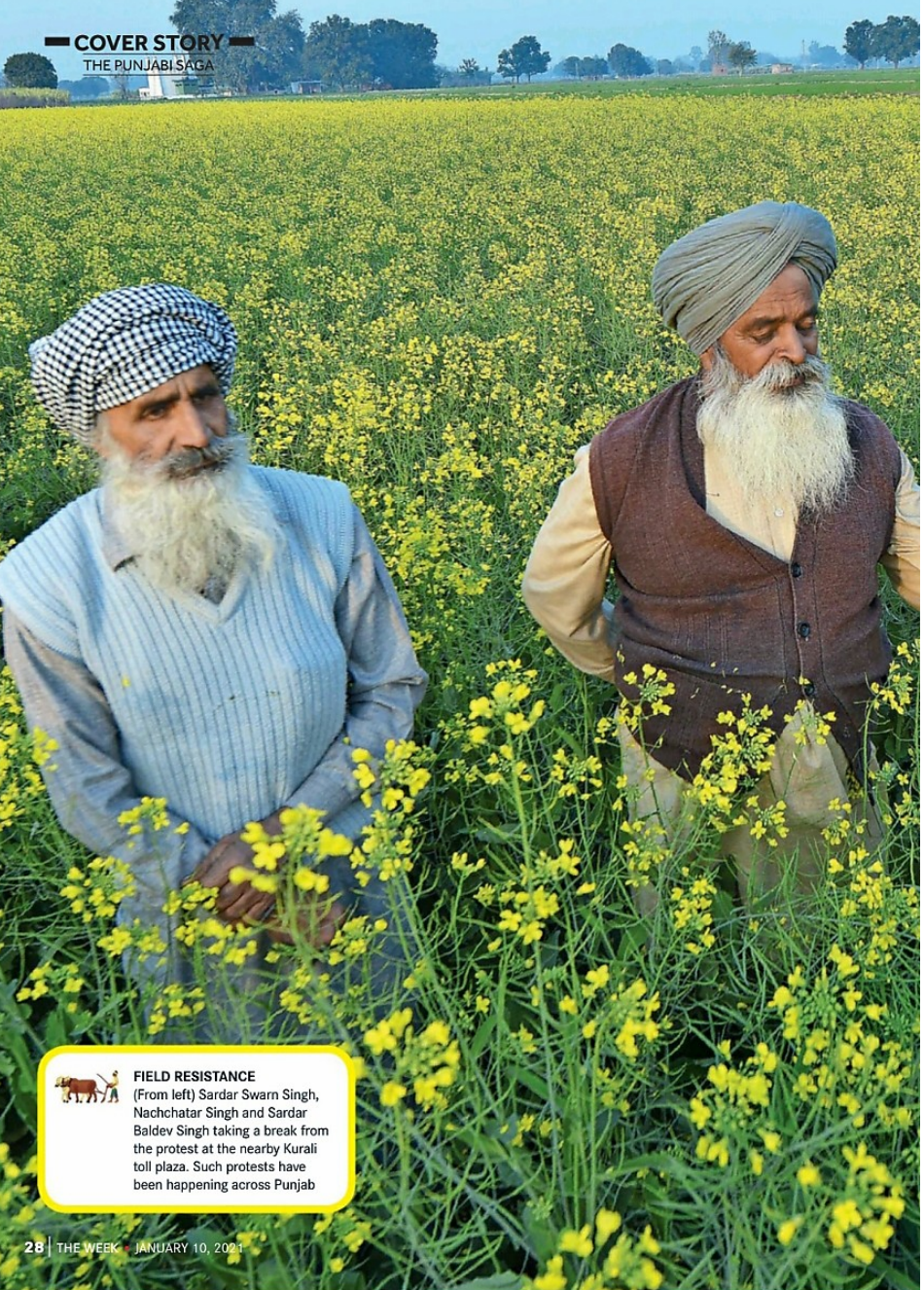
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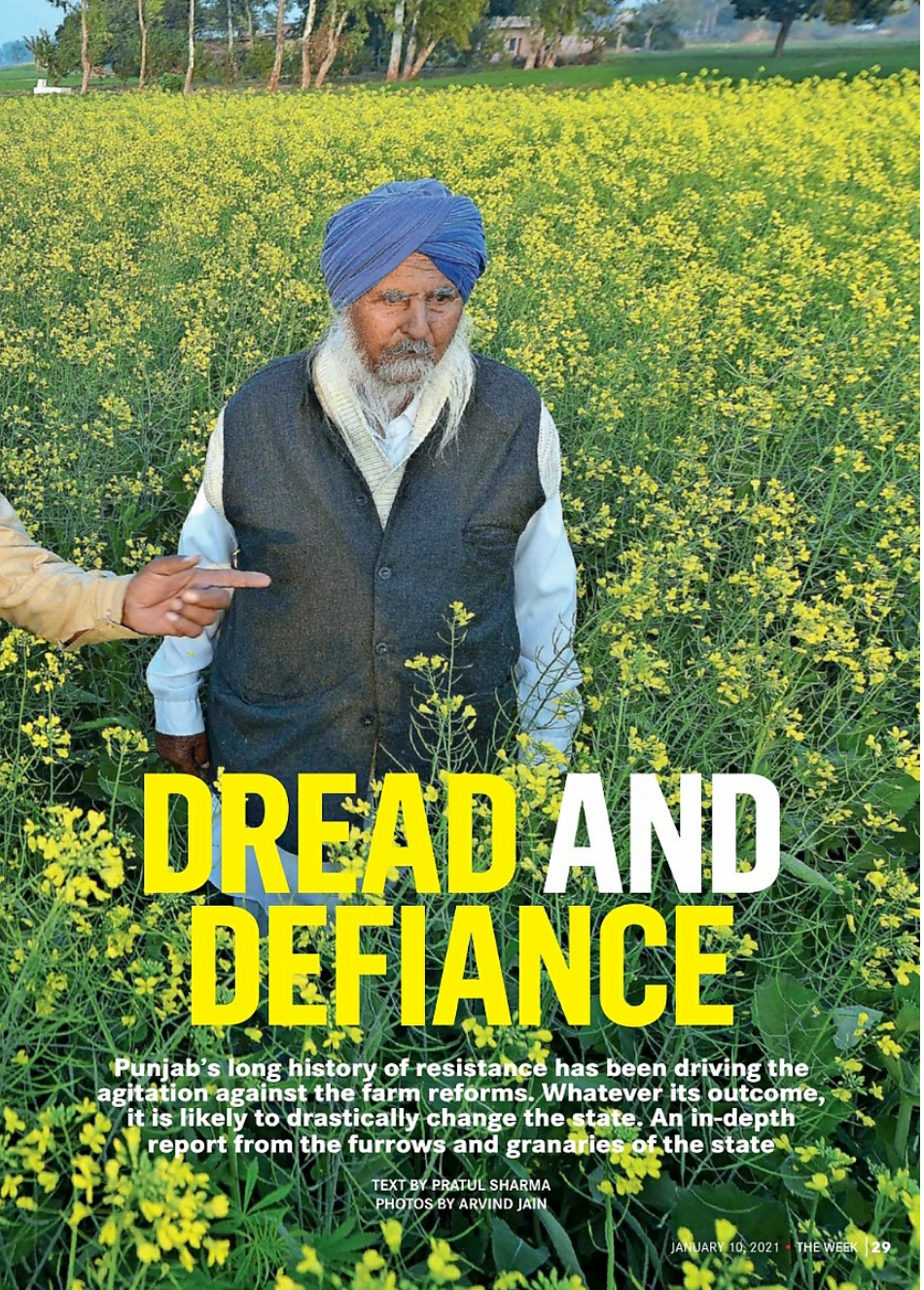
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FIELD RESISTANCE

(From left) Sardar Swarn Singh, Nachchar Singh and Sardar Baldev Singh taking a break from the protest at the nearby Kurali toll plaza. Such protests have been happening across Punjab



DREAD AND DEFIANCE

Punjab's long history of resistance has been driving the agitation against the farm reforms. Whatever its outcome, it is likely to drastically change the state. An in-depth report from the furrows and granaries of the state

TEXT BY PRATUL SHARMA
PHOTOS BY ARVIND JAIN

Bharpur Singh sits on sacks of paddy in a tin-roofed warehouse large enough to house several hundred cars. He is scrolling through his smartphone to kill time, and looks up occasionally to check whether anyone is calling him. He has come from Jatana Ucha village in Punjab's Fatehgarh Sahib district to sell his basmati at the *mandi* in Khanna, a town on the Grand Trunk Road from Amritsar to Delhi.

It is a Friday evening, and Asia's largest grain market is numbing cold. Sudden icy winds from the Shivalik mountains in the north have plunged the temperature to 7 degrees Celsius from 18 degrees a few hours ago. "I am planning to go to Delhi soon to join the *morcha* (farmer protests)," says Singh, who is in his mid-forties. "The government has done us injustice."

His face lights up as someone calls his name. A man transformed, he rushes for a tractor trolley parked nearby and brings a winnowing machine to remove dirt and chaff from the basmati rice he had harvested two months ago. It is a high-yield variety of basmati, known as 1121, that he had grown in a portion of his 10-acre farm. After winnowing, it weighs 30 quintals. It would be auctioned the next morning. The buyers are usually rice brand owners.

Known for its fragrance and length, the 1121 basmati costs ₹3,000 a quintal. It was developed in 2003, and it soon became a leading choice of farmers in Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. The 1121 basmati fetched more than ₹4,500 a quintal two years ago, before US sanctions hurt Iran—the biggest importer of Indian basmati.

Unlike paddy, basmati is not part of the government's MSP (minimum support price) system, which covers 23 crops and gives farmers an assured income. The government announces MSP twice a year, but procures only wheat and paddy through designated market yards, known as agriculture produce marketing committees (APMCs). The system was set up in the 1960s.

There is no price guarantee for the other 21 items in the MSP system, since the government does not procure them directly. Farmers sell their produce to private players at market prices. Often, the wholesale prices are lower than the MSP, provoking farmers to dump their harvest on roads in protest.

In 2020, the government procured 449.83 lakh metric tonnes of paddy till December 25—an increase of 25 per cent over the previous year. Punjab contributed 45 per cent of the total procurement. "I tried growing different crops like moong dal, sugarcane, maize and basmati, but the price fluctuates despite the MSP for them," says Bharpur Singh. "The current MSP for moong dal



GRAIN AND PULSE

Bharpur Singh, a farmer from Jatana Ucha village, removes the dirt from rice before an auction at the *mandi* in Khanna. He is waiting to join the protest in Delhi

is ₹7,128, but I got only around ₹3,000. When there is no guarantee of recovering production costs, we have no choice but to plant only wheat and paddy."

There are 154 main APMC *mandis* and 1,820 purchase centres in Punjab. But one of the three new farm laws—the Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act—allows private players to bypass APMC *mandis* and directly buy produce from farmers. This means that the *mandis* will lose their prominence in the procurement process. Farmers like Bharpur Singh are worried that they would lose their assured income.



Bharpur Singh talks about what happened in Bihar, which abolished APMC *mandis* in 2006. Farmers there now sell directly to traders and corporates. Even though the MSP for paddy is ₹1,868 a quintal, the market price in Bihar hovers below ₹1,000. Punjab has registered more than 80 cases in the past few months, after seizing hundreds of trucks of paddy brought from Bihar to be sold in APMC *mandis* in Punjab. The influx of paddy from Bihar had created a curious situation—Punjab procured more paddy than it produced. What riled the Punjabi farmers was that even the state's rice mills were buying paddy from Bihar at rates lower than the MSP.

Bharpur Singh is also worried that the new agricul-

ture contract law—the Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act—would enable corporates to take control of his land. He fears that he would have no recourse to justice. Under the new farm laws, arbitration powers rest with sub-divisional magistrates, whom farmers fear corporates would easily influence.

Such concerns have led thousands of farmers from Punjab to lay siege to Delhi seeking repeal of the new laws. Punjab and Haryana are the states that will be most affected by the weakening of APMCs and the MSP system. These two states earn around ₹2,700 crore a year as taxes and levies.

Farmer unions have been educating people on how

the new laws would affect them. What started as regular protests have since galvanised into a widespread agitation against the authorities. After forcing their way through police checkpoints, a cavalcade of tractor trolleys reached the Singhu border, a gateway to Delhi. Singhu has a memorial to Guru Teg Bahadur, the ninth Sikh guru who sacrificed his life to protect Hindus from the Mughals. A symbol of resistance, the memorial is less than 100 metres from the huge camp the protesting farmers have built. It was at the Singhu border that Punjab rediscovered

its Punjabiati. Sacrifice had met service.


Resistance is ingrained in the psyche of Sikh peasantry. Punjabis from all walks of life have pitched in, turning the protests into a spectacle of defiance. Ideologies of all political, social and religious hues have united behind the protesting farmer. Any "assault" on agriculture is interpreted as an attack on the Sikh faith and culture. Every day, buses and trolleys bring 'pilgrims' to the protest sites on Delhi's borders. The caravan of trolleys stretch as far as 30 kilometres.

Farmers from Haryana have also joined, though they

TRACT CHANGE

Pavitar Singh Pangali, vice president of the Punjab Agricultural University's farmers' club, says he has been helping fellow farmers adapt to changes in farm technologies and processes





The Union government is dealing with the issue at two levels. It is both **engaging with the farmers and trying to divide and isolate them into groups.**

are hardly visible in the sea of turbans.

If the number of protesters is any indication, the Union government has found a formidable adversary. Parallels are being drawn between the farmer protest and the historic Sikh *morchas*: the Guru ka Bagh Morcha in 1922 for ownership of a gurdwara in a village near Amritsar; Jaito Morcha in 1924 for restoring the rule of Maharaja Ripudaman Singh of Nabha; and Morcha Chabian for recovering keys to the Golden Temple treasury.

The Union government is dealing with the issue at two levels. It is both engaging with the farmers and trying to divide and isolate them into groups—as farmers from Punjab and elsewhere, for instance. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been highlighting the benefits of the new farm laws. But the farmers are sticking to their demand that the laws be repealed. And, the groundswell is preventing farmer union leaders from withdrawing.

Punjab is closely watching what is happening in Delhi. The verdant wheat fields and the sweet smell of jaggery being prepared next to the sugarcane fields belie a seething anger. New Punjabi songs are filled with open challenges to “Dilli”. Stickers and flags declaring ‘No Farmers, No Food’ have become so common that even luxury cars sport them.

“Sikhs have a history of resistance, which is visible in these protests,” says Prof Gurdarshan Singh Dhillon, a Sikh historian. “It is much beyond the farmer issue. It is a fight for the diversity of the country. It was promised before independence that India would be demarcated on linguistic and cultural basis. What the government is trying to do is make ‘one culture, one language.’ These protests are a cumulative expression.”

Farmers, predominantly Jat Sikhs, have been the dominant force among the Sikhs. The protesters invoke cultural metaphors drawn from erstwhile religious agitations, military campaigns and sacrifices of the gurus. “This is part of the Sikh ethos; it’s a way of life. It is from where the Sikhs draw their strength and morality,” says Dhillon.

Where are the farmers drawing money and material from? “Guru Nanak has given a key mantra to the Sikhs: *kirt karo, vand chako, aur naam japo*. Honest labour, fair distribution, and then prayers. These principles are part and parcel of the Sikh ethos,” says Dhillon. “You read this with *uttam kheti, madh vapaar, nakhid chaakri*, which means agriculture is supreme, then comes business, and finally slavery or a job. When agriculture is given

such respect, people are ready to do anything to save it.”

What do the cultural and historical references signify? “People argue that historically Punjab had a conflict with the Delhi durbar, starting from the Mughals,” says Harish Puri, former professor of political science at Guru Nanak Dev University in Amritsar. “When gurdwaras talk about sacrifices of the gurus, and the incidents are invoked every day, they have an impact. But the current farmer leadership has been cautious not to [let the radical side] hijack the movement in any way.” Puri says these protests have also become a cumulative expression of all resentments against the Modi government.

The community’s sense of victimhood is palpable. The farmers look at the new laws as an attack on the federal structure of the state. They also deeply fear the possibility of corporates usurping their land. “My father served in the British Indian army and was bestowed the rank of Sardar Bahadur. He won a military cross,” says Baldev Singh, 76, of Barudi village in SAS Nagar district. “We got 125 acres, much of which was sold at that time. Now we have around 10 acres and nothing else.”

Every day, Baldev and fellow farmers from neighbouring villages gather at a highway toll plaza for a sit-in. Similar sit-ins have been going on across Punjab. The protesters commemorated December 20 as martyrs’ day. Pictures of 32 farmers who died since the protests started have been put up at all toll plazas in Punjab. Martyrdom is a common theme that binds key events in Punjab’s history. Observers say that the yearlong celebrations of Guru Nanak’s 550th birth anniversary, along with the opening of the Kartarpur corridor, had boosted the “community sentiment”.

Villagers are taking turns to go to Delhi, so that those who have been staying there can return. Food is being prepared and cash donations are collected. “We have assured families of people who have gone to the *morchha* that we will take care of their crops,” says Baldev Singh. “It is a fight for survival.”

Swarn Singh of Dhakron Khurd village says the focus is on Singhu border. “But it’s at Tikri border that we hear of shortages. We have collected money to send there,” he says.

The government says the new laws affect only rich farmers who have gained disproportionately from the MSP regime. But Swarn Singh, who owns five acres, says smaller farmers are the most affected. Big farmers have already diversified into related businesses like transport and cold storage, or are active politically. “Without the



Sikhs have a history of resistance, which is visible in these protests. It is much beyond the farmer issue. **It is a fight for the diversity of the country.**

Prof Gurdarshan Singh Dhillon,
Sikh historian



arhtiyas (commission agents in APMCs) and the big farmers, the smaller farmers cannot survive. The new laws affect the smaller farmers the most," says Swarn Singh.

The grain market in Khanna, spread over 50 acres, has around 200 *arhtiyas*. A municipality in the prosperous Ludhiana district, Khanna derives its name from a Punjabi word that means one-fourth. According to folklore, the wife of a neighbouring royal received one-fourth of a property. The area came to be called Khanna. (The name has no relation to the Khanna surname.)

The new laws aim to abolish the role of *arhtiyas*, allowing private players to buy from farmers directly. At grain market in Khanna, most of the *arhtiyas* have been absent for days. The income tax department had raided the houses and offices of several prominent *arhtiyas* across the state, especially those who had

vocally supported the farmer protests.

"This is our third generation in this business," says Sanjay Ghai, 61, former president of the Khanna *arhtiya* association. "Our grandfather became an *arhtiya* and bought food grains, jaggery and pulses. Before the government started buying from here, the wheat used to go to Mumbai. I remember going to Mumbai along with my father to sell grains there."

He remembers the green revolution changing the agriculture profile of the state. The Ghais had an oil factory where they pressed locally grown groundnut. "[During the green revolution] the farmers used tractors to flatten all sandy hills," he says. "They transformed the area and started sowing wheat and paddy. We shut down our oil mill, as farmers stopped cultivating groundnut. I now have a rice mill."

There are more than 27,000 registered *arhtiyas* in the state. Many of them have two-storey shops that



SACKED AND STACKED

Heaps of rice being weighed and packed after filtering at the *mandi* in Khanna, Asia's largest grain market



provide accommodation to farmers during the procurement season. They are often compared to Sukhilala, the greedy money lender in the 1957 film *Mother India*, played to perfection by actor Kanhaiya Lal. But the reality is different. “[Former Union minister] Sushma Swaraj called us farmers’ ATM,” says Ghai. “Our doors are always open to farmers who need money and other help—be it for a marriage in their family or a health emergency. We go out of our way to help them. These relations sustain us.”

The *arhtiyas* charge 2.5 per cent from the buyer as commission, while government takes 6 per cent as “development charges”. The farmer, however, gets full MSP for his produce. “We are service providers,” says Raman Singh, an *arhtiya* in Khanna. “We buy machines, employ workforce, and provide jute bags for cleaning and bagging the crop—all with this 2.5 per cent commission. The farmer is paid in advance, while we take the risk with the buyer.”

Many *arhtiyas* have diversified into related activities, and are better prepared and politically connected than small farmers to absorb any economic change that a free-market system may bring.

Like most farmers, Bharpur Singh also depends on *arhtiyas*. “I take money [from them] for family needs,” he says. “My daughter is in class 12 and is preparing for IELTS exams. My younger son wants to join the Army like his grandfather did. It is customary for zamindars to gift a car when a daughter gets married. [All this needs money.] I am what my land is; without it, I am nobody.”

As jobs are scarce or unattractive, youth in Punjab have been migrating out of India. “We are thankful to countries like Canada, Australia and New Zealand for accepting Punjabis,” says Raman Singh. “That is where we are finding our glory again.”

The MSP system has been a lifeline for farmers for six decades. It brought them prosperity, and preserved the cultural and social systems in Punjab. The enactment of farm reforms without consulting the farmers has fuelled the suspicion that this way of life was under threat.

A flip side is that the MSP system has been a cushion for complacent governments, which failed to modernise agriculture. “MSP is a trap,” says Manjit Singh Kang, renowned plant geneticist and former vice chancellor of Punjab Agriculture

A flip side is that the MSP system has been a **cushion** for complacent governments that failed to modernise agriculture.



WORK (AWAY) FROM HOME

Rajender Kumar (blue shirt) from Bihar works as a labourer at the *mandi* in Khanna. Many Bihar labourers head to Punjab for work as they do not earn enough on their own farms back home

University in Ludhiana. "It doesn't allow farmers to opt for other crops."

An adjunct professor at Kansas State University, Kang lives in Ludhiana with his wife, who is a scientist from Tamil Nadu. "MSP is unfair to farmers of food bowl states like Punjab and Haryana," he says. "The price is calculated on an all-India basis, but farmers here spend much more on their crops. These farmers are going to produce even if there is drought. They will run tube wells even if there is no electricity; they will use diesel. Moreover, the wheat produced here has 11 per cent of protein, whereas in other

states it is 7 per cent. MSP should be on a regional basis. Why not pay them more for better quality crop?"

According to him, the government was trying to change a system that was working well. "The government hooked the farmers from Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh on MSP for ensuring food security. The farmers have done well. I wonder if corporates will be able to better their production," he says.

Rice is not native to Punjab, but the state took to growing the grain. Rice drains the state's groundwater reserves. "The green revolution is not sustainable," says Kang. "Yields are not going up. If ecology goes wrong, everything will go wrong. The government is encouraging a second green revolution, increasing the productivity of eastern states. My argument is, if we save the grains we waste, that will in itself be a green revolution. To encourage diversification, the government should buy other crops on MSP."

According to the government, there are 34 tube wells per square kilometre of net sown area in Punjab. The state's policy of giving free power, with MSP, for paddy cultivation has led to indiscriminate use of groundwater. Experts suggest that paddy cultivation be cut down by half, and the vacated land be used for cultivating vegetables and fruits. And enough cold storage be set up to allow farmers to sell crops when the price is right.

Kang says the government should have talked to the farmers before enacting the new laws. NITI Aayog called a meeting of farmer leaders in 2017 but they felt they were not really heard. They were told that the corporates would rent their land to ensure better output. "Now, you don't tell the farmers that someone else can do a better job than them. You know the reaction now," says Kang.

The current agitation may force policymakers to notice the progressive changes farmers have already initiated. Pavitar Singh Pangali, vice president of the Punjab Agricultural University's farmers club, says he has been helping fellow farmers adapt to changes in farm technologies and processes. With three tractors and some workers, Pangali has been cultivating vegetables, wheat, paddy and lentils. He is planning to plant bamboo to help the National Bamboo Mission.

"I have attended all courses that the agricultural university holds for farmers," he says. "I use the latest, high-quality variety of wheat recommended by the university. None of the 7,500 members in the farmers club have been driven to suicide."



There are more than 27,000 registered *arhtiyas* in the state, and many of them have **two-storey shops that provide accommodation to farmers during the procurement season.**



FARM AND FAMILY
A protester at the Kurali toll plaza

Pangali says the government can do a lot for farmers. "Our oil import bill is huge—₹80,000 crore. Canola oil is imported even though we can produce it here locally. I produce my own oil. If government makes ethanol production mandatory for all sugar mills, the oil can be sold at petrol pumps, which in turn can help sugar mills tide over payment crises. More farmers will be planning sugarcane, instead of paddy and wheat."

Hostile India-Pakistan relations have affected farmers in Punjab. "We exported so much to Pakistan, and many middle-eastern countries," says Jagbir Singh of Salana village. "The prices have come down because of the ban on trade. Strained relations with Pakistan always affect Punjab the most."

Jagbir's nephew Harmanjot Singh, a mechanical engineer in his early twenties, says he decided to return to farming as there were hardly any well-paying jobs. "I was getting ₹10,000, which we were paying to labourers on our farm," he says.

Farmers in Punjab distrust the government's promise of retaining the MSP system. The influx of workers from Bihar during the cropping season only adds to their distrust. Many of the labourers own more farmland back home in Bihar than the farmers who employ them in Punjab. Dharendra Kushwaha, a labourer who hails from Bihar's Bettiah district, owns more than six acres. "We cannot earn enough from our farms," he says. "Our farm is near the Gandaki river, so there is a constant threat of flooding. The vegetables we grow do not fetch a good price."

The farmers laying siege to Delhi's borders are in it for the long haul. The caravan of trolleys has gone too far to return without scoring a victory. There are, however, fears that the victory itself could be Pyrrhic. "I am worried that this anti-corporate sentiment may harm the state, as investments may dry up," says Puri. "Punjab is in trouble because of crumbling economy, joblessness, and lack of industries."

Whatever the outcome of the farmer agitation, one thing seems certain: it would end up drastically changing Punjab. ●


SQUASH SEASON

An aerial drone view of farm workers on the Sam Accursio & Son's Farm in Florida, as they fill up bins in the back of a truck with zucchini

Unsuitable model

Experts doubt whether India needs to follow the fully-open western models for reviving its agriculture sector

BY PRATUL SHARMA

On October 22, during the US presidential debate, Donald Trump and Joe Biden had an argument over farmer subsidies. Trump boasted that he had paid \$28 billion of subsidies to the farmers, to which Biden responded that it was taxpayers' money. The money was paid by the US government to help farmers tide over losses due to trade restrictions with China—the third-largest importer of America's agricultural products,

particularly soybean and corn.

Since the sanctions, the US farmers have relied heavily on government support and got 40 per cent of their net cash income from it. The doles given to American farmers in 2020 amounted to nearly \$46 billion. The European Union's common agricultural policy (CAP) gives out \$64 billion per year in farming subsidies to its 27 member states. This amount comprises nearly one-third of the EU budget.

Even in the free economies,

agriculture is not left to the mercy of market forces. The agriculture sector is affected the most by volatility in prices, so it requires government interventions. In November 2019, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi decided to stay out of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, one of the intentions was to protect Indian farmers from dumping of dairy products. His legislation to open up the agriculture sector to the private sector, however, has alarmed Indian farmers.

The US and other western countries have been pushing India to open up the agriculture sector. While India could learn from the experience of the US in creating agricultural infrastructure, the ground realities are totally different in the two countries. "American farms are big. But Indian farms are small. Their system is very open," says M.S. Kang, adjunct professor, Kansas State University and former vice chancellor, Punjab Agriculture University, Ludhiana.

Kang spent 40 years in the US and owned a 100-acre farm in Texas. "In the US, there are large farmers who can afford expensive equipment. They use computers and do precision farming," he says.

Precision farming involves using technology to feed fertilisers and water, and to ensure the quality of seeds for greater productivity. It cannot be done on smaller farms. American farmers could adopt it in a big way through mechanisation of farms. Hybrid seeds helped them emerge as top producers of many crops. In contrast, India spends far less on research and development in

the agriculture sector.

Over 80 per cent of Indian farmers have two to five acres of land. Farmers in Punjab and Haryana sustain themselves through minimum support price (MSP). Their input cost is much higher than the input costs of the bigger Indian farmers due to economies of scale, and they cannot survive on farm income alone. The government wants to minimise their dependence on farming, by nudging them either into allied fields or into contract farming so that smaller farms can be pooled for greater crop benefits. But, for a migration of farming workforce to other sectors to happen, more jobs have to be created in non-farming sectors.

In the US, less than 2 per cent of the population is engaged in agriculture, while in India the figure is nearly 70 per cent. Economists argue that unless dependence on agriculture is reduced, it will take a longer time for India's economy to rival those of China and the west.

Agriculture expert Devender Sharma says that every five years the US comes out with farm bills to give

subsidies. The last farm bill in 2018 made a provision of \$867 billion for the next 10 years. Despite so much support, farmers have faced bankruptcy there, he says.

"India should not follow America and Europe," says Sharma. "It is a failed model. They had witnessed an open market economy for the last six to seven decades. They do not have an MSP, or agriculture produce market committee (APMC) system or upper stock limit for Walmart. They have contract farming and commodity exchange, and their farmers are saddled with bankruptcy of \$425 billion in 2020."

China, which has a higher growth in agriculture, has combined all input subsidies into a single scheme, making direct payment to farmers on a per hectare basis. However, India spends higher on subsidies on different inputs like power, fertilisers, credits and loan waivers.

According to government estimates, the investment to GDP ratio in agriculture was 13.3 per cent (which is low); the private sector accounts for less than 2.5 per cent of investments in agriculture, which the government is trying to increase.

Sharma says India can be the role model for the world with an effective MSP and APMC *mandi* system. Today MSP is given to only 6 per cent of Indian farmers. While MSP is technically available for 23 crops, the government procurement—which ensures MSP—is available only for wheat and rice. These 23 crops cover 80 per cent of cropping area in the country. Sharma says if farmers are assured of MSP even when the government is not procuring all of it, the condition of farmers will improve.

"In the US, farmers get only 8 per cent of the total cost of a product in the value chain," he says. "According to Amul, the milk farmers get ₹70 out of ₹100 cost. Why can't we replicate the Amul model for vegetables and crops?" ●

India should not follow America and Europe. It is a failed model.... **They do not have an MSP, or agriculture produce market committee system or upper stock limit for Walmart.**

Devender Sharma, agriculture expert

Murder for medals?

In a first instance since Jammu and Kashmir became a Union territory, an Army officer has been charged with a fake encounter in the valley

BY TARIQ BHAT



IN SEARCH OF JUSTICE

National Conference leaders Farooq Abdullah and Hasnain Masoodi protesting the fake encounter (file picture)

THE JAMMU AND KASHMIR

Police have charged an Indian Army officer—Captain Bhoopendra Singh alias Major Basheer Khan of 62 Rashtriya Rifles—and two civilians—Tabish Nazir from Chowgam, Shopian, and Bilal Ahmad Lone from Nikas, Pulwama—for killing three Rajouri youth in a fake encounter on July 18 at Amshipora, Shopian. The victims—Abrar Khan, Abrar Ahmed and Imtiaz Ahmed—were cousins.

After the encounter, the Army had released a statement calling the victims “three unidentified terrorists.” “During the search, terrorists fired upon Army personnel and the encounter started,” said the statement. It also mentioned that arms and ammunition were recovered from the site of the encounter.

Local residents and regional political parties were furious about the incident. Soon it became the first fake encounter case registered in Jammu and Kashmir after it was made a Union territory, after the families of the victims claimed that the trio were ordinary labourers.

The families had filed a missing person’s report on August 9. The following day, when photos of the “militants” killed in Amshipora appeared on social media, they were shocked to see the resemblance with their sons. Soon they went to the police and urged them to trace the trio.

The Army was quick to initiate a court of inquiry into the incident. After the DNA samples of the trio matched the samples taken from the families, the allegations of a fake encounter gathered substance.

Nazir and Lone were taken into judicial custody on July 28, while Singh is yet to be formally arrested because of the immunity he enjoys under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act.

The informers in Jammu and Kashmir are paid cash rewards for providing intelligence on militants, and the security forces teams that carry out the operation receive bounties placed on militants based on the grade—A+, A, B+, B and C. The charge-sheet filed in the court of the chief judicial magistrate in Shopian on December 26 accuses Singh of

furnishing “false information” to mislead senior officers, and of getting an FIR lodged to further his motive of claiming the bounty.

According to the charge-sheet, the victims were abducted from their rented accommodation at Chowgam by the accused, taken in a car and executed. Allegedly, illegally procured weapons were planted on them. “The vehicle... with registration number DL 8CU 0649, which was used for abduction and transportation of the victims, was seized as evidence,” says the charge-sheet.

The accused have been charged with murder, criminal conspiracy and destruction of evidence. The charge-sheet says Imtiaz had been working with a person named Muhammad Yousuf from Chowgam since 2018. His cousins had joined him there for work. Khan’s father, Muhammad Yousuf Khan, said he was satisfied with the investigations. “The captain who killed my son should be hanged,” he said. “They killed him in cold blood along with the other two boys for money and medals.” ●



Red bricks and brickbats

IIMA's decision to rebuild its iconic red-brick dormitories has been met with criticism from architects and some alumni

BY NANDINI OZA

RAGHURAM RAJAN, Mallika Sarabhai, Kiran Karnik, Arvind Subramanian, Ajaypal Singh Banga, Harsha Bhogle, Chetan Bhagat.... These are a few of the names that are part of the Indian Institute of Management

Ahmedabad's 33,000-strong alumni base.

But, that base is now divided over IIMA's decision to demolish and rebuild at least 14 of the 18 dormitories in the iconic red-brick campus de-

signed by American architect Louis Kahn. Kahn's children wrote to IIMA director Errol D'Souza, urging him to reconsider the decision and preserve the legacy of their father, who died 46 years ago.



CRUMBLING LEGACY

Damage at IIMA's heritage campus

architect had spent 14 years to make the campus what it is. The Padma Bhushan awardee said Kahn had agreed after he was told that Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier had designed buildings in Ahmedabad. He added that Kahn only charged travelling expenses to and from the US for the job.

Doshi said that Kahn had used the best bricks available at the time and had adapted to local conditions. Nothing has happened to the brick arches, he said. "It is not a question of quality and nothing is [about] to collapse the way it is being talked about," said Doshi. He added that if the argument was that the buildings are harmful to students, then all historical sites are harmful and should be closed to the public.

Professor Anil Gupta, visiting faculty at IIMA said: "There have been instances wherein portions have fallen off, but there hasn't been any serious consequences. But then, safety of students is paramount."

Sarabhai said that she was against the current proposal. "For someone who led a march in 1973 to have a dorm for women on the campus, I strongly feel that they should not be destroyed," she said. She added that other buildings of this age have been restored. IIMA is a symbol of transparency and this decision was sudden, she said.

Architect Mansee Bal Bhargava said: "We are talking about two things—the legacy of the architect and the liveability of the building. The latter has been discussed internally but has not come out." She added that there was no denying that the condition of the buildings were not good, but it is important to know what the new design will be. (It is too early for details of the rebuilding to be made available; as of now, IIMA has invited architects from across the world to present options that are in sync with the "grammar" that Kahn envisioned.)

Kalpen Shukla, president of the Mumbai chapter of IIMA's alumni association, said there was due consideration to retain Kahn's legacy. "We saw the structural damage that has taken place," he said. "Dorm 15 was taken up as a case study. It was estimated that the cost of restoration/reconstruction would be ₹3 crore to ₹5 crore." According to him, the earthquake in 2001 had damaged the plaza and adjoining structures. In 2017, IIMA had sought funding support from the public for conservation and restoration of the heritage campus and had received substantial funds. The institute restored the library; the Louis Kahn Plaza, where the convocation takes place; and Dorm 15. The other three dormitories being restored are Dorms 16 to 18, which along with Dorm 15 and the Louis Kahn Plaza are the first buildings that a person entering the campus would see.

Shukla said that the storm of negative reactions could have been avoided with more inclusiveness. D'Souza told THE WEEK that stakeholders were invited to a "roundtable reflection on the conservation of dorms" in November 2017. "Their inputs were considered in meetings of the building committee and board," he said. "The institute has made consultation a part of the process." T. Muralidharan, chairman, TMI Group, and an alumnus of IIMA, said: "The board is very competent and they have come to a conscious decision. We have no business to advise them. They won't do it casually."

D'Souza said IIMA was always receptive to suggestions. "Even now, given that some feel they have not been heard, a forthcoming meeting of the board will take note of the recommendations that are coming in and will deliberate on the way forward," he said. If so, why the controversy? "Beats me," said D'Souza. "Ask those who created it." ●

On December 23, D'Souza wrote to the alumni informing them of the circumstances that led to the decision. He explained that the buildings were dilapidated and also shared the advice given by international restoration consultants. What seems to have irked many is D'Souza's statement that the bricks used by Kahn were not "best in class"; he cited Indian Standards (IS 3102-1971) to say the bricks were second class.

Architect B.V. Doshi, who had convinced Kahn to take on the IIMA project, said that the American

Panchayats unlimited

A corporate-sponsored political party captures four panchayats in Kerala civic polls

BY CITHARA PAUL

MATTA RICE ₹11.60/kg; sugar ₹9.60/kg; milk ₹5/l; onion ₹5/kg; shallots ₹15/kg; coconut oil ₹44/l. It is not the price list at a grocery store; it is the election brochure of the Twenty 20, a party which won four panchayats in the recent civic polls in Kerala. The brochure also tells the story of how a corporate-sponsored outfit is capturing the imagination of highly politicised Malayalis.

The Twenty 20 was born in 2013 as the welfare arm of Kitex Garments, a prominent exporter. A year later it became a political party and promised to turn Kizhakkambalam panchayat, where the company has been based since 1968, into a world-class village by 2020. In the 2015 local body polls, it registered a landslide victory in the panchayat.

"Our decision to enter politics was accidental," said Sabu M. Jacob, chief coordinator of the Twenty 20. "All we wanted was to ensure the welfare of the people around us, but the high-handed attitude of the then ruling party in our panchayat forced us to enter politics." Jacob is the managing director of Kitex Garments, the world's second largest infant wear producer and a major supplier to Walmart and Amazon. Kitex's parent company, Anna Group, is one of the largest employers in the state.

The Twenty 20 did turn Kizhakkambalam into a model village with

squeaky clean roads, housing projects for the poor and a food security market. The panchayat was also turned into one with surplus funds, a rarity in the country. "Our model panchayat could be replicated by anybody provided they have the vision, planning and disciplined execution, and a will to root out corruption," said Jacob.

The food security market, which can be accessed with a consumer card allotted by the Twenty 20, was the highlight of it all. Entirely sponsored by the corporate social responsibility fund of the company, the market offers huge discounts on essentials. "When others buy rice at ₹60 a kilo, we buy it for less than ₹10," said Achamma Kora, a resident of Kizhakkambalam.

In the 2020 local body polls, Twenty 20 spread its wings to the neighbouring panchayats, winning three more of them. "My family voted for the first time for a party other than the Congress," said Saramma Elias of Aikaranad panchayat, where the Twenty 20 swept the polls.

Now the party has big plans, with Jacob announcing its decision to contest in the upcoming assembly elections. "I am getting calls from all over the state. It is evident that the people of Kerala are fed up with the existing political parties and are eager for a change. We are ready to



E.V. SREERUKHAR

take up the challenge," he said.

The political parties, obviously, are not happy.

Jacob is using his money power to win votes and to cover up the violations of his company," said Elias Karipra, Congress unit president in Kizhakkambalam. "They win only because they offer freebies." He alleged that the Twenty 20 used the consumer card to trap the voters and threatened to withdraw it if they did not vote for the party. "Jacob ruins Kizhakkambalam like a king. Nothing happens here against his wishes," he said.

Jins T. Musthafa, secretary of the CPI(M) local committee, said Jacob was using the loopholes in the system to his advantage. "He is exploiting the poor people, and he makes clever use of the popular construct that all politicians are bad," he said. "Kitex pays additional salary to the elected members of the panchayat. Will they be loyal to the people or to the company?"

Jacob denied that panchayat members were on his payroll. "Yes, we reimburse their expenses, as the honorarium of Rs 7,000 that they get from the government is not enough



POWER PAYS

Twenty 20 chief coordinator Sabu M. Jacob with his supporters

for the effort they put in," he said.

Interestingly, political commentators are yet to figure out the Twenty 20 phenomenon. Activist C.R. Neelakandan said it was the failure of the traditional political parties that led to the growth of apolitical parties like Twenty 20. According to J. Prabhaskar, former head of the political science department at Kerala University, the victory of Twenty 20 is "political and apolitical at the same time". "People's decision not to vote for the Congress or the CPI(M) is certainly a political act," he said. "But their decision to opt for a party which has no ideology or political position is certainly apolitical."

Prabhaskar said the Twenty 20 would have to rethink its political positioning if it was planning to branch out to other parts of the state. "Ruling a panchayat without an ideology is fine, but if it is planning to expand in the given format, it will be exposing itself too much," he said.

Jacob, however, asserts that the ideology of his party is "peace, happiness and security". "Is there anyone who does not want development and happiness?" he asked. ●

INTERVIEW

Sabu M. Jacob,
chief coordinator, Twenty 20

People are impatient for change

Q/How would you explain the Twenty 20's impressive performance?

A/We won because people trust me. They know I am someone who delivers what I promise. Our victory in four panchayats proved that the people of Kerala are fed up with the existing political parties and are impatient for change. The Twenty 20 is the change that the people of Kerala are waiting for.

Q/How will you explain the financial model?

A/There is no magic. We achieved it through financial discipline and long-term vision. Also, it is important to weed out corruption from the system. If all the above three are there, Kizhakkambalam model can be emulated by anyone. The CSR funds helped in running the food security mission, which ensures that our people get quality food at a discounted rate.

Q/Women seem to be the torchbearers of Twenty 20.

A/Yes. All our panchayat presidents are women, and nearly 70 per cent of our voters are women. They are the ones who prioritise their families before anything. While men can be easily swayed by many things, including politics, nothing is more important for women than the welfare of the family. They vote Twenty 20 because they know that our party will ensure high quality food in their kitchen and a much better living standard.

Q/There are allegations that you floated a party to protect your company from government interventions.

A/If I had anything to cover up, do you think I would dare to take on the political parties ruling the state. By logic, any businessman will only try to buy the politicians, which is far easier than fighting them. My adversaries are national parties and it would not have been possible if my slate was not clean.

Q/Will any of the panchayats ruled by the Twenty 20 go against Sabu M. Jacob?

A/Panchayats no longer have the powers they used to have to intervene in any business initiative. So there is no conflict of interest. Yes, I may have a greater say in all the decisions, but I rarely intervene unless it is absolutely necessary. I believe in collective decision making, but I will ensure that what we have promised is delivered.

Q/If Mukesh Ambani or Gautam Adani forms a political party, will you vote for it?

A/Why not? I cast my vote depending on the person's intentions and not by his background. Being a businessman does not stop anyone from entering politics. If I feel that a party is good for me and my country, I will definitely vote. ●



The tycoon who inspired a book

Shantanu Naidu and Ratan Tata share a unique relationship. The legendary tycoon is an octogenarian, and Shantanu, a millennial. Age does not come into their incredible bond. They are 'friends'—close, connected and perfectly in sync with one another. *I Came Upon a Lighthouse: A Short Memoir of Life with Ratan Tata* chronicles the enviable love they share—there is no other word to describe their partnership. The bond began in 2014 when Shantanu was a dog-loving student in Pune; an automobile engineer, he developed an innovation to save local strays from being run over by speeding cars. In a short note at the start of the book, Tata writes about how Shantanu came into his life—it started with their deep compassion for homeless, ill-treated, abandoned dogs and cats—and grew into something astonishingly tender and beautiful. Tata invested in Shantanu's small start-up, after receiving a letter from him about his passion-project, Motopaws.

Today, Shantanu works closely with the man who not only made it a point to attend his simple graduation dinner in Ithaca—cooked by Shantanu's amma, after he finished his MBA at Cornell—but also offered him a coveted position (deputy general manager) in his own office, which is efficiently run by four handpicked people, three of them being women. Shantanu's book (illustrated by Sanjana Desai) is all heart and sentiment. It is written with disarming candour and a touching simplicity. When he writes about enjoying strawberry waffles for breakfast at the spiffy New York hotel, The Pierre, with an amused Tata across the table, or when he describes his morning swims to 'get some sun' while on a Kerala break with the business magnate, there is an appealing sense of naturalness

in the tone. It is like frenzied international travelling on a private jet with a world famous icon, and being in the presence of global celebrities at dazzling events is really no big deal for this young man from Pune! That is how intimate and true their feelings are.

Tata is a reticent man. He guards his privacy fiercely and rarely attends public events. For all his genuine humility and modesty, his is one name in India which comes with a platinum edge.

December is Tata's birthday month—and one would imagine a man in his position would be busy cutting a multi-tiered cake with VVIPs. Nothing of the sort! Shantanu tells us that for the past few years, it is he who organises two cupcakes with a single candle, a 'crappy' movie, and pina colodas (for Shantanu) and that is how they celebrate! The book is about several such delightful anecdotes, which show Tata in a totally different light. Readers get to see his other, very human

side which allows him to crack jokes with Shantanu about his curly mop of hair, or tease the young man about 'lipstick on your collar'—a popular song from the 60s.

'Shantaa-nu', as Tata calls his adoring executive assistant, is blessed and privileged indeed. He even has a picture with his arm flung around the legend! When he refers to his boss, friend and mentor as a beacon of light, it warms our hearts. I loved the bit where Shantanu shared priceless nuggets of their 'pandemic time' together, when the great man would watch over Shantanu as he finished a gigantic chewable vitamin-C tablet or reluctantly drank turmeric milk. Shantanu has given the world a real treat—by showing readers the most endearing side of a man who is seen as a superhero by millions.



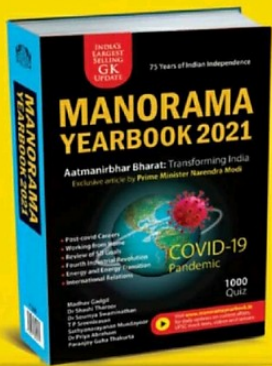


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HIGHLIGHTS

Exclusive Article by Prime Minister Narendra Modi: Aatmanirbhar Bharat: Transforming India
Covid-19 Learning about a Pandemic by Dr. Soumya Swaminathan. **The Post-Covid World : An Era of Deglobalisation** by Dr. Shashi Tharoor. **Current Affairs:** India and the World, Calendar of Events, Environment: Review of Status of Sustainable Development in India; **Information Technology:** Digital Strike and Digital Evidence. **Quiztival:** 1000 questions on History, Geography, General Knowledge. **Youth:** Unemployment in India; Careers for a Post-Covid World; **Skill Development:** Employability Skillsets. **Gender Equality and Social Justice. Economic Survey 2019-20: An Overview,** India and the Fourth Industrial Revolution; State of the Economy. **Polity:** Governance and Ethics, International Relations.

Strain spotting

The UK variant of Covid-19 may not be a serious threat, but the mutations necessitate enhanced genomic surveillance

BY NAMITA KOHLI

THE COVID-19 story had begun to appear hopeful with early approval for at least two vaccines and over 4.4 million doses administered already. But on December 14, scientists in the UK sounded the alarm once again. SARS-CoV-2, they said, had acquired several mutations, giving it the ability to spread faster. First spotted in September, mutations in SARS-CoV-2 were seen in two-thirds of the cases in London by mid-December. Since then, many countries reported the presence of the new variant, indicating its rapid spread. On December 29, India joined the list—of the 114 UK returnees who tested positive, six had the new variant.

The new strain has 17 mutations that are significant, to the extent that they have rendered the virus more contagious (by up to 70 per cent), reports from the UK suggest. No effect on the severity of disease, change in symptoms or mortality has been found, yet. But scientists say that early studies show it is better at entering human cells and infecting them. "Three main mutations are important. The N501Y mutation seems to be responsible for the efficient binding of the receptor-binding domain of SARS-CoV2 spike protein with the ACE2 receptor," said Dr Sunit Singh, professor, Banaras Hindu University.

The ACE2 receptor is a protein on the surface of many cell types and provides the gateway for SARS-CoV2 to infect the cell.

"The second mutation (amino acid deletions) might be responsible for helping the virus evade the human immune system," said Singh. "The third mutation, P681H, might be helpful in the cellular entry of this virus after infection."

Viruses mutate all the time, said Singh. The flu virus changes often and demands a tweaked vaccine for protection almost every year. "The degree of mutations may differ," he said. "Each virus is different. For the most part, mutations are deleterious for any virus. Under exceptional circumstances, though, they may help the virus in adapting better in causing infection."

A growing concern is the potential impact of the mutations on the vaccines, given that the changes have occurred in the virus's spike protein area, an area most vaccines are targeting. But some experts feel otherwise. "The SARS-CoV-2 spike is a big protein," said Dr Nimesh Gupta, head, vaccine immunology laboratory, National Institute of Immunology. "The new variant may escape few antibodies that are made against the 'old unmutated parts' of the virus,



but it cannot escape the large number of antibodies targeting different parts of the virus spike protein. So, any such variant with few mutations is not alarming for the ongoing vaccines."

Despite the reassurances, experts concede that an evolving virus, which is trying hard to evade the body's immune system, remains a matter of concern. In India, it has brought to fore the need to enhance genomic surveillance; the logic being if you look hard enough, you may find something. "But we have not even been looking," said Dr Rakesh Mishra, director, Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology, Hyderabad. Sequencing a proportionate number of positive samples is part of a routine surveillance strategy. According to the WHO, between 5 to 10 per cent of all SARS-CoV-2 viruses have routinely been sequenced in the UK. In India, 0.05 per cent of samples were being sequenced until now, which is



REUTERS

AIR-BORNE VIRUS

Passengers with face masks at the Mumbai international airport

low, said Mishra.

"We have the second largest number of infections in the world," said Mishra. "There is a chance that the virus might be undergoing changes here as well. Doing whole-genome sequencing (WGS) as part of routine surveillance helps plan better. It can help us catch any significant mutation early, and design our containment strategies better." The importance of doing WGS can also be understood from the fact that the mutation acquired by the new variant has also helped it trick diagnostics. "Tracking any new mutation early is absolutely crucial so that the diagnostics can also catch up," said Mishra.

On its part, the government seems to have finally "woken up". Last week, members of the National Task Force for Covid decided that routine genomic surveillance of SARS-CoV-2 from representative samples is essential. A plan to conduct WGS for five per cent of Covid-positive samples

was agreed upon.

A genomic surveillance consortium under the National Centre for Disease Control, New Delhi, too has been proposed. The exercise will help understand the spread of the virus and in locating any changes to the genetic code. Generating data from genomic surveillance can be immensely useful. For instance, it



Most of us with a competent immune system should be able to mount strong immune responses to any such variant.

—Dr Nimesh Gupta,
head, vaccine immunology laboratory,
National Institute of Immunology

can be used to identify super-spreader events, outbreaks and trends in mortality.

The new variant has also sparked a debate on the role of immunocompromised patients. "In the current scenario, it seems like the evolution of this virus happens within the immunocompromised hosts during an extended period of infection," said Gupta. "It seems that the virus has got an opportunity to make it a 'better fit' while staying in the body for a long time without any resistance from the already compromised immune system. This may happen in any part of the world."

India, too, has to watch out for the immunocompromised hosts. "We should be more careful now and any immunocompromised patient with Covid-19 should be managed with adequate treatment in a very controlled manner," he said.

As far as the new variant's impact on patients goes, Gupta feels that there might be hope for Indians. "If we are able to control the virus in the early phase, either by some cross-reactive protection or by having a well-synchronised immune response, we will have an advantageous outcome," he said. Strong traits of both the cross-reactive and SARS-CoV-2 specific protective immunity in Indian patients have been seen, Gupta said. "Most of us with a competent immune system should be able to mount strong immune responses to any such variant," he added.

But Gupta cautions that with this variant there will be higher chances of the virus spreading to the vulnerable population. "So, until we start with the vaccination, any variant with higher transmissibility is indeed a major concern," he said. "Vaccines may come, but [precautionary] measures still remain crucial to containing the pandemic," said Mishra. Despite an evolving foe, the fight can still be won. ●



Babel doom, Indic boom

An explosion in Indian language content, technology and back-end support will power internet accessibility for the next billion users in India

BY K. SUNIL THOMAS

WINTER SOLSTICE, WHEN the sun is farthest from the northern hemisphere, is usually the coldest day of the year. At the DailyHunt headquarters in Bengaluru, however, winter solstice 2020, which fell on December 21, was anything but cold. The new media startup that aggregates news and content from various content providers was basking in the warm glow of success. Its parent company, VerSe, had just been adjudged a unicorn.

What sets apart DailyHunt is that it operates completely in the Indian language space, providing content

collected across 14 languages. Interestingly, the latest round of funding of \$100 million—which pushed its valuation beyond the magical \$1 billion mark—came from Google and Microsoft for the company's Josh short video app. A statement by the company described itself as "India's first tech unicorn for local languages".

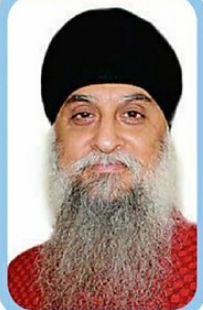
It may be the first, but it will not be the last unicorn success story in the Indian language space.

In the summer, the Internet & Mobile Association of India (IMAI) announced that for the first time ever, rural internet users had surpassed



urban users—22 crore, compared with 20 crore in cities. In 2021, Hindi internet users may overtake English users. KPMG says that three-fourths of India's internet users by 2021 will want to access content in Indian languages.

"Every new user coming online is an Indian language user," said Sanjay Gupta, country head and vice president, Google India. But that is also where the problem lies. The audience is growing by the day but the content is barely keeping pace. On the other



BREAKING BARRIERS

(From left) Vishnu Mohta, cofounder, HoiChoi; Sanjay Gupta, country manager and vice president of sales and operations, Google India; Sarabjot Singh Anand, director (computer science and engineering), BML Munjal University

A market estimate puts the opportunity in the vernacular content space at ₹40,000 crore in the years to come.

side, there are more than five crore small businesses in the country that would like to sell products in the hinterland, but still have sparse software or back-end support to hawk their products in the suitable language.

"Businesses speak English and consumers speak a different language," said Rakesh Kapoor, CEO of Process9, a firm that offers translation solutions for business websites. "It is a huge gap, and this gap really is the opportunity which

is in front of us."

This 'next billion' business opportunity is huge and ripe for plucking, where early movers can score big, with most content providers, ranging from entertainment and information to social media and e-commerce, operating on an English-first model. No wonder, a market estimate puts the opportunity in the vernacular content space at ₹40,000 crore in the years to come.

Similar to DailyHunt's billion-dollar status, there are other home-

grown players reaping the dividends of sowing early. ShareChat is one. This social media platform was launched by three IIT Kanpur students who realised the potential of social networks in local languages. Today, ShareChat is available in 15 Indian languages and used by 16 crore Indians. "The Indian internet market is bustling with opportunities at the moment," said ShareChat co-founder & chief technology officer Bhanu Pratap Singh. Google is reportedly in talks to buy ShareChat, valuing it as a unicorn.

Last year, when Google CEO Sundar Pichai announced a \$10 billion investment plan for India, he had said that the money will be invested in companies "enabling affordable access and information for every Indian in their own language". While the likes of Google, Facebook, Amazon and even Apple support different languages, ease-of-use and universal acceptance still remain a distant goal.

"In India, it is a complex problem to solve," admits Gupta. "But this has not deterred us. We've been investing in this for over a decade. We've taken a holistic solution to solve for consumption, communication and creation."

Google has expanded Indian languages support for many of its applications like Google Maps (nine languages) and Google Assistant (nine languages). Gboard, its keyboard, now supports 60 Indian languages, including Bhojpuri and Tulu. Google is investing more in machine learning and artificial intelligence to become better in understanding local languages and colloquialism.

While the input point, conventionally the keyboard, has been a vexing issue, trends indicate a shift to voice and video interactions. "Speech-to-text and text-to-speech interfaces are going to be key in the future, especially if we want to

give access to information to those who are not English speakers and are also not 'readers,' said Dr Sarabjot Singh Anand, director (computer science & engineering), BML Munjal University.

The video boom in recent years has meant that a large chunk of Indians now access the internet for video entertainment. TikTok was a trailblazer of sorts in the local language content creation space. New entrants like Roposo, Chingari and even Instagram's Reel (the Facebook-owned company is testing its Instagram Lite app in India, which has support for nine Indian languages) are now trying to fill the gap left by the TikTok ban. On streaming platforms, it is Indian language content that is ruling the roost, with even global biggies like Netflix and Amazon Prime Video focusing on creating local content. "There are millions of people in India who speak a regional language. To put that into context, that is an extremely wide base to go after when one is thinking about any sort of offering," said Vishnu Moha, co-founder of Hoichoi, a popular OTT platform which offers programming only in Bengali.

While entertainment is mostly in a receive-only mode, things get more complex when it comes to other services, such as online shopping and net banking. With government services also going increasingly online, the digital divide gets even more wider.

"Services needed by rural India are different from urban settings," said Anand. "Most people are unaware of their rights. Access to information and open governance provides huge opportunities. Health care, education and agritech are some of the key areas where tech companies can impact rural India."

This is where intrepid domestic

entrepreneurs have jumped in. They range from Vokal, an app where villagers can get their questions answered by experts in 11 Indian languages, to Process9, which translates content in real time with neural machine translation for the likes of HDFC, Bajaj and Paytm. Vokal's founder, Aprameya Radhakrishna, is so convinced of the Indic boom that he launched Koo, a Twitter-like micro-blogging site in Indian languages. myUpchar, a startup which specialises in online consultations with doctors and medicine delivery

to tier 2 and tier 3 towns, offers its services in five Indian languages beside English. Its usage shot up 300 per cent during the lockdown, and 25 per cent in the ensuing months.

Or take eSamudaay, a ready-to-use platform which a local business can use to sell in small localities. The startup offers services on both fronts, content and the back-end technology, where it uses conversational artificial intelligence. "There is a language and user interface barrier," said Anup Pai, founder & CEO of eSamudaay. "Once we have

INTERVIEW

Bhanu Pratap Singh,
co-founder & chief technology officer, ShareChat

English is no longer a deterrent for optimum user experience

BY K. SUNIL THOMAS

Q/Recently, Indian language users overtook Indians accessing the internet in English. What does it signify?

A/ Industry analysts have been predicting this development for a long time, as India is dominated by language-first citizens. As more than 500 million new internet users are expected to be added in the next three to four years, we believe more

than 90 per cent would come from non-English backgrounds.

During the initial days, people used to learn English to access the internet. The trend has been reversed. Now the internet is coming to the users with platforms that users would be comfortable with. English is no longer a deterrent for optimum user experience.

In the past few years, the internet

has been democratised and is available even in the most remote parts of the country. Lower data rates, increasing penetration and easier access to smartphones have fuelled this trend. Increasingly the internet ecosystem has become more Indian language enabled. This signifies a shifting trend that is expected to continue in the years to come.

Q What does it signify going forward? What are the spaces where we need further tech/user advancements?

A With more Indian language users joining the internet we need to make sure that our product capabilities are upgraded to engage these next billion internet users. As we are leading the social media space in Indic languages, it is necessary for us to strengthen our artificial intelligence and machine learning capabilities that are critical to our products' success. At ShareChat, our aim is to understand the content on our platforms and give our community a personalised feed relevant to their interests.

Semantically understanding content in natural languages and connecting it with the relevant content genres across interest graphs require cutting edge technological capabilities to

function across 15 Indic languages, which have their own complexities and scripts. We are leading the next level of development for our camera tech function, by unlocking features that include building newer technologies. These will be focused around augmented reality experiences, creating lenses, filters, stickers, live-streaming video content capabilities and other technical expertise. These enhanced features will equip our community to create highly innovative, vibrant and engaging content across ShareChat and Moj.

Q Will further advancements in the Indic internet space come from Big Tech, or will homegrown entrepreneurs lead the innovation?

A The Indian internet market is bustling with opportunities at the moment. The landscape offers a huge potential that is evident to all the players. While homegrown entrepreneurs understand the nerve of the market completely, the Big Tech companies come with a technological dominance that is unmatched in the market by small players. Therefore, we need to complement each other's strength to build India for the future. ●

adequate local language content, conversational support in Indian languages and availability of local digital businesses, we see this barrier dissolving and more people being able to derive value from their smartphone devices and data networks."

The government has been pushing the Indian language agenda. It has been nudging mobile phone makers to adopt Indian languages in handsets sold in India. The Telecom Department's Technology Development for Indian Languages

(TDIL) section is looking at developing processing tools and techniques for human-machine interaction without language barriers. The citizen engagement platform MyGov has also been planning its language options.

India's Ajay Data is the head of the Universal Acceptance Steering Group, which works towards an across-the-board acceptance for domain names and email addresses in all languages. "We all have the responsibility to bring the next one billion online [with] universal ac-

ceptance which means all software, apps and devices must work in all 22 Indian languages," he said recently. "Seems reasonable and expected, but not always met."

Sarika Gulyani, director & head, ICT, digital economy and FICCI's Indian Language Internet Alliance, put it succinctly. "Vernacular [is] one of the crucial components for getting the masses online," she said. "This is important for realising a mass internet revolution." The internet's next billion is awaiting this spring revolution. ●

BHANU PRAKASH CHANDRA



Pandemic paradigm

Even as campuses reopen, the online mode of learning will stay and institutions will need to continuously upgrade processes

BY ABHINAV SINGH

IT WAS A COMMON sight in college campuses—students streaming through the corridors from one lecture room to another. But as educational institutions reopen, this may no longer be the norm; at least until herd immunity to Covid-19 is achieved. For now, lecturers will go to students. This is one of the measures that colleges are implementing

to ensure student safety.

St. Xavier's College, Mumbai, is planning to hire additional security; they would be authorised to check students' timetables and usher out those who have finished their day's classes. All co-curricular activities will be held online, and the canteen and library will not have seating facility. Moreover, furniture in common rooms will be reduced so that they are used only for essential activities and not as gathering spots.

Rajendra D. Shinde, principal, St. Xavier's College, said that learning will be blended, with 40 per cent of teaching remaining online. "[On campus], we have planned for open-door lecture rooms or auditoriums with the AC strictly switched-off," he said. "If possible, lectures with a



smaller number of students would be conducted in spaces with shade or even in the main hall or the main library."

The new normal is here to stay. In college libraries digital infrastructure is being upgraded and administrative offices are using more online transactions. Shinde said this would save time and energy for applicants as they could submit documents or make payments round-the-clock.

Colleges are also planning to implement staggered attendance and mandatory health screening.

Chocko Valliappa, vice chairman, The Sona Group of educational institutions, said there would be more project-based work. "I feel [the] classroom will become a place more

to discuss doubts and the teacher will become less of a sage on the stage and more of a guide on the slide," he said. The focus on online learning will continue for most institutes. Prof Madhu Veeraraghavan, director, TAPMI, Manipal, said that the b-school had introduced an "industry-guided course of independent study." "The guidance will be via technology enabled platforms," he said. "We are also introducing project-based courses which will leverage technology. However, online classes will be continued based on regulatory requirements and guidelines. We see critical processes like summer placements and final placements still being conducted online. We are working on processes to augment our online student admission process."

There is no doubt that institutions

will need to continuously benchmark and upgrade their systems, processes and structures. "We will embrace a hybrid teaching-learning model that combines the positive aspects of technology with in-person mentoring and hands-on experimentation," said Rupamanjari Ghosh, vice chancellor, Shiv Nadar University. "We believe that 2021 needs to be a reset for higher education. University education should drive, and not just respond to, industry and technology."

Online internships and placements are likely to continue in 2021. Deepoon Das, a final year MBA student at TAPMI, did his internship online with Bosch. It involved market research, where he had to interact with car dealers and bike workshop owners virtually. "The internship began in April and ended in June," he said. Das has been staying at his home in Chennai ever since he left the campus in March. He said that his final place-



THE NEW NORMAL
Despite strict Covid-19 protocols, students long to return to campus

ment also happened online. "Links were sent to the candidates," he said. "I was placed in an IT company after rounds of discussions and online interviews."

There was concern about the job prospects of students in tier-2 and tier-3 cities. But, Anchal Kamboj, from Seth Jai Parkash Mukand Lal Institute of Engineering and Technology, Yamunanagar, Haryana, said she got offers from three IT firms, including Infosys and TCS. However, she says that there is a drop of at least 50 per cent in the number of companies visiting campus and a majority of the students are yet to be placed. "The uncertainty for students continues," she said.

Valliappa said that students at the Salem-based Sona College of Technology have been placed in companies such as Infosys, Virtusa and Hexaware with an "average salary of ₹5 lakh per annum". He said that students with specialisations in cloud computing, cyber security, artificial intelligence, machine learning, robotics process automation, data science and, especially, health care analytics, are getting better starting salaries.

Many institutes have also realised that placement opportunities are comparatively less and are going the extra mile to help the students. For example, TAPMI is carrying out extensive research on potential recruiters and is speaking to many sources and tapping into their alumni network to help the students. "The students should never let a crisis go waste and rather they should use this time to build skills through certification and online courses," said Veeraraghavan. "While building new skills, they should always work to find a match between their preferences and market opportunities. In this new global environment where VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity) reigns supreme, those who can best understand the complexity and develop expertise in decision making under these conditions



SAFETY FIRST

Colleges are planning to dispense sanitisers and mandate health screenings

will be the ones who can lead."

IIT Kharagpur is tackling the new normal with innovations such as a digital pad to do board work online and evaluation through time-bound online tests. The institute will also conduct open-book exams where students have to email soft copies of their answers to the professors.

Syllabus completion is on track and as institutes reopen only practical classes are pending, in most cases. "Prior to the reopening we took feedback from parents, students and faculty members and then formed the guidelines," said Prof V.A. Kothiwale, registrar, KLE Academy of Higher Education and Research, Belagavi. "We also conducted online

sessions with parents to alleviate their concerns and queries. The students have been given the flexibility to work at their own speed."

At the Aligarh Muslim University (AMU), final year exams have been prioritised. Most of the final semesters ended with only a few days of delay. "There is no delay as far as the final semester exams are concerned," said Prof M. Rizwan Khan, chairperson, department of English, and director, Internal Quality Assurance Cell, AMU. "The classes ended in the second week of December. For medical students, we are following the regulations of the medical council and likewise for engineering courses, the guidelines of the regulatory bodies are being followed."

The new mode of learning also had its share of positives. As Ruhi Jain, a final year economics and statistics student at St. Xavier's College, said: "Online classes saved me from daily commute in crowded Mumbai local trains." But, she still misses the campus. "Being around friends and meeting them regularly and now being restricted to Zoom calls... it has been an altogether different experience," she said. Despite the threat of the pandemic, there is a longing among students to go back to campuses. The young are restless and want to get on with life. ●

IIT Kharagpur is tackling the new normal with innovations such as a digital pad to do board work online.

Star of the east

A first-time MLA, Mamun Imdadul Haque Chawdhury has been regularly raising issues affecting the common man in the legislative assembly of Assam.

Mamun Imdadul Haque Chawdhury, 40, is a new-generation politician, who, in 2016, was elected as a first-time MLA from the Naoboicha constituency in Lakhimpur district, that falls in northeast Assam. Chawdhury is the General Secretary & Chief Whip of the All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF) Legislature Party, which was founded in 2005, and is one of the main opposition parties in Assam.

A lawyer, Chawdhury joined politics after finishing his master's in Botany from Cotton College, Guwahati.

In 2017, he was one among the 150 MLAs in the country invited by Sumitra Mahajan, former Lok Sabha speaker, to participate in National Legislators' Conference. In 2020, an e-magazine, Rajniti Asom nominated Chawdhury as the second most popular MLA in Assam.

Hailing from a remote village, Daulatpur, in Lakhimpur, Chawdhury has seen poverty at close quarters. Precisely why he is vocal in opposing privatisation of education and health care sectors. Chawdhury believes that these sectors can be run efficiently under public funding with a long-term policy of at least 30 years.

Chawdhury also stresses on the development of agro-based industries in Assam. In his opinion, as almost 70 per cent of people of the state are engaged in agriculture and related activities, development of agro-based and food-processing industries is the only way towards a sustained income-generation for a large chunk of the population. He also opines that As-



“ People have to be educated about the long-term losses of corruption. Students and young people need to be targeted for such awareness programmes. ”

Mamun Imdadul Haque Chawdhury

MLA,
Naoboicha constituency,
Lakhimpur district, Assam

sam's optimum potential in the tourism sector has not yet been explored.

Corruption worries Chawdhury the most. "Strict vigilance is not the ultimate solution to uproot corruption," he says, "People have to be educated about

the long-term losses of corruption. Students and young people need to be targeted for such awareness programmes."

Chawdhury, who is an avid reader, has written eight books so far. In his latest book, Mukhyamantritar Bhoj (The Fear of Chief Minister-ship), he argues that no one from the minority community should ever become the chief minister of Assam. Such an ambition of any minority leader, he says, will eventually create a strong sub-nationalist sentiment among a section of people, which can be exploited by clever politicians for their political gain, at the cost of peace and tranquility.

With the honour to have participated in every debate since he became an MLA, Chawdhury believes in deliberation in legislation making process. He has always tried to encourage educated young people to join politics. Chawdhury believes in introducing a leadership course in the school curriculum. "Leadership is not innate always. Rather, it can be developed in an individual," he says. He believes that after the nascent stage of Indian democracy, now the era of good people in politics has just begun.

A proponent of peace and developmental, Chawdhury has been working to mitigate the 40 years of conflict between the majority and minority communities in Assam. He has even written a book on it, titled, Axomor Rajnitiit Dhormio Shankhyalogur Abhirbhab Aru Probabh (The emergence and influence of religious minorities in Assam politics).

Chawdhury writes regularly for various Assamese newspapers on socio-political issues. Bharatiyo Rajnitiit Mitrojoot (Alliances in Indian Politics), published in 2018, is one of his most accomplished works.

■ M.R. Kumar,
chairman, Life Insurance Corporation of India

The pandemic has amplified the need of life insurance

BY NACHIKET KELKAR

FOR MANY PEOPLE, the pandemic came as a rude reminder about the need to be prepared for tough times. This may play a role in improving insurance penetration in India, says M.R. Kumar, chairman of India's largest insurer, Life Insurance Corporation of India. In an exclusive interview, he also talks about LIC's acquisition of IDBI Bank and its IPO plans. Excerpts:

Q | Covid-19 caused disruption across industries. For the insurance sector, however, it perhaps has been a catalyst in raising awareness about the need for being insured.

A | In spite of the collective efforts of insurers, regulators and the government, insurance awareness is still low in India, which is reflected in the low insurance penetration rate of 2.74 per cent. The life insurance industry faced the heat of the pandemic during the period of lockdown, which impacted its performance initially, but, at the same time, the pandemic has thrown light on the importance of life insurance and health insurance.

People have begun to understand the importance of life insurance and health insurance in financial planning amid growing uncertainties in income and medical costs. The awareness that has been generated in the aftermath of the pandemic has proved to be a growth catalyst in the industry, cutting across the product basket.

Q | What is LIC doing to deepen insurance penetration and what more needs to be done across the insurance industry to increase awareness?

A | Financial awareness about life insurance among households is the key factor which leads to the deepening of the life insurance market. Even though awareness about life insurance has increased among common people thanks to the collective effort of life insurers, the government and the regulatory authority, we have a long way to go. The pandemic has amplified the need of life insurance. LIC has chalked out a three-step process to increase insurance penetration—increasing the awareness about life insurance through digital, print and social media; expanding distribution reach through innovative interventions as per the demands of the market; and offering a suitable product based on customer segmentation. We feel the synergic effect of the three will help to increase insurance penetration in India.

Q | It has been five months since the country began unlocking. Have things returned to pre-Covid levels as far as LIC's business is concerned?

A | An increase in economic activity since the unlock process started in June has resulted in an uptick in the business performance of LIC. Business began to return to normalcy as we started to use digital tools and

new ways of prospecting and serving clients, keeping in mind the social distancing norms. As on October 31, we have collected a total first year premium of ₹1,03,566.08 crore as compared to ₹1,01,402.37 crore last year, at a growth rate of 2.14 per cent.

The number of policies is still showing a negative variation as compared to last year. As the unlock process is widened further, resulting in more economic activities, and with the probability of a vaccine in the near term, we expect the life insurance business to continue to grow steadily over the rest of the current fiscal. And backed by our digital innovations and marketing initiatives, we are confident of returning to double-digit growth in premium by the end of the fiscal.

Q | How will Covid-19 change LIC's strategy and operations going ahead?

A | The entire ecosystem is changing to digital mode since the pandemic started, and it will grow further in coming years. We have provided a digital interface to our agents to complete the proposals from their home with zero contact with customers. The module is integrated with our branch system so that the records get escalated seamlessly to the branch with which the agent is attached. We have arranged for online training for our field force so that their skills get updated. We feel that, with the involvement of more agents, sustain-



able growth in life insurance is possible and it will continue to be a key distribution channel. However, with the ecosystem changing towards digital mode after the pandemic, agents, too, will have to equip themselves to sync with the demands of time, and we have provided them the digital platform for the purpose.

Q | Interest rates have come down sharply this year. What kind of impact has this had on LIC's investments in debt markets? Will it have any impact on the returns that are offered on savings and investment products?

A | We are a long-term investor and our incremental investments are small as compared to total investments at any point of time. Any upturn or downturn in the debt market does not have any significant impact on our overall returns. Also, as a matter of strategy, we use a mix of debt returns and profit booking in equity to ensure returns to our customers as

per the market conditions.

Q | The budget this year proposed lower tax rates for salaried professionals. But those opting for it are not eligible for tax deductions, including insurance premiums. Will it be a setback for the insurance industry?

A | Covid-19 has made people aware of the importance of life insurance and it may be a turning point in life insurance in India where it is converted to a nudge product from a push product. Post pandemic, people may buy life insurance as an integral part of their financial planning. However, it is also a matter of fact that in order to reduce the social security burden on the government exchequer, it is essential that citizens opt for life and health insurance as per their personal requirements, and for this purpose, some sort of incentive in the form of tax break is necessary.

Q | LIC acquired a majority stake

in IDBI Bank in 2019. How has this panned out for the company?

A | LIC's stake in IDBI Bank has panned out along expected lines so far. IDBI Bank has registered profits in the first and second quarters of FY 20-21. As a prudent measure, however, the bank has made more provisions than mandated by the RBI to manage Covid-related stress on assets. The impact of any, and the quantum thereof, are likely to be known only when the bank closes its books at the end of the financial year. The bank is adequately capitalised at the present moment. LIC is bound by the regulatory guidelines and directives issued by RBI and IRDAI at the time of allowing LIC to acquire majority stake in IDBI Bank.

Q | The government has announced its intent to list LIC on stock exchanges. What kind of impact is this going to have on LIC, considering that it will then be under a lot more scrutiny?

A | DIPAM [Department of Investment and Public Asset Management] appointed two pre-transaction advisers—Deloitte and SBI CAPS—on August 27, 2020 for assisting the government and LIC in preparing for the IPO. Further, RFP [request for proposal] has been floated for appointment of an actuarial firm for determining the embedded value of LIC.

Q | Given how intertwined the financial services sector is, is there a case for a common financial market regulator?

A | Regulations are important to ensure that market participants are acting properly. Keeping in mind the intertwined financial service sector today, it may seem a good idea to have a common financial regulator. However, we have a long road to go before we think of having such a regulator, as the customers' expectations and needs are quite diverse. ●



SILENT SAVIOURS

We need bats for our survival,
but they would thrive in
a human-free world

PHOTOGRAPHS AND TEXT BY BHANU PRAKASH CHANDRA



PREDATOR AND PREY

An Iruliga tribesman
with a leaf-nosed bat he
caught. Iruligas are
hunter-gatherers who
eat bats



Rest and recovery

A caretaker at Avian and Reptile Rehabilitation Centre, Bengaluru, feeds fruit to an injured short-nosed fruit bat

An Iruliga tribesman wades into a muddy puddle inside a kilometre-long subterranean aqueduct near Bengaluru. He is fearless, but wears a mask, which is now mandatory in the world above him. In this darkness, his only source of light is his mobile phone torch. It is an abandoned aqueduct, built decades ago. He and a companion are here to catch bats. Iruligas are hunter-gatherers who eat bats. While many people blame the winged mammals for the Covid-19 pandemic, and fear them, the tribe continues to treat them just as before—as food. A heap of bat drop-

pings in the middle of the tunnel indicates that there was a large colony of bats here, before they fell prey to the tribesmen.

M. Byregowda did his doctoral studies on the tribe. He is also in “contact” with bats, but for a different reason. He collects decomposed bat droppings to use as fertiliser for the fruit trees and vegetables plants on his farm. He says no modern fertiliser can match bat-compost in agricultural yield. Bats also help in pollination and pest control, so he happily permits bats to feast on the fruits on his farm. “The bats are taking their share,” he says, “because they contributed to growing these fruits.”

Rescuers from the Avian and Reptile Rehabilitation Centre (ARRC), Bengaluru, save more than one hundred bats every year, from urban areas. Most of their calls have been related to bats harmed by man-made entrapments, such as power lines or kite strings. But, this year, the ARRC is receiving calls from concerned citizens asking it to remove the bats which roost on their roofs. “We try to convince people that these pipistrelle bats are harmless and [explain their] contribution to controlling insects, but people are still worried because of the bad press





The dark knight

Some relationships with bats are fictional. Ameya Udupa, 5, likes to dress up as Batman



Use for refuse

M. Byrappowda, a progressive farmer, collects decomposed bat droppings to use as fertiliser



that bats got during the pandemic," says Jayanthi Kallam, founder and executive director of the centre.

During the pandemic, bat researcher Rohit Chakravarty bust many a myth about bats through his educational videos on social media. Chakravarty, who is currently working on his doctoral thesis at the Leibniz Institute for Zoo and Wildlife Research, Germany, says that reductions in bat populations can drastically affect human health and economy. "Bats have lived close to humans for centuries, contributing massively to food and

cash crop production and insect control," he says.

Almost all animals harbour viruses. But, bats have an exceptional immune system, which prevents them from falling ill from most viruses. Thus, they become hosts. There is no proof that the novel coronavirus spread from bats; they are 'prosecuted' purely on suspicion. Bats rarely spread diseases directly to humans. They need a medium, like an intermediate animal, to pass on a disease, most of the time. And the cause of most zoonotic diseases is unsustainable human interaction with nature (for example, uncontrolled agricultural intensification and urbanisation, exploitation of wildlife and climate change).

Iruliga means people who live in the dark. Before they were relocated to government-built homes, they were living in caves, with bats. If bats are so harmful, how did the tribe survive? When it comes to knowledge of bats, it is the 'enlightened' city dweller who is in the dark. If humans, in our greed, eliminate the space between nature and ourselves, calamities are inevitable. Let there be space. ●



Frequent flyers

Indian flying fox, the largest bat in the country, is seen in groups in both rural and urban areas

Bat facts

There are around 1,400 species of bats

They are the second most common mammals, after rodents

They are the only flying mammals

Some bats use vision for navigation, but most use echolocation

They host many viruses, but are immune to the effects of most

Their immune system is a major area of interest for researchers

Bat wings have skin-like membranes, which can recover if damaged

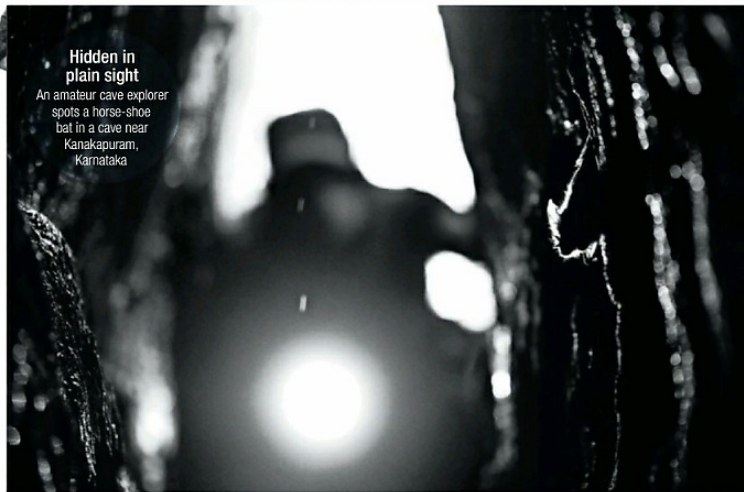
Though seen quarrelling, they are social; mothers carry pups during flight

Salim Ali fruit bat and Wroughton's free-tailed bat are classified as endangered in India



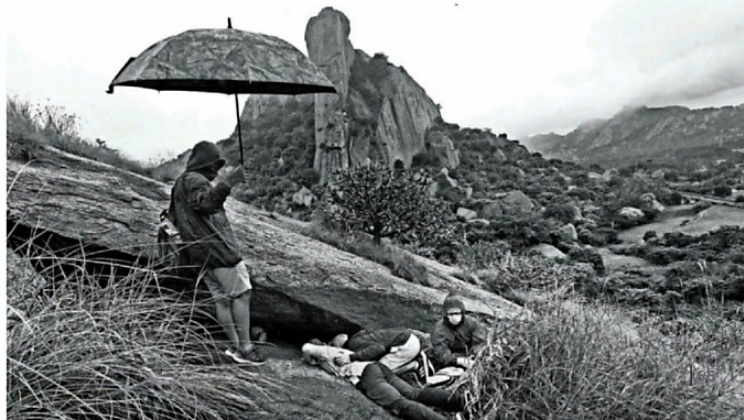
Hidden in plain sight

An amateur cave explorer spots a horse-shoe bat in a cave near Kanakapuram, Karnataka



Bat waters

A group of bat watchers near Channapattana, Karnataka. During the pandemic, they developed an interest to learn more about bats and their importance



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MOVING MOUNTAINS

A Nepali mountaineer's stunning feat puts the spotlight on a mountaineering milestone that has evaded Indians

BY SNEHA BHURA

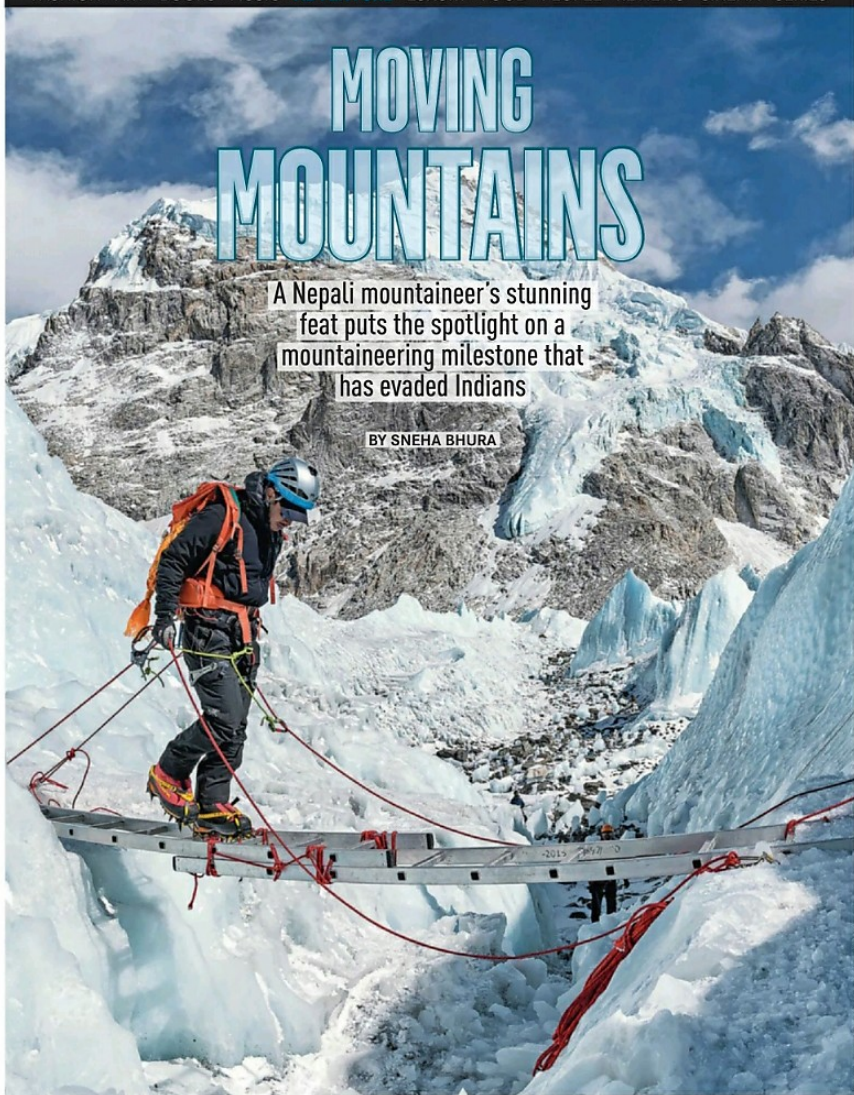


PHOTO COURTESY MACHETTE INDIA

T

he most treacherous of the 14 'death-zone' mountains in the world is said to be K2. Considered the

last frontier in the climbing world, it is the only one among all the 8,000m-plus peaks that has not been climbed in winter. But high-altitude climber Nirmal Purja, aka Nimsdai, says he considers himself "next-level crazy." He spoke to THE WEEK from Nepal before his December 20 ascent of the 'Savage Mountain.' "We are only limited by our own imagination," says the 37-year-old former Gurkha soldier. And, it might just take a climber of Purja's boundless imagination to accomplish what nobody has before.

His experiences in some of the world's sketchiest combat zones as part of the UK Special Forces can explain his incredible mountaineering feat in 2019. Purja summited all 14 of the 8,000ers in less than seven months, smashing the previous record of seven years and 11 months. All of these peaks are in the Himalayan and Karakoram mountain ranges spanning India, Nepal, Tibet and Pakistan. Some 40 mountaineers have managed to scale them all since the legendary Reinhold Messner first did it in 1986. While most of them took years, Purja's speed and agility conjure up an image of a Super Mario leaping from peak to peak. He had good financial backing, bottled oxygen and Sherpa guides, but mountaineering experts still laud the remarkable speed.

"I put my own fixed lines and do it for others too," says Purja. "I have rescued many others along the way, and if anybody does it the way I have done, by raising sponsorships, taking care of the logistics and politics, and dealing with the health of my mom, all at the same time, then we can talk. If you have not been in my shoes,

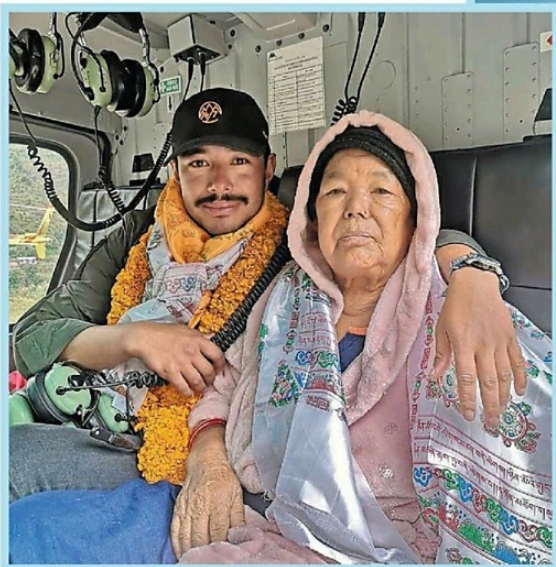


PHOTO COURTESY: HACHETTE INDIA

then do not comment from outside."

He represents a new-age climber who is ambidextrous. He is social media savvy, good with the camera—the 2019 photo of the long queue on Everest was his—talks about partying in the base camp and completes a memoir in just nine months. "Quitting is not in my blood, even in a near-death crisis. I was not a sheep waiting to be prodded by the shepherd; I was a lion and I refused to walk and talk with the rest," Purja writes in his memoir, *Beyond Possible*.

The youngest in a family from Dana village in west Nepal, Purja says his inspiration does not come from the mountains. "Muhammad Ali, Bruce Lee and Usain Bolt, they all inspire me. Look at their background, their lives were amazing," he says.

There are two styles of high-altitude climbing: siege and alpine.

TIES THAT MATTER

Purja with his mother; (top right) Indian mountaineer Arjun Vajpai, who wants to become the youngest climber to summit all 8,000ers, considers Purja a brother and a friend

The siege style of climbing involves a large support staff being employed at the base camp with equipment, gear and food. These are large expeditions with porters and Sherpas who open routes and provide help all the way to the top. Purists do not respect this method of mountain climbing. The Alpine style used by Messner requires a more technical set of climbing skills, and is carried out with no support staff or supplemental oxygen.

"The skill-set required to climb an 8,000er depends on how he or she wants to climb. Is it solo or alpine in a small team, expedition or guided?" says Brig Ashok Abbey, president of the Indian Mountaineering Founda-

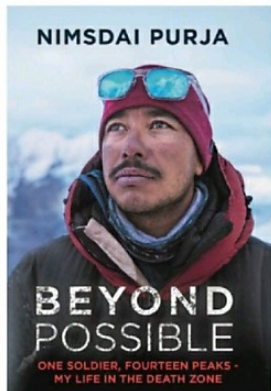


**PURJA SUMMITED
ALL 14 OF THE
8,000ERS IN
LESS THAN
SEVEN MONTHS,
SMASHING THE
PREVIOUS
RECORD OF
SEVEN YEARS
AND 11 MONTHS.**



tion, which has been seeing a lot of interest in 8,000ers from young Indian climbers. He would not attribute it to the Purja effect, although it has caught their imagination.

He wants to urge young Indian climbers to develop their skills in a playground of mountains in the Indian Himalayas, where 340 peaks have been opened up and more are on the way. "Our climbers should do their own route opening, ascend in small teams, care for the environment and climb the mountain on their own steam. They will be able to replicate



these on other bigger mountains," says Abbey.

Chewang Motup Goba, president of The Himalayan Club and founder of Khardung La Challenge, says climbing became commercialised in the mid-1990s. He first climbed a mountain when he was 13 and even tried to climb Everest solo in 1985. Things have changed a lot since then. "You do not need to be a very good climber," says Goba. "We know people who have climbed Everest but have never climbed in their lives before. There is much advance-

ment in terms of weather forecasts, logistics and equipment that few things remain a big challenge, except avalanches and rock falls.

Goba says one glaring hurdle for Indian mountaineers keen on 8,000ers is the political challenge. "Five of the 8,000ers, including K2, fall in Pakistan or Pakistan-occupied-Kashmir," he says. "It is very difficult to get permits. That is one of the reasons no Indian has managed to do it yet."

But that does not stop Noida boy Arjun Vajpai from dreaming. At 16, he became the youngest in the world to climb Everest. The 27-year-old now wants to become the youngest to summit all 14 peaks within the next three years. He has already climbed six of them by participating in 12 expeditions. He was once rendered paralysed after developing a medical condition at Cho Oyu.

"China and Tibet will not be a problem. They still hold mountaineers in a different regard," says Vajpai about the political hurdle. "About the remaining five in Pakistan, four of them are in the PoK region which is actually part of India. If we ask for permission, [we give up our claim on the land]. For K2, I hope the relations between the two countries [improve], but I have alternatives to actually go about this. I will go there in disguise if need be!"

Vajpai considers Purja a brother and friend. "You have to meet this guy in the flesh to believe how crazy one needs to be to pull this off," he says of Purja. "His feat is unlikely to be replicated in the next two decades." He says high-altitude climbing is perhaps the most expensive extreme sport with each peak requiring an investment of ₹35 lakh to ₹50 lakh. Last year, Vajpai had to turn back 291m away from the summit of Annapurna (8,091m) because of bad weather. "If I do Annapurna next year without oxygen, I will be the first Indian to do so," says Vajpai. ●

ALL THE WEB'S A STAGE

A cyber passage to a whirling city with a lost poet and his looping stories heralds a new chapter in Indian theatre

BY SNEHA BHURA

Habib Jalib was once the *awam-e-shayar* (people's poet) of Pakistan. Born in Hoshiarpur village of undivided India in 1928, a 19-year-old Jalib migrated to Pakistan after partition and started working in an Urdu daily edited by the venerable Marxist, poet and author Faiz Ahmad Faiz, whose influence propelled him to join the Progressive Writers' Movement. His poems of resistance and dissent have taken on military dictators like General Ayub Khan and General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq, leading to his multiple arrests and detentions. The verses from Jalib's poem, 'Das-toor', decrying the rise of fascism, was fervently sung by Indian students leading protests against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act.

In a 1987 interview in the *Herald* magazine, Jalib describes one of the many methods employed for his arrests. This one time a police officer scaled the walls of his house in the dead of night and sat on the edge of his bed. "My wife was suddenly awakened and the sight of a stranger in the house frightened her. She woke me up and then the intruder uttered the words I was to hear again and again:

'Consider yourself under arrest,' said Jalib in the interview, which also has testimonies from his wife.

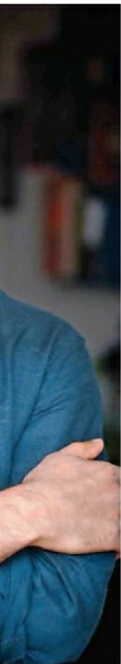
As a dramaturg, researcher and writer, Sarah Mariam has mined many such testimonies on lost poets through history to distil her thoughts and sentiments while scripting her first piece of "cyber-theatre", *The Last Poet*. It is a play which mounts an eerily whirling city on the web with floating rooms where denizens recall and reminisce about an endlessly fascinating poet who abruptly went missing for speaking truth to power. Directed by inter-media artist and director Amitesh Grover, *The Last Poet* is a multi-layered art form with theatre, creative coding, digital scenography, film and live performance. It is India's first genre-bending broadcast of theatre-on-the-internet, commissioned by SA Virtual of Serendipity Arts foundation. It went live on the internet from December 18 to 21 and is prepping up for several repeat shows in 2021.

"The whole show is arranged in such a way that you can put any actor in any room in any way and still the same story will emerge," says Mariam. "You can start and end at any point and you will still go away with a similar kind of experience of having



DIRECTOR'S CUT
Amitesh Grover; (top right) a screen grab from *The Last Poet*

heard all these little impressions, memories, rumours and anecdotes of this one man who we never meet or see. Mariam met with digital scenographers, coders and programmers to understand the fluid architecture of her virtual city. The result is an immersion in a world strangely dystopic yet quietly reaffirming with its compelling multi-monologues, disorienting in the way one feels lost in a void but also redeemed upon encountering pieces of a protagonist whose absence fuels our endless search.



**THE WHOLE
SHOW IS ARRANGED IN
SUCH A WAY THAT YOU
CAN PUT ANY ACTOR IN
ANY ROOM IN ANY WAY
AND STILL THE SAME
STORY WILL EMERGE.**

—Sarah Mariam,
playwright, *The Last Poet*



Grover. “The core concept in this play is also referencing the idea of hyperlinks. As you go to a Wikipedia page and you read one article, it seems incomplete and you click on something else within the article to go to another page.... And that

idea of navigating the cyberspace became the core navigation strategy for this work.”

He says that cyberspace demolishes the age-old performance convention of the fourth wall which exists in physical theatre and cinema—an imaginary wall which assumes that audiences can see through while the actors cannot. “The fourth wall is meaningless in digital theatre because there is no one else except the performer and the person who is watching at both ends of the screen,” he says. Two hundred people can log in simultaneously for a single screening of *The Last Poet*. Grover would provide instructions through a chatbox accessible to all members

of the audience while interactive polling tools embedded in the screen would help the actors communicate with the audience.

“All the actors are looking into the camera and performing,” says Grover. “And the audience members are looking into their screens and receiving the performers’ gaze, and sometimes also being provoked into responding. They never lose eye-contact.” He adds that no such piece of theatrical work exists in the western world right now. In the last four shows, says Grover, audiences from Europe, the US, Australia, Singapore and Pakistan have also logged in, and a well-known theatre scholar, teaching at The New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts, plans to take it up as a case study for her next semester on digital theatre.

Actor-director Atul Kumar has been searching for new ways of expression—a third dimension which is neither live theatre nor cinema—for the last one year. So, when *The Last Poet* happened to come along, he jumped right in. In the play, he is somewhat like a part-sombre, part-whimsical soothsayer who introduces the audience to the legend of the poet’s curse in the city. Kumar says the sooner we stop comparing cyber-theatre to other kinds of live performances, the better. “This is [like] entering a whole new realm where I am not looking for that live audience,” he says. “When I am looking at that tiny little camera, I am midway speaking with one person, gazing into his or her eyes, and at times, it would feel like, through that hole, I am entering into a sort of labyrinth where I am meeting hundreds of people sitting there. So, it is like audiences are there, but they are not there.”

Just like the revolving city and its never-ending stream of stories, there is a lot to discover about this new form of theatre. ●

“This play is meant for repeat viewings and each time the audience will discover something new and deeper,” says Grover, whose work has melded theatre, performance and interactive art since 2009. He studied digital theatre in London more than 10 years ago, when few in India envisioned ways to expand the art form on the web. He is currently the artistic director for International Theatre Festival of Kerala, and teaches at the National School of Drama, New Delhi, and Shiv Nadar University, among other places.

“All my experience of creating works for and on the internet has come to fruition in this project,” says

COLOURING THE WORLD

Chef **Vikas Khanna** gatecrashed Bollywood to realise his dream of making a movie with a social message

BY POOJA BIRAIJA JAISWAL



In 2015, just before a scheduled interview with THE WEEK at a hotel in Mumbai, celebrity chef Vikas Khanna was engrossed in an animated conversation on the phone. He was narrating the script for a film to a Bollywood director. The New York-based Khanna had just arrived in India in a desperate attempt to find the right people who could give his story on the widows of Varanasi a form and shape on celluloid. But it did not work out. "He (the director) said he would come on board only if a young, good-looking female protagonist led it," said Khanna. "I told him we cannot cast a Sunny Leone in the role of a widow from the ghats. Once that fell through, I decided to take up the task of writing, directing and producing it by myself."

Five years after that call, *The Last Color* released in several cities



around the world before entering India in December 2020. Neena Gupta is the face of the film, featured on the posters as a gentle, smiling widow in a white sari celebrating Holi. "My grandfather was a big fan of Neena ji and her striking charm," said the chef. "He called her Noor and I made sure to retain that name for her on screen, too." Khanna was speaking to THE WEEK from New York. He says that had it not been for the pandemic and his severe asthmatic problems, he would have flown down to India and even taken a dip in the Ganges at

the ghats of Varanasi, where the idea for the film had first dawned on him.

The Last Color, based on Khanna's novel of the same name, is a gripping story of an unusual and endearing friendship between an ostracised, elderly widow at the ghats and a cheerful nine-year-old tightrope walker, who is also used to discrimination as a dalit. Chhoti, the girl, inspires Noor to forego abstinence and embrace life in its myriad colours. Set against the backdrop of the "shunned, neglected and colourless" lives of widows in Varanasi, the film is a mul-



“
MY GRAND-FATHER WAS A BIG FAN OF NEENA // (IN PIC) AND HER STRIKING CHARM. HE CALLED HER NOOR AND I MADE SURE TO RETAIN THAT NAME FOR HER ON SCREEN, TOO.

—Vikas Khanna,
director, *The Last Color*



ti-layered rendering that addresses caste, class and gender discrimination. It has a nuance that is unusual from an industry debutant, let alone from a Michelin-starred chef who has cooked for the who's who of the world. Khanna, a renowned TV host and author of several books, has been making documentaries on Indian food for years. His last one, *Kitchens of Gratitude* (2016), premiered at Festival de Cannes and was even showcased at the White House.

But he admits that making *The Last Color* has been a different experience. At a time when most established chefs take the Instagram-YouTube route, here is an “outsider” who gatecrashed into a highly guarded industry with a full-fledged feature film slotted for a big-screen release. Did he come prepared? “I know there are gatekeepers in the film industry and they will not let me enter,” said

Khanna. “They are about favouritism, nepotism and dynasties.... But I am not giving up. I also bring along the baggage of influence as a chef, and I put myself out there despite the criticism.”

Khanna is not new to witnessing the many ways in which artistic liberty gets hijacked by an unforgiving culture of stereotyping. “Time and again, I have been asked to go back to the kitchen,” he said. “But how many times and in how many more ways can I make paneer makhani? I admire Sanjeev Kapoor who has [inspired] an entire line of chefs, but I cannot be a clone. I can continue doing those studio kitchen shoots for 24 hours, but what am I adding to your kitchen that you did not know already? The time has come to stay in the news and stay relevant and this is the way to go about it. Foray in new waters.”

The biggest challenge was in getting the right people to play Chhoti (Aqsa Siddique) and Anarkali (Rudrani Chettri), who is a transwoman and sex worker. It took eight months. Poonam Kaul, the film's coproducer says the team auditioned more than 2,000 children but they all seemed “too sophisticated” to play Chhoti. “We were looking for a rough-looking chirpy girl whom one often sees playing along the ghats,” said Kaul. “It was difficult for us to explain to the casting agents and it was not cheap.”

Siddique, says Khanna, looked disinterested when the team arrived at her school in Shahdara, Delhi, for the auditions. “She was sitting at the back, complaining that a master chef had come to the school without bringing anything to eat,” said Khanna. “I heard her and just as she got up to leave, I zeroed in on her. We took permission to block her for three months, during which we trained her for tightrope walking and speaking slowly because she spoke very fast!”

Khanna's film was launched at the Palm Springs film festival in California and has been screened in over 20 other film festivals. But reviews have been mixed, with some critics saying that the film lacks flow and focus.

“We are rookies, of course, but at the same time this film is of a different genre,” said Kaul. “[Director] Shyam Benegal said that the way the film was shot reminded him of Satyajit Ray. It is a nuanced film and appeals to an audience that values emotions and visual brilliance.”

Meanwhile, Khanna has already started work on his next film in New York, has launched a luxury range of gold-encrusted tableware, has three books in the pipeline and is working on establishing the Indian Culture Centre in midtown Manhattan. “America has given me a lot and it does have an influence on me, but all my stories are entirely based on India,” said Khanna. ●

Meaning in material

At the new
Vida Heydari
Contemporary
Art Gallery
in Pune, the
world settles
into stillness

BY ANJULY MATHAI



ART FOR
ART'S SAKE
Vida Heydari;
(below) Sudarshan
Shetty's for all
that we gather

Most spaces have an aura about them. At the new contemporary art gallery in Pune started by Iranian-Canadian curator and gallerist Vida Heydari, one gets a sense of stillness, as though it has barricaded the chaos outside from streaming in. It is a minimalist space with clean lines, high ceilings, small niches and subdued colours. "For many years, I had been leading a nomad-

ic life," says Heydari, who has 14 years of experience in the global art world. "But once the urge to travel had gone, I knew I wanted to settle down and start a gallery. I wanted to have an international space where local and foreign artists could collaborate." Alongside the gallery is a restaurant with a menu designed by Mumbai-based chef Ajay Chopra, where one can relax with a plate of Belgian pork belly or a marinated kale pizza.

The lightness of the gallery space is beautifully complemented by the physicality of the artworks. The inaugural exhibition, *Origins of a Perennial Bouquet*, has been curated by Bose Krishnamachari and features the works of artists Sudarshan Shetty, Benitha Perciyal, Manish Nai, Sumedh Rajendran and Tanya Goel. "I wanted to understand how materiality and science go together," says Krishnamachari. "Not science in terms of technology. Take the work of Tanya, for example. The way she mixes colours is an experiment in materiality. Her studio is almost like a laboratory."

This element of craftsmanship is evident in all the artworks. Like in Benitha Perciyal's bust of "the mysterious visitor", made of frankincense, myrrh, cinnamon, clove, bark powder, lemongrass, cedar-wood essential oil and

re-used Burma teak wood. Perciyal makes meaning out of her materials. "Materials like cinnamon and clove are everyday ingredients present in every house," says Perciyal. "They are used at auspicious events to take away negative vibes. They are also ritualistic materials used in puja rooms, mosques and churches from time immemorial. After a while, these elements disappear without a trace, and only their memory remains."

What is also interesting is how the artists have used the solidity of these materials to create an illusion of lightness and buoyancy. Take Sumedh Rajendran's teak wood and marble work, *Honour Cracks*, outlining several figures facing different directions. They seem to be suspended in mid-air and yet, there is something very rooted in their postures. This same illusion of fluidity is created by Sudarshan Shetty in his teak wood cupboard of everyday items like rolled-up bedding, a few utensils, a bulging laptop bag.... The way he makes the wood "slither" is poetry in motion. Like the dent he has carved in a pair of shoes lying askew in the cupboard. There is a potent sense of immediacy in the work, as though someone—perhaps a middle-class office goer—has just removed them and they are still warm to the touch. Multiple stories lie untold in each of the exhibits, perennially framed in the stillness of the gallery. ●





The black duke and dalit kings

Netflix's Christmas Day release *Bridgerton*, a historical romance series set in 1803, has created quite a stir by casting a black actor in the role of the wealthy, immensely privileged Duke of Hastings—something that is entirely period-incorrect and wildly improbable. In doing so, the show is following the example set by the superhit musical *Hamilton* that cast black actors in the roles of several of America's founding fathers. The logic for such casting is not so much colour blindness (casting the best actors in the parts regardless of ethnicity) but colour-awareness—casting persons of colour in order to give young viewers role models to aspire to. And not let historicals become a way of covertly celebrating the 'good old days' when white people called all the shots, and people of colour could only be either slaves or criminals. (This is something we are seeing a lot of in Indian historicals nowadays, which, in the name of period-correctness, seems to be full of demonised Muslim invaders, patriotic Hindu kings who kowtow to wise, sacred-thread wearing Brahmins, docile women who know their place in society, and mute dalits.)

Of course, I see how the *Bridgerton* kind of casting can be problematic, especially in a country like ours where huge swathes of people are still uneducated, uninformed or only hazily informed about our history and mythologies. We tend to take our movies as gospel truth, especially the so-called 'biopics'. I even know of some schools that are screening these films during their history and civics periods.

And so we have collectively swallowed the notion that when Milkha Singh was running the 400 metre race in the Olympics in 1960, he was traumatised by flashbacks of the partition in 1947, and so it was really the fault of the British and Muslims that he ended up coming fourth. We fully believe that Allauddin Khilji ate raw meat with his bare hands, that Sanjay Dutt once hilariously put a toilet seat around the

neck of his girlfriend instead of a mangalsutra, that Bal Narendra sold tea to soldiers heading to the war front, and more recently, that Princess Diana used to roller-skate down the corridors of Buckingham Palace listening to 'Duran Duran', and that this Christmas Eve, Anurag Kashyap kidnapped Anil Kapoor's daughter.

Internationally, Netflix's series *The Crown* has been accused of wildly misrepresenting the lives of the British royal family and passing off tabloid gossip as history. *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* and *The Queen's Gambit*, both very popular Netflix shows, also take liberties with historical accuracy,

imagining a female stand-up comic and a female chess prodigy during an era when no such person existed.

Purists argue that narratives like this get in the way of genuine introspection. In the Milkha example, for instance, why did he end up coming fourth, really? What were the shortcomings in his training, his gear, his preparation?

How can we, as a nation with sporting ambitions, improve upon that? Which is valid, I guess.

But then again, we live in a world where fact blurs with fiction constantly. We are all about 'display pictures' and 'cover photos' and faking it. So everything is up for re-representation, really.

And sometimes, the sight of a handsome black duke riding about all Wakanda-like, clicking his fingers to summon white manservants to do his bidding can be more empowering and more of a course-corrector than an in-depth documentary into the evils of slavery.

If our 'historicals' are gonna be inaccurate in any case, why can't we make them so, in a good and empowering way? I am all for handsome black dukes in the 1800s. And sassy female chess grandmasters and stand-up comics in the nineteenth fifties. Netflix, now just give us a hot dalit king and a shudra dynasty or two.





MIND PROBE

Vijay Mallya's son, **Siddharth Mallya**, is all set to come out with a book on mental health called *ConSIDer This*, in which he writes about his own struggle with mental health issues. The book is scheduled to be published in May 2021 by Westland Publications and is inspired by a series of videos that he had posted on social media. "So grateful to have this opportunity to continue shining a light on mental health using my own experiences," he tweeted. "A big thank you to everyone for your continued love and support."



EYES WIDE SHUT

Sonam Kapoor Ahuja has started shooting for her next movie, *Blind*, in Scotland. The Shome Makhija directorial is a chase thriller involving a blind police officer and a serial killer. The film, scheduled for a 2021 release, also stars Vinay Pathak, Purnab Kohli and Lilette Dubey. Sonam had recently made a cameo appearance in her father's film, *AK Vs AK*.



GETTY IMAGES



ANNA TODD,
writer

QUEEN OF HEARTS

After *We Collided*, a romantic drama starring Hero Fiennes, Dylan Sprouse and Josephine Langford, was trending at number four on Netflix soon after it released in October. The film, about the relationship between two college students Tessa and Hardin, is the sequel to *After* (2019), an adaptation of Anna Todd's eponymous book which catapulted her to overnight fame. After getting millions of reads on Wattpad, the social story-telling platform on which *After* was released, Todd is now *The New York Times* best-selling author of the *After* series, *The Brightest Stars* and *The Spring Girls*.

Q What do you think is the reason for the success of the *After* series?

A I would love to know (laughs). I think it was a mixture of me updating regularly on Wattpad and writing a story with a lot of twists and turns. The drama is what people love about the series.

Q What do you think about your work being compared with the *Fifty Shades* trilogy?

A I personally love *Fifty Shades* and, regardless of anyone's opinion, it liberated millions of women. The plot lines are not the same, so sometimes that is a bit frustrating, but overall it is an honour.

Q How did you get the idea for *After*?

A I wanted to write the kind of book that I wanted to read. I love drama and chaos (in fictional form) and I could not find anything that was catching my



attention as much as before, so I decided to write a chapter, and then the story just began to pour out of me.

Q\Do you think the Netflix film has done justice to the book?

A I don't think films ever do justice to any books, except *Harry Potter*. I am honoured to have a movie series, but I am much more of a book person. I like details and conversations and not rushing the plot, so adaptations can be hard for me to love.

Q\Are there any incidents in the *After* books that are drawn from your own life?

A There are some parallels. My marriage is much less dramatic than Hardin and Tessa's relationship, but I got married young, so we had some growing pains as well. I drew a lot of inspiration from my life for the parents of the characters, especially Ken and Tessa's father.

Q\What, according to you, is the recipe for a successful book?

A I have not figured that out yet! But for me, writing from your heart and not writing to get attention is a major factor. Only write what you feel you would want to read and do not try to follow trends.

—By Anjuly Mathai

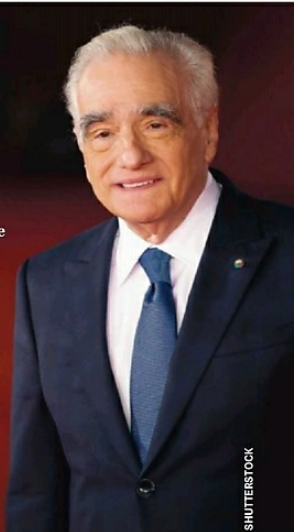
LAST SIGHT

Late actor **Irrfan Khan's** last film, *The Song of Scorpions*, is scheduled to release in theatres in early 2021. Directed by Anup Singh, it is a story of "twisted love, revenge and the redemptive power of a song". In the film, Irrfan plays a camel trader who falls in love with a tribal healer. *The Song of Scorpions*, which also stars Golshifteh Farahani, Waheeda Rehman and Shashank Arora, premiered at the 70th Locarno Film Festival in Switzerland three years ago.



MISSING SPARK

Oscar-winning director **Martin Scorsese** says he is struggling to recapture the spark in his upcoming film, *Killers of the Flower Moon*. "I have to find a way to get back to a singular creative impulse for my new film, the way I had for *The Irishman*," he said. "Cut away all the award ceremonies, all that stuff, and get back to being in a room alone with a project and wondering if I can do something again." *Killers of the Flower Moon*, about the murder of the members of the Osage tribe in the 1920s, stars the veteran director's favourite actors, Leonardo DiCaprio and Robert De Niro.



COMPILED BY
ANJULY MATHAI



The Karunakaran guide

The 10th death anniversary of eminent Kerala politician K. Karunakaran offered a sobering reminder of a different kind of politics. We live in an era where politics is at its lowest ebb; where identity trumps performance; and where temples, pilgrimage sites, mosques and love marriages are the battlegrounds for political contestation. What we need is a refocus on what matters to people, and this is why it is essential to recall Karunakaran. At a time when development is Kerala's crying need—when its young and unemployed are clamouring for political leadership to fulfil their aspirations—his life reminds us of an era of innovative change.

Karunakaran was instrumental in conceiving, initiating and implementing several infrastructure projects in Kerala—notably the Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium and the Cochin International Airport, the latter being India's first public-private partnership airport—that most conventional politicians had considered infeasible. He overcame political resistance and got them done.

The much-touted 'Kerala Model' of advanced human development has led to a certain degree of political complacency. Disillusionment is growing among the public with conventional politics. Kerala has to move beyond the basic issues, boldly tackle 'second generation' problems such as creation of infrastructure, move to a manufacturing, if not heavily industrial, economy, develop itself as a knowledge economy, improve the quality of higher education and vocational training to meet the requirements of a modern workforce, and build on its existing successes in tourism and hospitality services. All this will create meaningful employment opportunities and an increase in income levels.

The story of the Titanic from the early years of the last century is instructive. For almost a hundred years, it was believed that its sinking on its maiden voyage from Southampton to New York was caused by the ship moving too fast and the crew failing to see the iceberg before it was too late. But a book by a descendant of one of the officers of the

ship revealed that the accident was caused not by speed, but by a steering blunder. It seems that the ship had plenty of time to miss the iceberg but the helmsman actually panicked and turned the ship the wrong way, and by the time the error was corrected, it was too late and the ship's side was fatally holed by the iceberg. The error occurred because at the time, seafaring was undergoing an enormous upheaval as a result of the conversion from sail to steam ships. The change meant there were two different steering systems and different commands attached to them. When the first officer spotted the iceberg two miles away, his order was misinterpreted by the quartermaster, who turned the ship left instead of right.

In a sense, Kerala's development failure has been like the story of the Titanic. Today, the ruling left appears unsettled by the global changes which have moved the economic system far beyond their old paradigms and theories.

As with the Titanic, there is nothing wrong with the ship—Kerala, its people, its resources or its potential. But the state has to move with the times and not be left behind. Reliance on NRI remittances will not solve the basic problem, since these are essentially personal savings and spent on conspicuous consumption, including purchasing land and constructing dwellings. Kerala has to attract productive investment funds, which can produce goods and services. This will only happen if Kerala is hospitable to investors, who are terrified that if they set foot in Kerala they will be greeted by red flags.

This does not mean betraying our workers, but finding them work. It does not mean giving up our values, but adding value to our economy. It does not mean placing profit above people, but rather, using profits to benefit the people.

"Leader" Karunakaran won public trust for his vision of development and made a remarkable success of it. He left us 10 years ago, but there is no excuse for forgetting the lessons he taught us. We must rededicate ourselves to creating once again a developed Kerala that he always believed was possible.



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to laugh with your loved ones. Relearn to live.
But be responsible while you are in Himachal.

Welcome to Himachal



Follow COVID-19 safety guidelines



Wear mask properly



Wash your hands with soap frequently & use hand sanitiser



Maintain safe distance



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mangroves and paddy fields. Wander through
narrow palm-fringed canals. Float on a houseboat
and watch life in slow motion. It's time to
step out and get away from the new normal.
It's time to step out into Kerala.

