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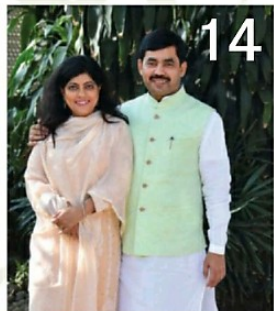
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THE WEEK | DECEMBER 27 | 2020
FOR THE WEEK
DECEMBER 21 - DECEMBER 27

CONTENTS



EDUCATION

How management education in India will change in the post-Covid phase

8

POWER PARTNERS

Spouses of politicians who are making waves in their own ways

14

INFLUENCERS

Child stars in the Indian digital-influencer landscape

28

COVER STORY

The humorous side of our locked-down lives

36

LANGUAGE

Corona-speak has changed the vocabulary of our thoughts

58

AYODHYA MOSQUE

The Dhannipur mosque complex aims to reflect the syncretic traditions of the region

62

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PROTECT
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CONTENTS

SOCIETY

Ranu Mandal's fall from fame was as sudden as her rise

66

CARTOGRAPHY

New-generation map makers are combining traditional knowledge and technology to survey India

69

SMART LIFE

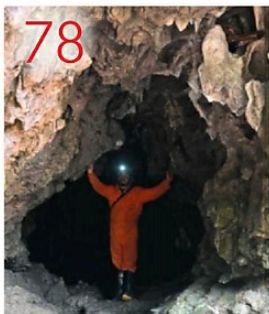
The apps that can earn you some extra pocket money

74

TRAVEL

From the caves of Meghalaya to the summit of the Rupin Pass, THE WEEK presents destinations to fulfil your wanderlust

78



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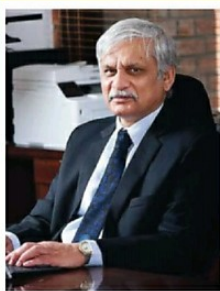
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BY ERROL D'SOUZA,
director, Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad

Management education in post-Covid India

AS BUSINESS schools shifted to online education because of the Covid-19 pandemic, they quickly realised that it was not an adequate substitute for the teaching that happened in traditional classrooms. A new pedagogy is required as both teachers and students struggle to adjust to a new medium. Online classes are slower than normal classes, but the learning is as effective with mind-wandering (the experience of thoughts not remaining on a single topic for a long period of time) by students during an online session is approximately the same as in a physical class.

An advantage of online learning is that it can be used to include simulations that encourage problem solving, and with online chat rooms, students can collaborate and assist fellow learners. This is an opportunity for us to examine which courses require the synchronous presence of faculty and participants to address queries, coach and respond to contextual issues that ought to be done in a face-to-face setting. Those sessions that proceed in a linear fashion and where students absorb concepts at differential rates of concentration can be done online and also recorded

so that students can go back and overcome the learning that is missed because it is sometimes difficult to rewind in the class. The crisis is an opportunity for business schools to unpack different dimensions of learning and to attempt to transform some of it into online sessions that enable revision and paced out learning.

Within programmes, the methods of teaching could very well undergo a change. The myriad ways in which problems arise in business require sessions that highlight the ways in which the joint application of the principles of finance, marketing and strategy working together can address issues suitably. As courses become increasingly delivered in an online mode, there will also be the challenge of how to transmit the critical learning that is experiential rather than functional, and institutions will have to find ways to do so. Implanting sustainability issues into management teaching is also important so as to equip students to face the challenges of the day and to understand that purpose and social responsibility are as important as the maximisation of profits. This would require drawing on different disciplines that are not in the traditional

domain of business schools such as law, sociology and politics. Institutes will be under scrutiny for their efforts to reduce carbon footprint and food waste and for prioritising gender parity among their students, faculty and staff. Management programmes will be increasingly scrutinised for their ability to disseminate learning by doing and they will have to change the way they assess participants in their courses away from exams to grading for projects undertaken during the course.

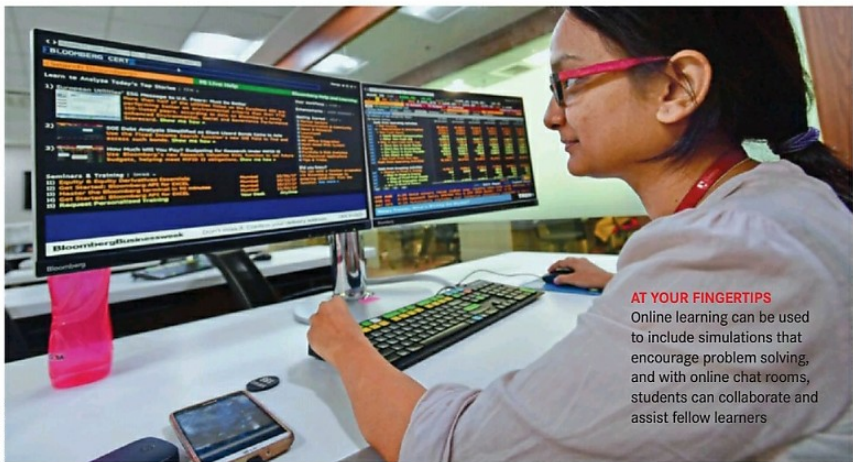
The pandemic is an occasion to review the curriculum and to introduce contemporary topics such as how workers from home use their time, the efficacy of different communication strategies when face-to-face interaction is difficult, the implications for business productivity of online networks such as Microsoft Teams, the impact of the pandemic on stress and resilience and the use of new channels to do business such as the deployment of fintech to improve the flow of credit. Domain specific skills in marketing, operations, finance and strategy will continue to be important. Soft skills are also becoming vital as growing specialisation requires the ability to collaborate and build

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JAMAK BHAT

AT YOUR FINGERTIPS

Online learning can be used to include simulations that encourage problem solving, and with online chat rooms, students can collaborate and assist fellow learners

relations of trust and accountability. Prized managers will be those who regulate their work-life balance, and are able to live with the experience of failure as closures and losses associated with the transformation of business take place. The facility for entrepreneurship and an innovative mindset will be an advantage for managers as firms reinvent themselves to focus on addressing how to become technology driven.

As internationalisation proceeds unabated, there will also be a call for managers who have a cultural agility to perform in cross-cultural situations. They would require the ability of empathy so they may fit seamlessly into multicultural teams and be able to work with people who have markedly different lives from their own. The ability to work in a team will be a skill that is prized as increasing specialisation and skills require the ability to understand, integrate and oversee what specialist engineers, data scientists, biotechnologists, software experts and other folks are doing in organisations. Problem solving will require excellent communication abilities so that various

functionalities that operate are able to realise how and why they contribute to the overall functioning of an organisation.

The composition of business school programme portfolios is going to be reconsidered in the face of the pandemic. Executive education is dependent on the economic cycle and when recession strikes, the first thing corporates do is to cut down on the cost of training. As the economy recovers, executive education income will rise. Executive education is a high reward, high risk business and customised programmes can be highly profitable. In contrast, during a slump, MBA programmes usually receive more applications as laid off and other employees use the downturn to reskill. Academic institutions will have to refocus the emphasis they give to executive education against the master's programmes in management. Shorter courses that are part-time and online and which can be adapted to suit work and family life could well see a rise in popularity. Online teaching will see competition from new forms of

organisation such as tech ventures that will not have the overhead of a campus to hold them back and can grab the business away from traditional institutes. A good example is Jolt that runs a "Not an MBA" programme in London and Tel Aviv.

Finally, academic institutes would benefit from using the occasion to take the long view and to focus on their students who would be disappointed that they are not going to get to take courses on campus. Students should be nudged to take control of the situation and make the best of it, to be proactive and participative, and to speak up in class and communicate their difficulties to faculty and the administration. They have to negotiate with family over the use of the internet and to ensure that they have adequate bandwidth and that others at home are not downloading large files during sessions. Even before Covid-19, we lived in an age of uncertainty and since then it has become even more imperative that we stay focused on how to handle and be relevant in the face of uncertain contingencies. ■



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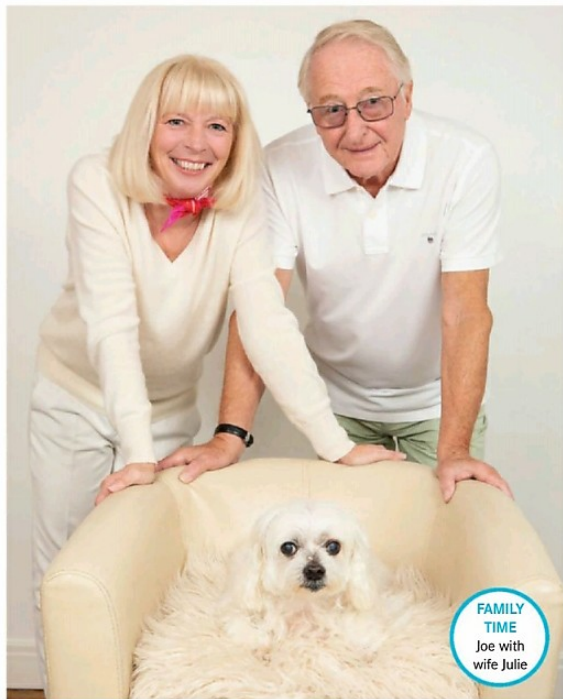
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FAMILY
TIME
Joe with
wife Julie

STORM AND CALM

IN HIS MEMOIR, THE FOUNDER OF REEBOK LOOKS BACK ON
THE EMPIRE HE BUILT... AND LEFT BEHIND

BY ANJULY MATHAI

For 31 years, Joe Foster's life ran parallel to the shoe company that he built. Until his shoes outpaced him. "It had become a big company that was being run by numbers," he tells THE WEEK. "And I was just taking it light—getting picked up in limousines, meeting nice people, having nice meals.... By that time, the challenge was gone. The journey, for me, was at an end."

It all began in 1942 when seven-year-old Joe won a Webster's dictionary at an athletics event in Bolton, his hometown in northwest England. The dictionary was to come in handy 18 years later, after he and his brother, Jeff, started a shoe company called Mercury, only to realise that the name had already been taken by Lotus and Delta, a division of the British Shoe Corporation. They were advised to "choose a made-up name, something nobody else would have thought of." A disillusioned Joe flipped through the dictionary, his finger trailing random names in it. Mamushi? Mamzer? Redwood? No, no and no. Until he came to Reebok: "A light coloured antelope." Perfect. It was short, catchy and easy to pronounce. It suggested light, but fast and agile.

Reebok's journey, however, was neither light nor fast and agile. There were seemingly insurmountable hurdles. Like when they got a winding-up petition from a patent office wanting to close down the company. Or when Lawrence Sports, the worldwide distributors of Reebok, went bust. Or when faulty manufacturing by Bata caused the mid-soles of around 20,000 pairs of Reebok to collapse. But when a door closed, a window always opened. Joe first met Paul Fireman at a trade exhibition in Chicago in 1979. Fireman was

key to Reebok's success in America. Five years later, Fireman, along with Stephen Rubin, the CEO of ASCO, a subsidiary of the Pentland Group, would buy the company from Joe.

"I sold the brand for what at the time was a reasonable figure.... None of us in our wildest dreams thought Reebok would go on to become a multi-billion-dollar company," writes Joe in his new memoir, *Shoemaker: The Untold Story of the British Family Firm that Became a Global Brand*. "If I had an inkling that it would, then, yes, maybe I would have retained some kind of share. But there is no point in looking back at unknowns."

In many ways, Joe measures the milestones in his life through specific Reebok shoes. There was the Aztec, for example, that opened the door to America. The nylon and suede shoe which came in blue, red and yellow was one of three Reebok shoes that was given a five-star rating by the prestigious *Runner's World* magazine in 1979. Those days, the magazine's rating was the acid test to determine the success of a shoe in America.

But it was really the Freestyle that propelled Reebok to global fame in 1982. It was the idea of a Reebok sales agent, Angel Martinez, who noticed, while joining his wife at her aerobics sessions, that women did aerobics either barefoot or in uncomfortable trainers. He quickly recognised the need for specialist aerobics shoes. The Freestyle, made with soft glove leather lined with adhesive nylon, was the first fitness shoe specifically designed for women. It was an immediate success, with everyone from celebrity fitness guru Denise Austin to Hollywood actor Jane Fonda endorsing it. The shoe played an instrumental role in Reebok's sales skyrocketing from \$1.5 million in 1981 to \$13 million in 1984.

Success, however, came at a price. Joe's family life suffered and his first marriage ended in divorce. "As with



IN THEIR SHOES

The Freestyle which propelled Reebok to global fame



SHOE MAKER



THE UNTOLD STORY OF THE BRITISH
FAMILY FIRM THAT BECAME A
GLOBAL BRAND

JOE FOSTER
THE FOUNDER OF REEBOK

**SHOEMAKER:
THE UNTOLD STORY OF
THE BRITISH FAMILY
FIRM THAT BECAME A
GLOBAL BRAND**

By Joe Foster
Published by
Simon & Schuster
Price ₹699; pages 319

my dad before me, and his before that, work and family were separate entities, linked only by the one providing necessities for the other," he writes. "Business gain was my driving force, or rather my obsession." It was a tough trade-off, especially when his daughter Kay, to whom the book is dedicated, died of leukemia in 1988. "It was the last day that my heart

would ever be whole," he writes. In fact, after her death, the tone of the book changes, striking a softer and sadder note. The high-octane life of glitz and glamour gives way to the gentler one of retirement and rest. "I started living at my pace, instead of Reebok's," says Joe, currently settled in the Canary Island of Tenerife with his second wife, Julie. "Yes, I would have liked Kay and my brother Jeff to see the success of Reebok," he says. "It did not happen, but you can't change that. You wish you could, but you can't."

Joe is content with his life now. "I enjoy sitting out here and just being still," he says. It took him some time to get used to it, though. Initially, he would wake up thinking, when is the next plane? He recounts how Nike's founder Phil Knight was once asked what was left on his bucket list. He replied that if he could do it, he wanted to do the journey all over again. Not Joe, though. For him, the memories are enough. "It was fantastic to have done it, but great to come out of it," he says. Still, you can take him out of Reebok, but you cannot take Reebok out of him. "It is like the [lyrics of] Eagles' 'Hotel California,'" he says with a chuckle. "You can check out, but you can never leave." ●

WINNING ALLIANCE

STRADDLING THEIR PERSONAL LIFE AND THE PUBLIC SCRUTINY THAT COMES WITH BEING THE SPOUSE OF A POLITICAL LEADER, THESE PEOPLE ARE MAKING WAVES IN THEIR OWN WAYS

BY SONI MISHRA

US President-elect Joe Biden, in his acceptance speech after clinching the presidential polls, proudly proclaimed, "I am Jill's husband," bringing into focus America's next first lady. In 2015, in an election of a smaller scale, a similar scene played out when Arvind Kejriwal's Aam Aadmi Party swept the assembly elections in Delhi. He pulled his wife Sunita in front of the cameras, introducing her to the world and thanking her for being a pillar of support for him. In the next state polls, Sunita, having resigned from the Indian Revenue Service, plunged into campaigning for her husband as he spent time campaigning for the party's other candidates.

The image of a politician's spouse has traditionally been that of a smiling, hand-waving personality who surfaces during election time. They are seen as their partner's main supporter, projecting him or her as a wholesome family person who can be trusted to take care of the constituents.

But the role of the political spouse extends to much beyond that, bearing a greater share of the responsibility of looking after the home front. Their statements, attire and connect with the voters are taken note of.

Political spouses do not come out of a common mould. In recent memory, Gursharan Kaur, known for her graceful demeanour, was seen as adding to the decency that former prime minister Manmohan Singh was known for. On the other hand, Rabri Devi, wife of Lalu Prasad, became a leading example of a spouse who would fill in for her husband when he was named in a case. There is also the case of Dimple Yadav, who emerged from the shadows of the family elders to support husband Akhilesh Yadav as he dissociated from the old guard of the Samajwadi Party.

Some have developed an intense engagement with their partner's constituency, too. They have their own voices and independent identities. Some are outspoken, like Amruta Fadnavis, wife of former Maharashtra chief minister Devendra Fadnavis,

who has unabashedly been taking on her husband's critics on public fora.

For long, the focus had been more on political wives, with the husbands not subjected to the same level of expectation. Now, the husbands are more visible than before, be it Union Minister Smriti Irani's husband, Zubin, or Sushma Swaraj's husband, Swaraj Kaushal, who was a proud cheerleader for his wife. Kaushal was content to be in the background despite his own notable achievements as a Supreme Court lawyer and governor of Mizoram.

A political spouse is under constant public scrutiny. Their conduct could impact the career of the politician and this often places restrictions on what they can or cannot do. Sometimes, the professional activities of the spouse proves to be a liability for the leader, like the allegations against Robert Vadra being an Achilles heel for Congress general secretary Priyanka Gandhi Vadra.

The world of the political spouse is indeed uneven and ridden with challenges.



BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

Charu Singh Chaudhary,
wife of Rashtriya Lok Dal leader and
former MP Jayant Chaudhary



THE GLITTERING WORLD of high fashion and the dusty hamlets of western Uttar Pradesh are worlds apart. However, straddling these two distinct realms forms a huge part of the life of fashion entrepreneur Charu Singh Chaudhary.

She curates collections of clothing and jewellery, as owner of the South Delhi fashion store Zooki, with the same ease as she dons the hat of *bahu* of the Chaudhary clan in the agrarian belt of Mathura and Bagpat. Charu says it is not so much of a leap for her since she is a small-town girl who grew up in different parts of the country. "They are very different worlds. But I am who I am," said Charu. "I don't lead a very glamorous life. I lead a quiet life. Even in my engagements, I am more entrepreneur-

ial. At the end of the day, you cannot change who you are. I have grown up in small towns of the country. I have seen the real India."

Charu comes from a Punjabi family with no political connect. She and Jayant were classmates at Shri Venkateshwara College in Delhi University, where they fell in love. Charu was not apprehensive about getting married into a political family. "We married young. So, I really never thought about it like that. Also, our families were comfortable, and we

POWER PARTNERS

sort of went with the flow," she said.

Passionate about fashion and design, Charu worked towards her aim of opening a multi-brand, multi-product store. She left a corporate job and pursued a jewellery design course from the London chapter of the Gemological Institute of America. But Charu had to put her dream on hold as she became preoccupied with her responsibilities as a mother of two girls. The store opened a few years ago in South Delhi. She had just moved it to a luxury mall when lockdown halted her plans to upgrade.

"I see my role more as a facilitator and balancer for my husband," said Charu, on her role as the spouse of a political leader. "In politics, the highs and the lows can be very dramatic. I try to ensure there is a comfortable space for him to come back to [at the end of the day]."

Jayant entered active politics only some years after their marriage. Charu says the first public meeting she attended alone was a memorable one. "It was for the 2009 Lok Sabha elections. My husband could not make it so I turned up alone. People were very kind to me. The response really stays with you," she said.

It was during her first roadshow for her husband in Chhaprauli, Baghpat, ahead of the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, that she fully understood the legacy of Chaudhary Charan Singh, Jayant's grandfather and former prime minister of India. "It was unlike anything I had witnessed," said Charu. "The number of people who turned up was mindboggling. It was supposed to be a six-hour roadshow, but it went on well past 1am. That was when I experienced the full extent of *dadaji's* connection to that place. Up until then, it was theoretical."

At home in the world of fashion, Charu is also at ease on the campaign trail.



HER CITY, HER RULES

Maya Shankar, wife of Union Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad



AFTER DECADES of having an aversion to politics, Maya Shankar made the biggest turnaround of her life when she campaigned for her husband, senior BJP leader and Union Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad, for the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. A loyal Patnaite, Maya recalls ribbing Prasad that if she did not canvass for him, he may not even win, as the city knew her better. Prasad retorted: "*Samay samay ki baat hai* (how times have changed)."

It was Prasad's first electoral outing, having been a member of the Rajya Sabha prior to that. If he was recognised as a homegrown leader, Maya held her own as a history professor of four decades at Patna University and had an active social life in the Bihar capital. "The advantage of being a teacher is that you have a

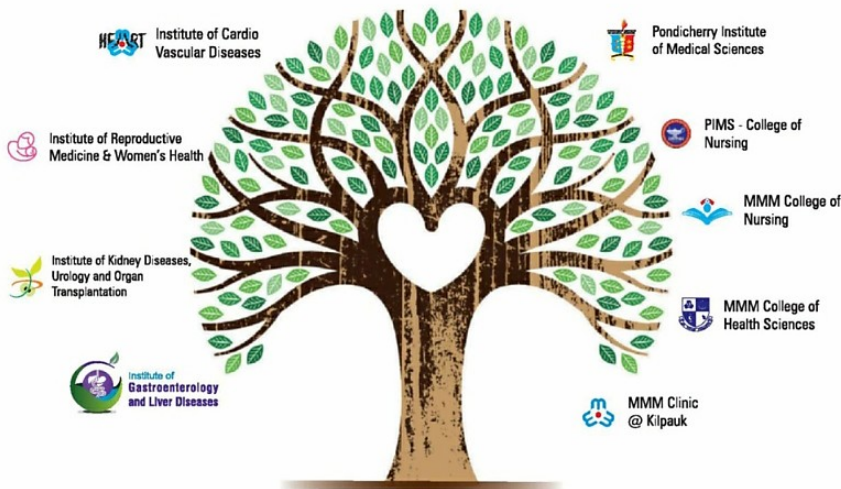
student in every house," said Maya.

As Prasad moved to Delhi in 2000 to involve himself in national politics, Maya stayed back and made a name for herself as an academic, a promoter of classical dance and music, and as a social worker as member of the All India Women's Conference. "Women should have engagements that are independent of their husbands," said Maya. "My identity is not dependent on my husband's profile as a minister."

“

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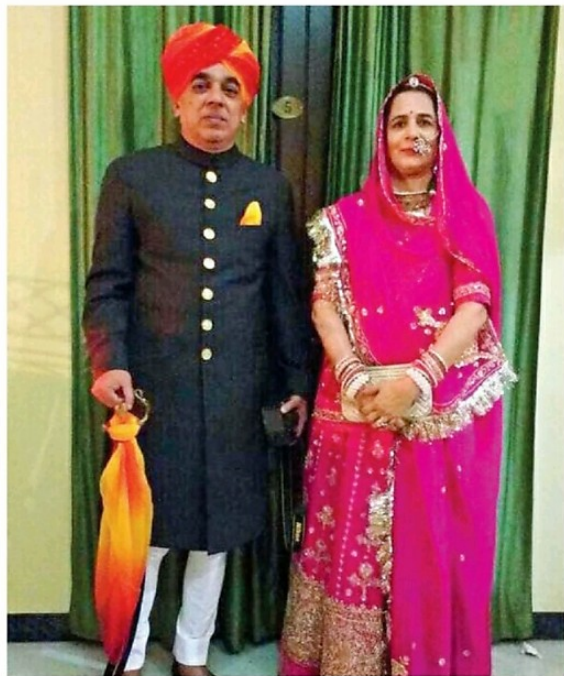
"I may be a minister's wife, but I drive my own car. I like to do my own chores and go out to buy groceries. People are surprised. Some friends tell me I should keep security [guards]. I ask them, what for? I am in my own state, my hometown. I have nothing to fear," she said.

Maya met Prasad at Patna University. She was studying history, and he was a student of political science. Those were the heady days of the Emergency. Prasad plunged headlong into student politics, while Maya was more worried about the loss of two academic years as a result of the movement.

"It was more like an arranged marriage," said Maya. "Our families knew each other well. Our fathers were eminent lawyers in the Patna High Court. While my family was completely apolitical, Ravi's family had a strong political legacy. His father was one of the founding members of Jan Sangh in Bihar."

Over the last two decades, with Prasad in Delhi, Maya divided her time between Patna and the national capital. She looked after the education of their two children. Maya speaks about the unseen restrictions that the spouse and children of politicians have to deal with. "Suppose I am teaching and an issue with political connotations comes up. I should not give people an opportunity to accuse me of any bias. Nobody should say that since my husband is in the BJP, I am going around with the hindutva card," she said.

For the same reason, even as she campaigned for Prasad in 2019, Maya did not skip a single lecture. "I was very particular about my responsibility towards my students," she said. A proud academician and a woman of varied interests, she has held up the rear guard for Prasad in their city.



ROLLING UP HER SLEEVES

Chitra Singh, wife of Congress leader and former MP Manvendra Singh



MANVENDRA SINGH, son of the late BJP leader Jaswant Singh, made his electoral debut in the 1999 Lok Sabha elections, contesting from Barmer in Rajasthan. Manvendra lost by just 16,000 votes. "He gave a good fight to the main opponent, who was a two-time MP from the area," said his wife, Chitra. "But I could not get over the fact that he needed just 16,000 more votes to win. So, I set out to analyse the voting pattern and find out the reason for my husband's defeat."

When Chitra analysed the election data, she discovered that only 15 per cent of women turned up to vote. Women in the area, especially Rajput women, do not come out to vote, she was told. At once, Chitra started working on improving the voting turnout of the women in Barmer.

She began holding separate meetings for women. "The first meeting was attended by about 50 women. The second meeting had more," she said. "After four to five meetings, the men also wanted to come and listen to me. I said they could come, but there would be a barricade between them and the women. They came, but stood a little away from the tent."

Chitra's meetings made an impact, and in the 2004 general elections,



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Manvendra won by 2.73 lakh votes. The voting percentage of women in Barmer had shot up to 65 per cent. "The Rajput women began relating to the fact that a *bahu* of a known Rajput family was going door-to-door and holding meetings. It made them feel that they, too, should come out and vote," said Chitra.

Born in a conservative Rajput family in Chittorgarh, Chitra was up against the traditional mindset that a girl's domain was limited to domesticity. She feels this is destiny's way of helping her fulfil her dream of becoming a civil servant.

Chitra initially had apprehensions of Manvendra's electoral plunge. "He was a journalist and a territorial army officer. When he contested his first election, I was carrying our daughter, and my son was only two. I was very nervous. I said to him, 'How are we going to survive if you leave your job?'" said Chitra.

Now, she is so popular in the constituency that there are demands to give her a ticket. "I have always told the people that one person from the family in politics is enough," she said.

The last few years have been a challenging time for the family with a string of defeats. Chitra says the most heart-breaking one was her father-in-law's defeat in Barmer in 2014.

Jaswant Singh, denied a ticket by the BJP, had contested as an independent. "For a man of that stature, someone who had worked so hard in the constituency, for him to lose at that age was tragic," said Chitra. "I worked the hardest that time—18-20 hours a day. That was the first time an electoral defeat made me cry."

Manvendra switched from the BJP to the Congress in 2017, and ended up losing to BJP's Kailash Chaudhary in 2019. "We have not given up," said Chitra. "I tell the people that even if they did not vote for my husband, I will continue to work for them."

For Chitra, her tryst with Barmer goes beyond elections.



CONSTANT AMID CHANGES

Owen Roncon, husband of Congress leader and former MP Priya Dutt



THE RUN-UP to their marriage in 2003 had plenty of drama. Priya Dutt's family, especially her brother Sanjay, had reservations about Owen Roncon. And the years that followed their wedding have also been anything but placid. Though the Bandra boy won the confidence of the Dutt family, he and Priya had to deal with challenges of a different nature.

Two years after they tied the knot, Priya's father Sunil Dutt passed away, and she was suddenly thrust into politics. Priya was fielded in the byelection from Mumbai North West, her father's seat. Moreover, she was nine months pregnant. Owen was a pillar of support for her at the time,

utilising his expertise in event management and marketing to manage her campaign. When Priya was back on the campaign trail just three days after her delivery, Owen took care of the baby.

"In the next election, she was carrying our second child. I said to her, 'Please do not fight any more elections,'" Owen joked.

The two first met ahead of a fundraiser that Owen was managing for

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the Dutt NGO Adapt. "I had to meet the trustees to take the final approval on the project. Priya was a trustee, and we became really good friends," he said.

Though both Owen and Priya lived in the same area, they had different backgrounds. Priya bore the rich legacy of her famous actor parents. The family was known for its commitment to social and political causes. Owen came from a completely apolitical set-up. His father was a pilot for Air India, who, Owen remembers, blindly voted for Sunil Dutt.

Owen's first political assignment was his father-in-law's campaign for the 2004 Lok Sabha elections. The campaign addressed the youth and was run mainly in colleges. Sunil won the election and was made Union minister of youth affairs. "Of course, I claimed credit for it, saying it happened because of the youth campaign," said Owen.

He admires the values that the Dutt stand for, especially Sunil. "He was a man of discipline. None of us could even touch his official car, let alone ride in it. If Priya was travelling back with him to Mumbai, he would downgrade himself to economy rather than upgrade her," said Owen. He says Priya is like that, too. Though he helps his wife in her campaigns, he refrains from interfering in or even commenting on her decisions.

One of the founders of Fountain-head, an event management company, Owen says the politics has had an impact on his professional sphere. There are companies that refuse to sign him on because of his political association. "There have been situations where government contracts have not come to me," said Owen. "But there is no regret. Luckily, I have a strong group of business partners who take care of all the interaction with the government."

Despite all the tumultuous changes in their lives, Owen continues to be the same Bandra boy.



ARVIND JAIN

THE WRITE PATH

Renu Hussain, wife of BJP leader and former Union minister Shahnawaz Hussain



THEIR LOVE story began with a chance meeting in a city bus. For the boy, it was love at first sight. The girl took her time to make up her mind. They soon exchanged letters. The boy proposed marriage in only his second letter. But they had to wait for nine years for it to happen. The religious divide, after all, had to be bridged.

Renu Hussain (née Sharma) belongs to a Punjabi Brahmin family, while Shahnawaz Hussain comes from an aristocratic Syed family in Bihar. Their families opposed the

alliance. BJP leader Uma Bharti, a good friend of the couple, tried to persuade the two families, but they would not budge. Acting on her advice, Shahnawaz and Renu got married in 1994. The kin eventually came around.

“

IT IS A WRITER'S DUTY TO PUT A MIRROR TO THE SOCIETY. IF I AM NOT HONEST IN MY WRITING, THEN WHAT IS THE POINT OF IT?

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"Love triumphed in the end," said Renu. "My family dotes on him, and I get so much love and affection from my in-laws. I did have apprehensions about going into a different culture, but I was accepted wholeheartedly."

Tying the knot with Shahnawaz was only the beginning of some life-changing events for Renu. Four years after their marriage, Shahnawaz got his big break in politics. He was fielded by the BJP from Kishanganj in the 1998 Lok Sabha elections. He lost that election, but won from the same seat the following year and was appointed a minister of state in the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government. In 2001, he became a cabinet minister.

"Both our families had nothing to do with politics," said Renu. "I used to think his inclination towards politics was a passing interest. He studied engineering and even had a job. But he surprised all of us as his involvement in politics grew."

As a teacher in a government school in Delhi and a known figure in Hindi poetry circles, Renu maintained her independent identity. "Shahnawaz asked me why I needed to continue working. But I was clear that I would not leave my job," said Renu.

In the collections of poetry she has published, she does not hold back from voicing her political opinions. "Writers are free in their thought process. No pressure works on them," she said. "It is a writer's duty to put a mirror to the society. If I am not honest in my writing, then what is the point of it?"

Renu says Shahnawaz admires her passion for writing and her commitment to teaching, and they give each other space to revel in their interests. "I do not impose my literature on him just as he does not impose his politics on me," she said. Love, said Renu, also teaches you to give your partner space.



COACH FOR LIFE

Virender Poonia, husband of Congress MLA Krishna Poonia



VIRENDER POONIA is never seen on the campaign trail with his wife, the athlete-turned-Rajasthan MLA Krishna Poonia. It is a matter of ethics as he is employed with the Indian Railways. This is in contrast to Krishna's career as a discus thrower, where Virender doubled as her coach. Virender played a huge role in honing Krishna's skills, which resulted in international acclaim.

Virender, a hammer throw national champion, identified the potential in Krishna. She had participated in athletics in college, but it was only after marriage that she trained professionally. "She is six feet tall. She

has a good arm span and I knew that with proper training she could [excel] in discus throw," said Virender.

When Krishna began training in 2000, the couple had to make a lot of sacrifices. Virender gave up his hammer throw career as they could not bear the costs of training two athletes. Krishna, a new mother then,

“**KRISHNA WAS CRITICISED FOR [NOT KEEPING THE GHONGHAT]. NOW, VILLAGERS WANT THEIR BAHUS AND BETIS TO BE LIKE HER.**

”

TAVR : A PARADIGM SHIFT IN AORTIC STENOSIS TREATMENT



Dr. Raj Pratap Singh
M.D. (Medicine), D.M. (Cardiology)
Sr. Consultant Cardiologist
Kailash Hospital, Dehradun

Q What is aortic stenosis?

Left Ventricle (chamber) of heart receives oxygenated blood and pumps it into aorta which is the principle artery delivering blood from heart to all the body organs through its branches. The opening of heart into aorta is guarded by a one way valve called aortic valve. It opens with each heartbeat (systole) and then closes. This endless cycle goes on throughout life. Normally the flow across aortic valve is smooth. With advancing

age, especially by 7th decade and above, the valve may accumulate calcium and become stiff. Thus the valve become narrowed and does not open properly, a condition termed aortic stenosis (AS). If this occurs then heart needs to work more against this narrowed valve to pump required quantity of blood. This results in thickening and later enlargement of heart eventually leading to heart failure. Few patients may develop it earlier e.g. those with congenitally malformed aortic valve or those with rheumatic valve disease.

Patients with severe Aortic valve stenosis may experience the following symptoms:



**** Up to 50% of patients with severe aortic valve stenosis may die within an average of two years if not treated within aortic valve replacement**

Q What are the symptoms of aortic stenosis?

Patient of aortic stenosis may have fatigue, chest pain or heaviness, breathlessness, palpitations or dizziness. Many patients do not develop symptoms till disease reaches high severity. Few may be asymptomatic also. Once symptomatic the disease has rapid progression and high mortality if left untreated.

Q How is aortic stenosis diagnosed?

Physician may diagnose it clinically and then advise tests like ECG and echocardiography. Echo is the most common test done. It tells about the heart and valve function and severity of disease. If severe AS is found, a CT scan and coronary angiography is also generally performed.

Q What are the treatment options?

Severe Aortic stenosis is one of those conditions where medicines do not have much role and treatment is essentially replacement of aortic valve. Upto 50% patients may die within two years if not treated with valve replacement. Valve replacement has excellent result with most patients having almost normal lifespan post successful valve replacement especially when done early.

Q What are advantages of TAVR?



It is minimally invasive procedure. Patient doesn't require ventilator and avoids large incision and cutting of bones. It is a shorter procedure. Post procedure recovery is quick and patient may be discharged within two days. Another advantage is that it can be done even on severely ill patients who are not fit for surgery.

Q How is aortic valve replaced?

Until few years ago aortic valve was replaced surgically (SAVR) which involves making a large incision over chest, opening rib cage by cutting sternum or ribs, exposing aorta, excising the diseased valve and replacing it with other valve. The process requires general anesthesia, going on ventilator and cardiopulmonary bypass. It generally takes about one to two months for patients to fully recover. Now a new technique called transcatheter aortic valve replacement (TAVR) has been developed. TAVR generally requires no general anesthesia or incisions. The valve is introduced from a small hole in groin and is implanted inside the diseased valve under x ray guidance.

Q Is TAVR suitable for all patients?

Earlier TAVR was recommended for only high risk patients. But now it is recommended for even moderate risk patients. For low risk and younger patients (< 60 years age) surgery is still the treatment of choice. In Europe and America TAVR numbers has already exceeded SAVR but in country like India cost is big issue (TAVR costs almost 5 times of SAVR). However development of indigenous TAVR valve has led to decrease in cost and better adoption of this technique by doctors as well as patients.

Disclaimer: This initiative is undertaken in the public interest, and for patient education. The information constitutes solely the views of author and shall not be considered to be a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. please consult your doctor for further information. Author is not responsible for any errors, omissions or inaccuracies and/or incompleteness of information.

also had to deal with the pangs of being away from her infant son.

The hard work bore fruit. Krishna got noticed at the international level when she won the bronze medal at the 2006 Asian Games. Her moment of glory was winning the gold at the 2010 Commonwealth Games (CWG). Krishna became the first Indian woman and the first Indian since Milkha Singh (1958) to win gold in a track-and-field event at the CWG. Virender won the Dronacharya award two years later.

Back in Virender's village, Gagar was in Churu district, Krishna was celebrated as a role model. "She was the first woman in our village not to keep a *ghoonghat* (headscarf)," said Virender. "I did not want her to stay behind the veil. She was criticised for it. But now, villagers want their *bahus* and *betis* to be like Krishna."

She was offered a Congress ticket for the 2013 state elections. Originally from Hisar district in Haryana, she contested from Sadulpur, the constituency under which Gagar was falls. She lost the election, but continued working in the area for the next five years, coming back to win in the 2018 polls.

"Krishna worked really hard. She would leave at 7am and come back late in the evening. She met every person in the constituency. It was a difficult seat for the Congress to win. But she did it," said Virender.

He insists his involvement in her political career is limited to guiding her and taking care of backend operations. "I have never even attended a political rally," he said.

Accusations of him taking active part in her politics are done to tarnish their image, he says. And with them receiving death threats, too, Virender says they are still getting used to the "ups and downs of politics". "The negativity can really bog you down," he said. But he believes their sporting spirit will help them through the challenges.



ENHANCING ENGAGEMENT

Meenakshi Seshadri, wife of Congress MLA Krishna Byre Gowda



MEENAKSHI SESHADRI met Krishna Byre Gowda in the US in 2002. She was an IT professional and he was working as a project associate. They fell in love, and soon got married in a modest ceremony back home in Bengaluru.

The couple returned to the US and had just started building a life together, far from the political activity of their families in Karnataka, when a phone call in 2003 shook them. It was the news of the death of Krishna's father C. Byre Gowda, who was a minister in the Janata Dal state government until 1999.

Krishna rushed to India to complete the final rites of his father, with a return ticket in hand. But he ended up staying back, acceding to the pressure to take over his father's political legacy. Meenakshi says Krishna called her before deciding. She reluctantly agreed.

Meenakshi's grandfather H.S. Seetharam was once mayor of Bengaluru. "Both Krishna and I did not feel the political baggage till 2003," she said. "We were encouraged to

have a career [of our own]. In the US, we were far removed from what was happening in India."

As Krishna cut his teeth in his first election from his father's constituency, Meenakshi learnt how to build a lasting connect with the electorate. She realised that she needed to constantly engage with the constituents. Krishna had to shift from Vemgal, a rural constituency, to Byatarayanapura in Bengaluru, in 2008 following delimitation, and Meenakshi worked out a range of activities for the urban seat.

"I started finding things that I could get involved in, but I was clear that it would not be political. So, I have a team and we work on issues such as garbage management, environment and education," said Meenakshi.

She has been holding camps where services are provided to people, such as Aadhaar enrolment or help with pensions. "Our camps are open to all people. We hold them without a party symbol. My husband, as a representative of the people, is supposed to help everyone, not just the people who voted for him," she said.

Meenakshi feels that she is able to enrich her husband's political involvement through her own understanding of the issues. "I can go deeper than him since I can devote more time and come back with a better insight. Also, women open up to me and share their ideas and thoughts," said Meenakshi.

She balances her work in the constituency with the demands of being an IT consultant, which requires travelling. There have been times when she has considered quitting her job to devote more time to the constituency. But Krishna does not encourage that.

Meenakshi says the couple does not let politics dominate their lives. "Krishna and I take time out and indulge in activities such as biking or hiking or going on short vacations," she said. While Krishna is a certified ocean diver, Meenakshi loves to go to yoga retreats. Her aim right now is to find the perfect work-life balance. ●

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Nihal Raj aka Kicha
at his cooking lab

LITTLE BIG CELEBS

THESE KIDS ARE THE NEW STARS IN THE INDIAN DIGITAL-INFLUENCER LANDSCAPE. WHILE BEING IN THE LIMELIGHT IS FINANCIALLY REWARDING, CONCERNS ABOUT THEIR PRIVACY AROUND

BY NIRMAL JOVIAL

What was the greatest thing you did as a six-year-old? To steal a popsicle from the refrigerator without getting caught? Ask the same question to Nihal Raj aka Little Chef Kicha, and he would say that he took his entire family on a trip to the United States—to one of the Hilton hotels, to Universal Studios, and the Ellen DeGeneres Show. All this happened because he had tried his hand at making popsicles—instead of stealing them—at four, and shared that experience with the world.

Kicha, who hails from Kochi, rose to fame in 2016, when he was six, after Facebook brought the rights to one of his cooking videos on YouTube—How to make Mickey Mouse mango ice cream—for \$2,000.

Subsequently, he was invited to the Ellen Show as a guest in the same year. Dressed in a wee apron and chef's cap, Kicha showed Ellen how to cook putturu, a south Indian dish made of steamed rice flour and grated coconut. And, in the last four years, the child prodigy has established himself as one of the top kid influencers—who has the power to influence the purchasing decisions of his peers—in the country.

Kicha used to watch a lot of YouTube toy unboxing videos at an early age, says his father Rajagopal Krishnan who is the CEO of an online tutor platform, Stream Vertical. Kicha was inspired to start a channel after seeing American YouTuber Evan Lee's (who is 14 now) channel EvanTubeHd, which has 6.6 million subscribers. Even the name of his cooking channel, KichaTubeHd, is inspired by it. "Kicha

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SHOW TIME
Kicha at the *Ellen DeGeneres Show*

had a dream of going to the US to meet Evan," says Rajagopal. "During a family trip to Thailand, he asked me: 'Papa, make money, let's go to the US'. He thought it would be simple to meet Evan just by going to the States. So, I told him, 'Kicha it is not possible as it would require at least ₹15 lakh, and I do not have money.' Before returning from Thailand, he said, 'Our next trip will be to the US. I will take you all there.'"

Interestingly, within the next three weeks, Kicha, and the entire family, got an invitation to the Ellen Show. His dream of going to the US came true, but instead of meeting Evan, he ended up meeting Ellen. Followed by the Ellen Show, Kicha was invited to Little Big Shots US, and several other TV and radio shows. Soon, multinational brands like Nestle began seeing him as a potential influencer.

Influencer marketing is a fast-growing segment worldwide as it is creating huge returns for businesses. Brands are banking on influencers in the digital space because they can drive trends and encourage their followers to buy products they endorse. According to a study by professional services firm PwC and kid-tech Super Awesome, the global kids' digital advertising market will be worth \$1.7 billion by 2021. The

highest-paid YouTuber in 2019 was Ryan Kaji, 8, from Texas. According to Forbes, he made \$26 million from YouTube alone last year. His main channel, Ryan's World, has 27.1 million subscribers and more than 42 billion views. And it is estimated that he earns at least \$62,650 for each video. Compared with the west, the kid influencer domain in India is still nascent. And, most of the top influencer kids have urban roots. The 2019 Indian Kids Digital Insights by TotallyAwesome, a kid-safe advertising platform, says that influencer kids from India can charge from ₹1 lakh to ₹2 lakh on an average for pushing brands. The study also says that "93 per cent of kids find out about new things coming out and

search for their favourite brands from online sources, and 79 per cent of kids surveyed in the study ask parents to buy something because a kid influencer had it or used it".

Noida-based Kyra Kanojia—who mainly does toy reviews and unboxing—and her parents, Manish and Sinchitha Sur, are conscious about the impact the videos can have on other kids. That is why they cut back on toy reviews during the pandemic. "Almost for eight months, kids have been confined to home. And, if we do toy reviews, kids following her channel might feel jealous, or they might push and pester their parents to get those toys. It is not a positive thing to do," says Sur.

Kyra, now 9, started making videos at the age of 5. "She used to watch a YouTube channel where two Filipino girls unboxed toys," says Manish, who is a creative director for a tech company. "Those toys were inexpensive, DIY kind of toys. So, one day she asked me whether she can do a video like this. So, I went to the big toy market in Delhi and managed to get some toys. We shot the video and I showed it to some of my friends. They all liked it." Thus started Kyra's journey. She has more than 18,000 subscribers on YouTube now, and many of her videos have more than a million views. She has good traction on her website, Kyrascope.com, too.

"Initially, I used to buy toys for her," says Manish. "At the end of the first year itself, a lot of brands and PR agencies started approaching us." She also started receiving toys from

BECOMING A YOUTUBER CAME NATURALLY TO ANANYA AS SHE LOVES BEING IN FRONT OF THE CAMERA.

—Nisha Topwal
influencer Ananya Anand's mother

**TOY LOVER**

Kyra Kanojia mostly does toy reviews and unboxing videos

different parts of the world as gifts; when asked what her favourite toy was, Kyra had said "Lego". She has already tied up with several brands, including Hasbro and WinMagic Toys, and channels like Cartoon Network and Pogo.

When it comes to follower base, 11-year-old Anantya Anand, aka My Miss Anand, holds the top spot among kid influencers from India. Coming from a family of YouTubers—nine members from her family are content creators on YouTube and other social media platforms—she has a massive following of 9.39 million on YouTube and 2.3 million on Instagram. According to Social Blade, a website that tracks social media analytics, her yearly revenues from YouTube is estimated between \$3,30,100 (₹2.4 crore) and

\$5.3M (₹39 crore). Anantya's mother Nisha Topwal is also a YouTuber. Her food blog, CookWithNisha, has more than 85.3K followers on Instagram. "Becoming a YouTuber came naturally to Anantya as she loves being in front of the camera," says Nisha.

Anantya debuted on YouTube when she was four, in her aunt's vlog. "When I started, my aunt was doing beauty blogs. So, I did some fashion videos with her," she says. "Then for some time, I did not make any videos. But when I started making videos again, my mumma saw that I can act well. So, we started making sketches." Anantya's videos are mainly comedy sketches, with a moral lesson, and she is associated with major brands like Disney, Nickelodeon, Byju's, and Cadbury.

Generation Alpha (born after

2010) is the first generational group to be immersed in digital technology, practically from birth. There are clear indications that children are shunning TV for internet-based alternatives. And, of course, it is opening new avenues. Counselling psychologist Dr Nisha Khanna says early exposure to the internet is both a boon and bane for children. "The internet has surely intellectually stimulated children, but has made people physically lethargic," she says. "The Alpha generation is more prone to anxiety and depression as they constantly tend to compare themselves with others and try to seek validation from others." She adds that those who gain a celebrity or influencer status have the risk of facing some self-esteem issues, later in life. "This happens because

YASHODA
Super Speciality Hospitals

Mr Shubhang Arora

YOUNG IN SPIRIT, MATURE IN HELMING YASHODA GROUP OF HOSPITALS



A youth icon of the healthcare industry, Mr Shubhang Arora, at 25, is the Executive Director and Head of Developments, Yashoda Group of Hospitals headquartered in Kaushambhi, Ghaziabad in the densely populated state of India-Uttar Pradesh. After his graduation in economics from the New York University, in the US, he has returned to gradually take on the reins of the hospitals beginning with focus on operations. He brings with him a vision that is global in perspective to transform the healthcare sector with innovative ideas, excellence and compassion for mankind.

The upcoming Yashoda Medicity coming up in Indirapuram, Ghaziabad is creating a buzz in the healthcare sector. What is unique about this new healthcare project?

The Yashoda Medicity is our flagship project where I am deeply involved to ensure that this world-class medical facility is completed on schedule and is opened for treating people across economic strata, but is particularly accessible to the poor and needy. We aim to make this 800 bedded state-of-the-art hospital among the top-ranking medical facility in Asia covering the entire spectrum of health services on a much larger scale that would include nuclear medicine, an advanced research centre and all the

specialities which we currently have in all our three hospitals. Because India has some of the best doctors in the world and our health cost are very reasonable when compared to other countries such as Europe and the US, we are channelizing this synergy to encourage and strengthen medical tourism in India. I was instrumental in the signing of MOUs between Yashoda and almost 30 countries. We already have people coming in from different parts of the world for various treatments.

What else is the USP of the upcoming Yashoda Medicity?

Our objective is that for anyone coming from any part

of the world to the medicity, they will find a doctor, they will find a team of diagnostic experts and they can be treated for any ailment they may be suffering from. We are leaving no stone unturned in getting the best of infrastructure, technology and drugs from leading global companies which are comparable to any other leading hospital in the world. The Yashoda Medicity, which will be a completely comprehensive health city in Indirapuram, shall be the new address as a premier medical facility in Asia. Within the next two years i.e., by 2022, we should be opening the hospital to the people seeking medical refuge.

■ Apart from the Yashoda Medicity, which other projects are currently coming up. Are there any expansion plans to outreach regions?

Currently, we have two major projects in hand which we will complete first. One is in Noida and another is a 300 bedded multi-super speciality hospital in Greater Noida. I am personally working on these two interesting projects of Yashoda. We did have opportunities to open Yashoda hospital in Delhi and in some rural areas in Haryana, but we are taking a couple of things at a time.

■ How has Yashoda coped with the Covid pandemic?

We have expanded much more than the original hospital space having taken over a few more blocks in the vicinity. This enabled us to turn an entire block away from the main building into a Covid facility. Because cross contamination of the Covid virus is so high, we have been extremely careful to ensure a completely different air circulation at the dedicated area for treating Covid patients. Having been in the medical sector for more than 30 years now, our experience and expertise in treatment attracted people from as far as Rajasthan, MP, UP, Bihar to be treated for Covid when the pandemic was at its peak. The former chief minister of UP, Mr Kalyan Singh, the current health minister in Uttar Pradesh and many other VIPs were treated for Covid at Yashoda. As a private hospital, we have done thousands of free Covid tests for the economically poor, something which is unheard of in a private set-up. We have an excellent team of pulmonologist and critical care specialists headed by Dr R.K. Mani. We are doing random PC-RTC testing, plasma therapy, steroids, vaccinations etc., which are the best that you can find anywhere in the world. But what is of paramount importance is the increasing trust that people are reposing in us which is because of the goodwill that we enjoy for the kind of work that we do so selflessly. Getting that recognition is very important and that comes only from consistent and dedicated work.

■ Could you highlight some CSR activities by Yashoda Hospital?

We have adopted Masauta village in Ghaziabad district where we are investing a lot of resources to transform the village having all basic amenities for healthy living such as conveniences for the school, potable water, food, sanitization of the village, constructing toilets etc. For St Jude's, we do free testing i.e., diagnostics such as scans and MRI's, which cost anything between Rs 15,000-20,000, for orphans and abandoned children. Though it is not a part of the corporate business, we have a dedicated team to look after many charitable initiatives of Yashoda, done purely on humanitarian bases. I would like to emphasise that as a health institution Yashoda is not a profit based one, rather we are here to serve people and help those who cannot afford or have access to best medical treatment and care. If a person is coming to a hospital they are suffering and are vulnerable, so it is our duty to heal and cure people. This is what makes the medical profession so unique as compared to any other calling.

■ Who do you consider as your inspiration or whom would you like to emulate?

The teachings of Lord Buddha have deeply impacted and influenced me. As living beings, we all suffer in some way or the other. However, everyone has the capacity to mitigate the suffering of another living being and that is the biggest act of service to God that one can do. So, I truly believe that and try to follow that philosophy abiding by it to run our hospitals. I would do anything in my capacity to alleviate the sufferings of human beings and animals as much as possible. If we all think on these lines it would transform the earth into a heaven.

■ What makes you so unique in the healthcare space though you are not a medical professional yourself?

I would say that as a 25-year-old young professional in the healthcare space, there are not many like me. I have so far employed 3000 people and am overseeing so many administrative operations. It gives me immense pride that though very young, I could help ensure a huge turnover as far as financials are concerned, with a fresh and innovative approach bringing in a new dynamic to this healthcare space. And that is something that I feel is unique about me and unique about Yashoda. Also, we are a very young spirit as far as our ethos is concerned and as a young professional, I think I have a lot to contribute and I am working towards that everyday. I believe in Vasudev Kutumbakam, where the whole world is one family as it is the creation of one Almighty and that is the way we go about with service to mankind.

influencer kids are used to praises and positive comments, and they would tend to seek validation from others even as a grown-up," she says. The parents of the child influencers, however, testify that they exert strict parental control on social media accounts of their children—the children are not allowed to read the comments, whether it is positive or negative, or spend too much time on the web. Also, they do not want to pressurise their children to grow the subscriber base. "We do not want our subscribers to grow to millions in a week, or a month, or a year," says Rajagopal. "Now the channel is under parental guidance. Once Kicha is 13—because it is the legal year to be a social media influencer—if he is interested, let him take it forward. Until then, we will not make a push on social media."

The influencer kids have a great risk of facing issues of data privacy and online trolling, too. This is especially true in countries such as India, where rules governing data privacy and cybersecurity are largely ineffective. "India still lacks strong child data protection rules like COPPA (Children's Online Privacy Protection Act) of the US or GDPR-K (General Data Protection Regulation-Kids) of Europe," says Neha Nambiar, regional marketing communications lead, TotallyAwesome. Her company aims at providing a platform that is compliant with child data protection rules through which kids' brands can engage with the children. TotallyAwesome started its India operations in February 2019. But they had to halt it within a year since there is no bounding law concerning child data protection here. "We are living in a country where even a four-year-old would receive abusive threats and cuss words," says Rajagopal. "I am talking about the abuses that Kicha once received. It was so abusive. I started deleting all the bad messages that came to the page before my boy wakes up. I do not understand why people have to behave this way. A kid is cooking; if you want to appreciate, (do so). If you do not want to appreciate it, tell it differently. But it should not be abusive."

Nowadays, kids are interacting with all kinds of

INDIA STILL LACKS STRONG CHILD DATA PROTECTION RULES LIKE COPPA OF THE US OR GDPR-K OF EUROPE

—Neha Nambiar, regional marketing communications lead, TotallyAwesome, a child-safe advertising platform



SKETCHING STARDOM

Anantya Anand, aka My Miss Anand, has massive following on Youtube and Instagram

brands, and not just with those specifically meant for their age group. And, there is growing concern that they are being exposed to PII (personally identifiable information) trackers that are aimed to collect data points (parameters to identify online behaviour) on adults. It is estimated that adult ad tech can capture up to 72 million data points on a child before the age of 13. For a kid influencer, the exposure is much higher than this, which raises serious privacy issues.

In February 2019, YouTube disabled the comment section on children's videos after the discovery of a paedophile ring sharing comments, leaving timestamps and details noting when children were in suggestive positions while dancing or doing sketches. Though it had decreased the engagement and traffic on the videos, parents of influencer kids say it promoted child safety. There are privacy and safety concerns on other social media platforms, too.

Generation Alpha is arguably the most culturally diverse, and digitally-connected generation ever. They are opinionated, socially conscious, and are the true digital natives. Also, their choices are largely shaped by their peers in the digital sphere. All this means that more brands will chase more influencer kids, especially in a huge digital market like India, in the years to come. So, the thrust should be on making the internet a safe place for kids in the first place. ●

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AUTOBIOGRAPHY

OF AN

UNREPENTANT

YEAR

ROGUE YEAR 2020 HAS TAUGHT US
VALUABLE LIFE LESSONS

BY JAIRAM N. MENON
ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOB P.K.







was born with the fanfare that attends the eve of every new year. There was the usual orgy of well-wishing, inflated predictions and overblown hopes. No matter what, everyone nurses the naïve belief that a change of calendar would somehow result in a change of fate and mark the beginning of a dream run. Poof! Well, somebody had to burst that bubble, and I took up the responsibility. I have also given life lessons you would not have learnt any other way.

LESSON NO 1

I have taught all of you to be more economical in your expectations, and I guess that lesson has been learnt well. This December end, even your wildest dreams are going to be as colourless as a vintage Films Division documentary.

LESSON NO 2

I showed you that “experts” can be as dumb as ordinary folk, often dumber. Highly paid perspective planners, futurologists and the chaps who tell you your fortunes every week—none of them gave you a clue about how times would shape up. If I were you, I would ask for my money back. Fact is, these guys have been taking you for a ride for a long while. It is only that 2020 has made their incompetence obvious. Nassim Nicholas Taleb wrote a bestseller about the black swan—on how a single event could change our way of life. Bet I cooked, excuse the pun, Taleb’s goose, too.

LESSON NO 3

Be more careful with your excuses. You said you wished you had more time so that you could read the classics. I gave you enough time to read a rack of Russian novels. Did you even open the first page of *Anna Karenina*? If you have not been reading Shakespeare or the Nobel winner for literature, the fault, dear Brutus, lies not in the lack of time, it lies with Netflix.

LESSON NO 4

Some of life’s aspirations are better exactly as they are, as aspirations. You aspired for a slower, quieter and greener world. I gave you all three

and you did not know what hit you. In his autobiography, Charlie Chaplin said he had always idolised Gandhiji and was keen to meet him. In a sense, they were on the same side. Gandhiji was the diminutive leader who took on the might of an empire, and Chaplin, the small man who gamely fought the establishment. Strings were pulled, and the tramp managed a meeting with the Mahatma, but it ended in disappointment. While Gandhiji was courteous, an uneasy and embarrassing silence prevailed most of the time. Chaplin came away with a profound insight: Some of man’s most eager expectations are better off not realised.



LESSON NO 5

The margin between being missed and being taken for granted is narrow. A colleague with two teenage daughters used to say that the long hours in the office were keeping him away from his children, and that they sorely missed his company.

He reasoned the lockdown was ideal for some long-awaited family bonding.

Three months into the lockdown, he told me how interactions with his daughters went:

Week 1: Yay! It is so wonderful that you are at home the whole day, papa. Hope this lockdown goes on and on...

Week 2: Papa, we will teach you how to play a super video game.

Week 3: Can you be a little quicker papa? You are slowing down the game.

Week 4: Yes, papa (stifling yawn), we have heard that story of yours a hundred times.

Week 5: Papa, I think we are out of milk, and mummy wants you to get it.

LESSON NO 6

I taught you survival, or how to manage without the things you felt were essential for life. You learnt to manage without maids. You found you could live without kitty parties or going every evening to the club. You did not die when there was no weekend resort to get away to.

LESSON NO 7

It is not the product, it is the packaging. Remember the time when you had to invent excuses to skip

work. In elegant English, they called it 'French Leave'. In earthy and more evocative, Bombay Hindi, they call it *dandi marna*. I have made it legal. All it took was for me to invent a new name: Work from home.

LESSON NO 8

I tamed the net and turned 'online' from a perplexing mystery to a simple matter of a few clicks. When all doors were shut, God stepped in and opened a portal, then another and yet another. Soon you were going online like Gen Next. Now you can look your kid in the eye and tell him to log off so that you can attend a Zoom meeting.

LESSON NO 9

Fear is the ultimate fitness inducement. It takes a pandemic to get people really concerned about their health. I have also punctured the vanity of the gym showboats who flaunted their six-packs and claimed nothing could touch them. They gargled as if their life depended on it. (It probably did.)

LESSON NO 10

Your moral science textbook in school told you that all men (and women) are equal. But no one gave a practical demonstration like I did. Countries rich, poor and middling—all pressed the pause button. Royalty, heads of state (well, make that ex-heads of state), superstars and sportsmen... all were laid low. You have never seen a greater leveller than me.

LESSON NO 11

I gave you the ultimate alibi viz. social distancing to steer clear of

people you would rather avoid. So your ma-in-law stayed at her place, you in yours, and never did the twain have to meet. With a cast-iron alibi, you also managed to skip the big fat family wedding.

LESSON NO 12

It was the year of great learning. Lockdown diaries are full of people excitedly telling the world what they learnt during the lockdown. "I learnt how to _____. (Fill in the blank with whatever you did during the months at home; for example, make pizza, play the piano, repair the flush....) Do not ask me how long these new-found loves will last. Usually, they have the life expectancy of a pre-poll promise.

LESSON NO 13

I have made people more regular in their prayers. You asked yourselves—why did all this happen? Could it be, dare you say it, God's way of punishing you for your wrongdoings? Many of you automatically became better human beings; if only as anticipatory bail lest another pandemic was waiting in the wings. Remember that old joke about how, at heaven's gate, the Kerala interstate bus driver scored over the devoted priest? He had put the fear of God into more people in a single bus ride than the priest in his entire career in holy orders. Well, I think I have achieved pretty much the same results.

I do not need to wish you a 'Happy 2021'. After what you have gone through, any year is bound to be happy.

PS: Yes, I gave you Covid, but I got rid of Trump. You can spend all of next year wondering who caused more damage. ●

THANKS FOR MASKING

OF MASKS, UNDIES AND OTHER SUNDRY ITEMS

BY MATHEW T. GEORGE

Said Bertie Wooster to Jeeves: "There are moments, Jeeves, when one asks oneself, 'Do trousers matter?'" The paragon among valets replied: "The mood will pass, sir." So it was with masks. People thought masks did not matter, but that mood has passed.

In fact, there are quite a few similarities between trousers and masks. Both can be a hindrance... while making love, for example. The mask's bands do bite you in places which were bitten only by lovers and mosquitoes. And an ill-fitting pair of trousers, too, can bite you in other such places. In the family jewels, so to speak. If pant bite comes, can mask bite be far behind? Sorry, Shelley, mad times these.

Anyway, we digress. The topic is masks, and not pants. Not that pants are unimportant. For example, pants.... Sorry. Where were we? Ah, masks. See, masks have been great levellers. Only superheroes, doctors and certain south-Asians wore them. Now, it is international couture. They come in cotton, synthetic fibre, pastels, prints, casuals, formals and whatnot. No other article of clothing has had such a loyal following across gender and geographical lines. Except pants. Underpants, too.

Speaking of underpants, a wise friend tells me that they, too, have much in common with masks. For example, just as you must not take off your undies in public, masks, too, should stay on. It is common knowl-

edge that masks (and undies) must be changed daily. One does not share undies (and masks) with others. And, size matters. Also, it is bad form to leave home without either. He went on, but I will stop.

Masks have also changed our outlook. The masked man was a thief, a rioter, a chain-snatcher.... Now, he is a gentleman and the unmasked one is the boor. Covid-19 also standardised masks. In the upper-face-mask club, Zorro wore one with eye-slits, the Phantom covered his ears additionally, and Batman his nose. Superman is a bad boy; no mask. In a hat tip to the subaltern, coronavirus moved the mask to the lower half of the face. Welcome, égalité and fraternité. Sorry, liberté.

The home minister approves of the mask for reasons financial. No, not the one you are thinking of. True, it is easy to get confused because our ministers often hold forth on everything else and clam up when it comes to their own portfolios. Like the one who says "*goli maro...*" when he has nothing to do with ordnance, pharmacy, confectionery or marbles. To be clear, the home minister of my humble home is the one in reference. The lady reckons that she has saved a fortune on lipsticks, chap sticks and threading. Masks cover many an iniquity.

Before you accuse me of toxic mask-ulinity, let me add that men's grooming, too, has changed. Stubble, like stubble burning, is a regular

feature now. Public hair is back as the Bulganin, the long stubble, the handlebar, the full beard.... Shaving foam has a new use—to wipe spectacles with, to stop mask-breath from fogging them up.

Coronavirus has also proved Cicero right: "The face is a picture of the mind as the eyes are its interpreter." In fact, the eyes are the only interpreters left now. Gone is the grimace, the beaming smile, the leer, the wince, the pout, the stuck out tongue and the long face. The mask hides them all. All that remains are the rolling eyeballs, the dirty look, the wink, the hooded eyes, the sidelong glance and tears.

Certain masks have slipped, especially on social media. Did you know that our culture espoused untouchability to ensure that epidemics could be kept in check? The whites with all their hugging and tongue wrestling will not understand this ancient wisdom, mind it. Also, now everyone and his grandmother is in PPE, yet you wonder why we insist that all women should be covered from head to toe? The diaspora which quit the land of milk and sambar for the lands of Big Mac and bigger steaks now lecture us on why we must shun meat and materialism. Keep the masks on, folks, your real face is quite ugly.

Masks became political, too. No, not the ones printed with



Mask mutiny

In Los Angeles, performance artist DaVida Sal posed in front of Trader Joe's in a bikini made of masks. "If the MASKS work, WHY the 6 feet? If the 6 feet works, WHY the Masks? If BOTH work, WHY the LOCKDOWN?" she asked. Go on, answer her. In Kiev, Ukraine, a local post office told a woman at the head of the queue that she would not be served as she was not wearing a mask. The lady took off her panties, and put it on her face. Talk about problem-solving skills.

In London's busy Oxford Street, a gent sallied forth clad in nothing but a mask converted into a G-string. He was protesting the imposition of masks, apparently. And, in Melbourne, "Sue from St Kilda" used a pair of red, silk undies as a mask. They were a gift from her to her mother and were unused. Sue had bought them in China 10 years ago. Talk about beating the Wuhan virus with undies made in China!

symbols ranging from bat to banana and briefcase. Trumpistas saw the US president as a superman who shunned masks. So did Jair Bolsonaro's legions in Brazil. In the US, 28-year old Tomi Lahren, a conservative political commentator, gave president-elect Joe Biden, 77, one below the belt: "Might as well carry a purse with that mask, Joe." How civil and sagacious, I say.

Closer to home, a clip from the Bihar elections went viral. A TV journalist, who was talking to a man in a crowd, said, "Sir, you are not wearing a mask?" Suddenly, two hands and a purple mask entered the frame and the speaker pulled the mask on. The thunderstruck journalist asked the giver, "You gave him your mask!" First man: "*Toh kya hua, dost hai hamara* (So what, he is my friend.)" If that is his understanding of masks, then we should forgive him his other choices.

As we began with Wodehouse, let us bid farewell in his presence. In *Barmy in Wonderland*, actor Mervyn

Potter says: "There are moments when one needs a drink. Are there moments, indeed, when one doesn't?" True that, Potter. There used to be moments when one needed a mask. Now, there is hardly a moment when one does not. ●



THE DIFFICULTY OF STAYING WOKE

THE QUEST FOR THE PERFECT ALARM SETS
YOU AT WAR AGAINST YOURSELF

BY VARUN RAMESH

Recently, I needed to wake up earlier than usual; in the morning, instead of the whimsical moment that would seem right to me. Since I work the evening shift, I have no reason to see the sun. This absence of habit meant I would have to set an alarm. But, like my natural sleep cycle, even an alarm would prove insufficient.

Do bear with my laboured thought process here, because my quest to find the perfect alarm could benefit alarm clock manufacturers, app developers and serial procrastinators worldwide. Spare a thought also for those encountering what the University of California, Davis calls 'coronasomnia'—the phenomenon of people struggling to sleep amid this unending tirade of bad news, broken routines, and digital screens. For those with upset sleep cycles, a successful 'alarming' may break the pattern.

That said, I set alarms every day of my life. They go unheeded. Alarms go off around me with the same

frequency and indifference as the sun that rises and sets without my interference. I either snooze them or let the music play.

I needed heavy weaponry: The ShakeIt Alarm app, which makes you vigorously shake your phone until it stops 'alarming' you. For years, it was my mainstay torture-myself-until-I-wake-up technique. But, strangely, I could not find it among my apps.

Where was it? And for that matter,

why was I not using it every day? Its absence seemed odd.

Oh, came the disappointed realisation. I had uninstalled it one morning, when my laboured consciousness found an easier alternative to shaking my phone to silence.

This was not the first time I had uninstalled an alarm instead of actually heeding it. Many years back, I had tried an alarm app that forced me to solve math problems before it



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A silver lining

Call it gallows humour, black comedy, Soviet jokes: Mirth often stems from dark circumstances. In March, Omar Abdullah shared a meme featuring a dejected photo of him along with the caption: "When you spend 236 days in lockdown, and on the day you get out, the govt imposes 21-day national lockdown." The meme was, of course, referring to his lengthy house arrest, to which Omar added: "These are serious & scary times so a little humour doesn't hurt."

Take Alexei Navalny—poisoned with Novichok and feared dead, he sprang back to life with his sarcasm intact after spending weeks in a hospital. He tweeted about the joys of breathing without a ventilator: "It's a remarkable process that is underestimated by many. Strongly recommended."

would turn off. However, my waking self, though not sentient enough to know the value of an early start, did have enough brain cells to uninstall an app instead of pondering calculations. I skipped the math to take that nap.

Now, math alarm apps may still work, but if your muscle memory can have you uninstall them whilst you are but barely awake, you will need alternatives.

My options were to increase the complexity of the tech or go retro. I decided to try both.

The retro option is the traditional physical alarm clock: It rings, you hit it, it stops ringing. While not ground-breaking, it has its benefits—your first sight in the morning will not be your smartphone and its minefield of social media rabbit-holes.

Psychologists have increasingly argued that your phone should not be part of your waking routine. Says Ms Jwala Narayanan, a neuropsychologist at the Green Oak Initiative and at Manipal Hospital, "There is a need to distance ourselves from our smartphones—both before and after sleep. We all spend far too much time on our phones...Having an external alarm would help declutter from the phone, it is easier for the mind to associate the alarm with a specific event (like getting up) rather than the other notifications that would also come on your phone."

She adds, "A separate alarm clock

decreases the chances of you spending more time than you need to—you may take the phone to turn off the alarm but might end up spending the next ten minutes on social media feeling bad about the beautiful beach holiday someone else may be posting about."

In total, she identifies three benefits to having a separate alarm clock:

1. It helps you declutter from your phone.
2. It improves better association with the event/task and hence increases the possibility of you completing the task. The suggestion is to pair the alarm clock with something important to get things done.
3. It improves efficiency and reduces unnecessary multi-tasking (which is not very good for the brain).

There may be other factors at play. One Amazon review of a physical clock even said that "due to the radiation I can't keep my mobile near to me". Thus, 5G-sceptics have an ever-increased cause for worry and may prove a lucrative market for alarm clock makers. Incidentally, as per 360 Reports, the worldwide market for electronic alarm clocks is expected to grow at a CAGR of roughly 4.5 per cent over the next five years and will reach \$190 million in 2024.

However, a base alarm clock may no longer cut it. Sure, the good old Casio of my school days did wake me with a frequency that made me dread the beep-beep-beep-beep that signalled yet another day to be spent

unwillingly upon this mortal coil. But my procrastination has increased in sheer wiliness and willpower. I would strike it and go back to sleep.

I searched Amazon for intriguing physical alarm clocks and found many. Alarms that project the time onto the ceiling (effective at night, not so much in daytime). A 'sonic bomb' alarm that promises to shake the unholy hell out of you and your bed if you do not deactivate it. Even a basketball shaped alarm that forces you to sink a tiny hoop to make it stop. To wake us, the lazy generation, we now have projectors, vibrating 'bombs', and forced basketball try-outs.

But, do phones have other means of getting us, at the very least, out of our beds?

Googling this, I found the existence of comrades who, like me, tended to uninstall their alarm apps.

Through them, I found the NFC technique. Buy an NFC tag for a couple hundred rupees on Amazon and download an NFC Alarm Clock. Link the two and keep your tag in another room. To disable the alarm, you need to go to that room and tap the NFC tag to the phone—hopefully forcing you awake by virtue of making you leave your bed.

Should this fail, I could always try ALARMY—which, with uninstall prevention, dubs itself the world's "most annoying" alarm app. In this war against myself, it helps to prepare to fail. ●

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THE WEEK THE MAN

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THE PERKS OF BEING A WALLFLOWER

THE LOCKDOWN WAS A GODSEND FOR INTROVERTS. OR WAS IT?

BY ANIRUDH MADHAVAN

The moment our prime minister and his soon-to-be glorious beard announced a nationwide lockdown on March 24, a lot of Indians went into panic mode.

A pandemic was upon them and they would be caged in their homes for God knows how long. Obviously, they started asking themselves the important questions in life. Could you separate the alcohol from hand sanitisers? Does going to the terrace count as wanderlust? Would buying 50 kilos of onions make you a hoarder? And, finally, if the concept of thermal guns was always around, why had doctors been, all this while, violating our orifices?

While they were fretting, and furiously whipping up dalgona coffees, many others were popping the bubbly. For, you see, the introverts of the world have been socially distancing all their lives. They had got it down to a science and this was their chance to publish a paper.

The excuse they were looking for all their lives had fallen into their laps. No more feigning headaches to get out of going to the cinema with that annoying colleague who, for some reason, is still excited about *The Fast and the Furious* series. No more popping on your headphones to avoid small talk in public, no more

of being dragged to the latest eatery that your friend describes as having the most “amazing” fusion of Italian and Tamil cuisine. “They put beef fry on pizza, dude!”

Having mentally slayed such demons, the wallflowers retreated to their Covid coves, eager to discover new reading nooks in the home they had built with much love, but got surprisingly little time to enjoy.

Some even planned to emulate introvert idol Emily Dickinson, who was famous as a poet, recluse and, maybe less so, a baker. While not talking to death for her verses, she would lower baskets of bread to neighbourhood children from her window. She also, according to legend, skipped her father’s funeral, opting instead to hear the service from her upstairs room. So, maybe not the best role model.

Regardless, the introverts set the mood, and the next few days flew by, leaving in their wake a puff of contentment. Many podcasts were discovered, some cleaning agents, too. Whole sitcoms were devoured; some pizzas, too. Yoga was still too cumbersome for some, but, overall, the body was rested, the mind was at ease.

Then the next few days arrived. And with them came a realisation.

Those trapped at home with others, even family, soon found that their alone time had gone poof. Me time became





A star is torn

Ryan Reynolds, handsome man and self-aware actor, put up this gem of a sentiment on Instagram in March. Taking on celebrity culture and the symbiotic relationship between fans and stars, *Deadpool*/*Green Lantern* professed: "In times of crisis, I think we all know it is the celebrities that we count on most. They are the ones who are going to get us through this. Right after health care workers, first responders, people working essential services, ping-pong players, mannequins, childhood imaginary friends, like 400 other types of people."

Snark, thy name is Reynolds.

we time, and we time was torture. The lone wolves realised that they needed time away not only from the outside world, but also from their pack. They suddenly had flashbacks to their days of teen angst, when in a fit of rebellion, they had threatened to leave their "overbearing" parents and venture out solo.

Still, they coped.

Then, predictably, the extroverts had a bright idea. They discovered an app called Zoom (how did Skype drop the ball on that one?) and soon life was reduced to a cluster of low-definition rectangles on a screen. Meetings were organised with much gusto, and the poor introvert had no excuse to offer. "The office has given you a laptop and internet. Anyway, what other plans do you have?"

Even friends made Zoom plans to celebrate random events of varying importance. It was their way of flipping off the virus, by bringing the outside world inside. It was like being a panellist on the news. Unfortunately, with less shouting and more participation.

This was also the time introverts finally used the video calling option on WhatsApp (surprising quality, to be honest).

What made matters worse was that Zoom was more draining than physical interaction. With dodgy internet connections, the tone of the speaker gets muddled. Add to that the absence of body language, and the person has to strain more to understand the speaker. Hence, draining.

But it was not only the extroverts encroaching upon their territory that worried the introverts. A study from Australia, monitoring 114 introverts, concluded that they "tended to report heightened depressive symptoms and anxiety following the implementation of Covid-19 social distancing and lockdown measures".

The study also noted, in complex words, that the introverts may be mute about the

lockdown not because they were happy, but because they were usually silent about suffering.

A lot of introverts are also known to be highly sensitive, with some even absorbing and mirroring the emotions of others. Given the disaster-a-day year we are currently having, their hearts must be like the tar-filled sponge from the pre-trailer ad at the cinema.

So, perhaps, lockdown was not the bed of roses that they had hoped for. Maybe there was indeed a pea under the twenty mattresses and the princess could not get her forty winks.

It was a slap to the face. And as they caressed their bruised cheeks, it dawned on all the loners: As with a stripper on a pole, life was all about balance. It is not that introverts did not enjoy the company of others, it is just that they needed alone time to recharge themselves. Sitting alone all the time had overcharged their batteries and, like in phones from the 2000s, their performance was being affected.

Perhaps the occasional walk would not hurt at all. Perhaps talking to the annoying building secretary would build much-needed camaraderie. Perhaps the world outside was to be let in, once in a while, for you to enjoy the solitude even more. After all, trite as it may sound, there is no light without darkness.

Note one: This writer wanted to talk to a handful of other introverts for this piece, but by their very nature, they are an elusive lot.

Note two: This writer checked his privilege while writing this piece. Unfortunately, he forgot to double-check. ●



DISTANCE LEARNING

EVEN AS WE STRUGGLED WITH PHYSICAL DISTANCING, STAYING IN TOUCH WAS KEY TO KEEPING OUR SANITY AND WELL-BEING INTACT

BY SUSAMMA JOY KURIAN

Space, as a commodity and concept, seems elusive to most Indians. Many of us simply cannot afford to have or give space. Just picture a Mumbai local train during peak hours. A few, however, do not quite get the concept. Like our dear prime minister, whose hugs seem neither warm nor welcome. Way to disarm world leaders though! His "friend" in the United States would shake on it. Vigorously.

Hugs and handshakes are now forbidden (hallelujah, anyone?). All thanks to a virus that does not respect space or seek consent. No wonder it liked our company, especially that of men in India. Before you go #notallmen on me, statistics say so. Of course, official data is hard to come by in our country. The last available nationwide gender-based data showed that 76 per cent of Covid-19 patients were male—

then the highest among the countries that released such information. The gender gap seems to have narrowed down (no one is going to buy your #TheGreatEqualiser pitch, patriarchy). And as we have always dealt with issues of consent, we decided to cover up and isolate the 'victim'—in this case, the whole of humanity. Only, unlike victims of abuse, we were not entirely blameless here. And, the precautions were truly meant to protect us and not subju-

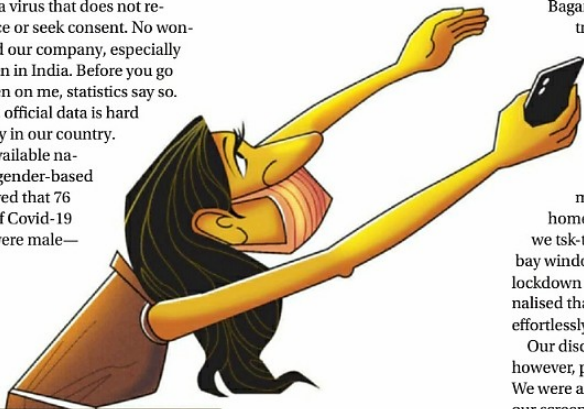
gate the 'weaker' species.

Meanwhile, the virus, like most predators, roamed free. For months, our movements were restricted. We stepped out of our concrete boxes, only to step into chalked-out circles. But where is the fun in staying within the lines, eh? We flouted the norms at the drop of a mask, say, for faith (Ganesh Chaturthi and Durga Puja celebrations "shakes head"), even blind faith (the clap-and-clang processions "facepalms") or football (the I-League trophy parade by Mohun

Bagan fans "rolls eyes"). But trust us Indians to ignore

our own inefficiencies and fallacies to judge others. Even as we struggled to maintain physical distance, the sheltered snoots among us derided migrants for marching home. "Look who's walking," we tsk-tsked, peering out of our bay windows. "Didn't they get the lockdown memo?" We have internalised that sort of distancing quite effortlessly, no?

Our disconnect with social reality, however, precedes the pandemic. We were anyway more in touch with our screens than with each other. But that turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Shut inside our homes, we 'checked in' on each other more often. Video calls became frequent,



elaborate and creative. A young writer put up a video on Instagram of her parents hosting *antakshari* on calls with friends every evening. Another writer in the US started a Corona Community Chorus, a sing-along party on social media. And this call for connection was not just digital; it was live, too. Remember Italians making music on their balconies? (No, banging pots and pans from your balconies is not the same thing—neither were they music to anyone's ears nor did their "vibration reduce the potency of the virus". And the less said about the 'Go Corona... Corona Go' chant the better.)

Music did strike a universal chord. It brought us closer in ways only music can. But it also amplified the absence of direct contact, bringing back memories of a not-so-distant past. Like, slow-dancing with your partner to your favourite song at someone else's wedding. Or, dissing a horrible remix of a perfectly 'humma'ble A.R. Rahman original with your friend as it played on loop at the diner you met after work. That was so 2019 though.

At home, too, we hesitate, turning into touch-me-nots in the presence of our loved ones, especially the

elderly. We do not embrace them enough; it is touch—a quick caress or peck on the cheek—and go. And science (the medical one, not the one that 'proves' why coffee should not be your cup of tea) says that physical touch is important for our well-being. It helps increase the levels of hormones—serotonin, dopamine and oxytocin—that induce happiness and human bonding. And, it works wonders in infants and the elderly.

There is a video of a couple in the US—the Wildreds—who meet after months because of Covid-19 restrictions and cannot stop kissing

and hugging each other. Jean, 89, on seeing Walter, 91, says, "Oh, I am happy to see you." A statement they keep repeating to each other through their conversation, all the while holding hands. Later she asks him if he is feeling alright, and Walter replies, "I am feeling better now."

If Covid-19 is here to stay, so are the safety protocols. But contact is key even in these Covid times. So, hug your loved ones, especially your grandparents. They will welcome you with open arms and hearts, and that will be the warmest hug you will ever receive. Trump that, Modiji! ●



The Big B(ang) Theory

Even the best of us have fallen for the *gyaan* peddled by the world-famous WhatsApp, Twitter and Facebook (WTF!) University. A day after the nation observed Janta Curfew on March 22, actor Amitabh Bachchan tweeted, "An opinion given: 5 PM, 22nd Mar, 'amavasya', darkest day of month; virus, bacteria evil force at max potential & power! Clapping shankh vibrations reduce/destroy virus potency Moon passing to new 'nakshatra' Revati. Cumulative vibration betters blood circulation." That tweet made the Twitterati's blood boil, and they lashed out at him.

To his credit, he deleted the tweet. We are all unlearning, too, are we not?



ANTI-VIRAL MATTRESS, ANYONE?

TRACTORS, COW DUNG, VOLCANIC ASH... THERE IS NO DEARTH OF
COLOURFUL CURES FOR COVID-19

BY ANJULY MATHAI

My parents have always gone for a passive-aggressive style of parenting. If you asked them for something, they would not deny it. Rather, they would wait for you to outgrow your desire. They used the same strategy with Covid-19. To prevent getting infected, they went on an 'offensive defence', trying out everything available in the market, which included zinc and hydroxy-

chloroquine tablets, and an alphabet soup of vitamins. They tried to outmanoeuvre the manoeuvrer. But to their detriment, they realised that the virus had a funny bone, because it got the last laugh. Both my parents tested positive for Covid-19 in early September. The devoted parents that they are, they gave it to me, too.

As they are doctors, you cannot really blame them for trying to combat the virus with experimental drugs.

After all, the US president himself fought it with an experimental cocktail of antibodies, including the plasma of a recovered Covid patient and of mice bred with a 'human' immune system. Also, a generic version of the heartburn treatment Pepsid, which is being studied as a potential Covid cure. But perhaps, what our researchers need to focus on is not heartburn but rather, mind burn. Because, in the case of many, instead of



Fun with puns

Comedians are mining gold from the pandemic, and nowhere was it more evident than at this year's virtual Emmys, hosted by Jimmy Kimmel. He performed to an audience consisting of celebrity cardboard cutouts. "Well, hello and welcome to the Pandemmys! Thank you for risking everything to be here. Thank me for risking everything to be here... You know what they say: You can't have a virus without a host," he quipped. Answering the question on everyone's minds, about how the winners were actually going to get the awards, Kimmel said: "Here's how this is gonna happen—if you win, a guy will drive to your house and chuck the Emmy through your window." The comedian killed it, despite his audience being rather... er, stiff!



the heart, the virus has gone for the brain, bringing down their IQ levels by several notches.

Take some of our world leaders. According to the Belarus president, Alexander Lukashenka, the best way to prevent Covid-19 is to go out and work in the fields, preferably on a tractor. "You just have to work, especially now, in a village," he said. "In the countryside, people are working in the fields, on tractors, and no one is talking about the virus. There, the tractor will heal everyone..." He also advised his ministers to go for a steamy sauna, because the virus dies at 60 degrees Celsius.

The Americans, being rather more devious than the Europeans, have another solution: death by white-wash. President Trump came up with the ingenious idea of bleaching the virus with disinfectant. "And then I see the disinfectant, where it knocks it out in a minute," he said. "One minute. And is there a way we can do something like that, by injection inside or almost a cleaning?"

But it is we Indians who have the most creative, and malodorous, solution of all. If you cannot sweat it out or bleach it, then blast it with cow dung. No virus, the reasoning goes, can survive the stench of our desi gobar gas. "A person who chants Om Namah Shivay and applies cow dung on the body will be saved," said

Hindu Mahasabha president, Swami Chakrapani Maharaj. "A special *yagna* ritual will soon be performed to kill coronavirus." India and China might be feuding over our boundaries, but it seems we are on the same page when it comes to our bovines. The Chinese government is recommending the Peaceful Palace Bovine Pill to fight the virus, a traditional Chinese medicine made with buffalo horn and the gallstones of cattle.

It is not just our netas who seem to have lost it. Take the spiritualists. Of both kinds—the ones that believe in holy water and the others that believe in Johnnie Walker. In Russia, clerics are going around the city sprinkling holy water on cars and drivers alike. In India, infamous tippler Kulwant Singh went viral after posting a video on social media claiming that drinking holy water, the kind with 40 per cent alcohol, is the right treatment for Covid-19. This proves that you believe in the cures that you want to believe in. Corona remedies are subject to your likes and dislikes. If you are in the Army, for example, you will probably end up believing that shooting an isolated sample of the virus with an AK-47 will kill it. If you are a stripper, you will believe that... well, you get the drift.

The best conspiracy theories about the virus, however, are the ones that are hatched on social media. That

is because Facebook has a revenue model that cashes in on idiocy. (If you don't believe me, ask Hillary Clinton.) There was the post that went viral about volcanic ash from the Taal volcano in the Philippines having disinfectant properties. Or the hashtag #nomet-nocoronavirus that trended on Twitter, claiming that vegetarianism was the cure to Covid-19. Everything from anti-coronavirus mattresses to Sri Lankan herbal drinks are being sold online as Covid remedies. Eleven people in Andhra Pradesh were hospitalised after eating the fruit of the *Datura* plant; a TikTok video had said that the fruit can kill coronavirus.

My parents and I became virus-free a few weeks ago. During this trying time, I learnt an important lesson: Doctors make the worst patients. My parents became scared and needy like little children. I finally had the opportunity to try out their strategy of passive-aggression on them. That is when I realised why there were so many superstitions and unscientific cures to Covid-19 floating around. It is because people are scared. In reality, it is not superstition that markets these products. It is fear. There is a huge, untapped business opportunity here. Perhaps canny businessmen have already started realising this. We hear that the next Patanjali product might be an under-eye night cream called 'Darr-onil.' ●

OF CHEAT WEEKS AND LOST MUSCLES

WITH GYMS SHUT, FITNESS FANATICS FOUND IT HARD TO STAY TONED AND ON DIET

BY JOSE K. GEORGE

Flab to fab journeys came to a screeching halt. The number of shirtless selfies on social media dwindled as abs began to be a no-show. Soon, the muscled folk woke up to the fact that international chest day is known as Monday in common parlance.

Days before the nation plunged into a total lockdown, gyms downed shutters, with the chagrin of fitness enthusiasts. However, the realization that you don't anymore need to classify your breakfast into pre- and post-workout meal, measure your meal to the last gram and grain, and fret over the fat in everything but plain old water, took some time to hit. And, when it did, it hit hard.

It was all hunky-dory in the first few days of no training. While the rest of the world cared much about WHO's 'test, test, test', the fitness enthusiasts heard 'rest, cheat (a bit), recover'. We will all get back to hustling again, blasting every possible workout music, and pump iron with renewed zest. After all, it is just 21 days; sure the vascularity will be lost, there will be some muscle atrophy and loss of strength, and some inches added to the waist. But the off-season weight gain happens to the best of them too, to the Mr Olympias, pro-bodybuilders and the rest of the champs. Who said

off-season is only for the pros? The average gym rat, too, deserves an off-season. These were some of the thoughts running through the minds of the gym rats.

Twenty-one days later, a month passed. Muscle atrophy was now a real thing, as egg whites and chicken breasts gave way to fries and the comforts of Nutella jars. After a few more weeks and lost muscles, the mirror on the wall, which had been a witness to plenty of flexes and poses, had begun reflecting an average Joe.

Nonetheless, influencers on Instagram, coaches on YouTube, and every other jacked dude and his uncle on the internet continued to influence, coach and inspire—with post-home-workout selfies replacing their post-workout gym selfies. The fit and fab celebs did not help to boost the spirits of the fitness fanatics either. Even those celebrities who had the luxury of the gym at their bungalows got on to the ground to press up, pull up and burpee to post selfies and videos of home workouts and throw challenges at each other. Because, you gotta put to use those #FitnessIsLifestyle, some time! And they looked fab as ever to the envy of the average, now not-gym goer.

It was not as if the troubled weightlifters, fitness enthusiasts and every aspiring ab maker had not done

anything to grab the attention of the authorities to force them to allow gyms to re-open. There were protests in various parts of the country by trainers and owners of gyms, with a few chiseled men pushing up in protest in the streets. The protests were not exactly reassuring. No, not because I am against protest, push up, or a combination of them. My objection was merely against them keeping their washboard abs and bulging biceps intact, still holding the pump, after all these months of staying away from iron.

It was time to turn to my gym bros for a little (de)motivation. We are all together in this muscle-less universe, right? After all, all the spotting, exchange of bro science, diet tips, carb bashing, bragging about the bench press PR (personal record), flexing together, and comparing sizes (of biceps, you perv) for far too many sweaty hours have brought us all closer in this pursuit of vanity, nay, better health.

Wrong! They all ditched—almost all the muscled buddies of mine took to some new forms of training! There were those who took to running, skipping, yoga, pacing up and down countless number of stairs, swimming, badminton, basically doing everything possible to ward off the lockdown-induced flab. A lot



Ageless AK

When it comes to fitness, Anil Kapoor is the man to take a few tips from. The virus and the lockdown did not stop the star from showcasing what most gym rats believe is the pinnacle of fitness—the courage to post a shirtless torso.

All you need to stay fit during the lockdown is a “wall and will power”, said Kapoor while posting one of his workout videos on social media in May. He followed it up with a set of shirtless photos in October. “This papa doesn’t preach, just removes his top and walks to the beach,” he captioned the photos, shot on a beach.

Well, the wall (and a personal trainer) can work wonders, if you have the will.

of crossfit videos and a Cult.fit link, too, followed.

Some had dusted off the fitness bands that were purchased on a whim, and were abandoned the very next day because a band could never replace the feel of iron. Others who had an old dumbbell or two lying around cosied up to them. The avalanche of home workout videos that flooded the internet, too, helped some to cope with the absence of iron. Get a spade ready and get on to the field, “coz digging is the best form of cardio,” I was told by one, while another muscled hunk waxed eloquent about saluting the sun, as I continued with my efforts to find solace in shared misery. More disheartening was the weight-loss journey a friend was gracious enough to share. “Never managed to lose so much weight when I was lifting regularly,” he said, as if telling me that he is not with me in this predicament was not wicked enough.

But can any of these jumping, skipping and running around, ever replace gyms, I wondered. What is a weight training session if you do not ego lift a bit, let out a Ronnie Coleman-ish “light weight baby” as you squat in the comfort of a smith machine, compare your PR with the bro next bench, and show off your guns to the newbie with unlimited supply of queries about getting washboard abs and Dwayne Johnson-isque traps in less than three weeks!

Well, in the end, I cut myself some slack, got back to the groove and did show up at the gym on the day it reopened. But not before realizing that while I let my slothful side rule over me during the gymless days, most of my fit friends did prove that hash-tags aside, fitness is indeed a lifestyle. ●

THE SHOW WENT ON

SPORTS RETURNED. THE SPECTATORS DID NOT.
WHAT HAPPENED NEXT DID NOT SHOCK US

BY REUBEN JOE JOSEPH

As sports fans, we often get carried away. We tend to forget that, just like us, the athletes on the field are working professionals. We have had reminders from them, too. Allow me to quote the great Muhammad Ali: "It's just a job. Grass grows, birds fly, waves pound the sand. I beat people up." Or perhaps I could interest you in a Mario Balotelli quote: "When I score, I don't celebrate because I'm only doing my job. When a postman delivers letters, does he celebrate?" Classic.

They are just doing their jobs. And we, who sit in the galleries, marveling at their superhuman abilities, often pay through our noses for the privilege of doing so. If you had someone paying you a million dollars to watch you work, would you be nervous that you do not disappoint your spectator or be motivated to give him the best display of document filing he has ever seen? Or would you not care at all?

When the spectator was missing from the stadium for a large part of this year, were we surprised that sports could go on without us? Sure, art needs an audience. But how intrinsically important is the spectator to the arena where the best fight it out to emerge victorious?

The question is really how much does the sport need the live spectator, rather than the other way around. Because, the live option really is not



much of a dealbreaker for a generation that has grown up with access to everything. A majority prefer the comfort of their homes, with the value-adding commentary and repeated replays to enjoy a game. Ah, to crack open a cold one, sit back

and yell at the TV screen while your neighbours grumble.

Granted, the match day atmosphere is more thrilling for some. You get to meet strangers and you bond over a common interest. Conversely, you meet a stranger and the both of



Comfortably numb

Gamers, how many times have you gotten so absorbed in your game that you had become oblivious to things around? Formula One driver Charles Leclerc can relate. During the lockdown, the Ferrari star was so engrossed with proving his simulation-racing skills on Twitch one day, that he did not hear the doorbell or his phone as his girlfriend waited outside their Monaco apartment. While live streaming, he suddenly exclaimed and excused himself. On returning, Leclerc said, "So my girlfriend had to subscribe to my Twitch channel to tell me that I had to open the door, so I gained a subscription. I'm so happy." Sadly for him, she only subscribed for a month.

you have to be pulled apart after you threw a sandwich at his face for insulting your team. Never a dull day. But not everybody's cup of tea.

But what about the players? Barring the economics of it, did the absence of fans change anything for them?

When organisers agreed they needed to "recreate" the fan culture in stadiums for the benefit of the athletes, some felt it was an ominous sign of a dystopian future where the flesh-and-blood fan was no longer needed. Cardboard cut-outs, robots, massive tifos and banners with messages replaced us.

And, as if we did not have enough screen time in our daily lives, not only did fans have to spend more time in front of their devices, but players, too, had to put up with massive screens installed in the arena to show fans supporting them from home. Did all this help the players? Your guess is as good as mine.

Yet, there were times when players would have welcomed some instant appreciation. The cricketers at this year's IPL must have been reminded of what it was like playing Test cricket in nearly empty stands. Smacking the ball into the stands certainly sounds different in front of a packed house.

For stars like Virat Kohli and

Cristiano Ronaldo, who thrive off the energy of a crowd, they would certainly have missed both the abuse and adulation. As did the 30-something-year-old NBA players who jumped around and pulled faces at each other like teens to bring the "energy" that was missing in stadia.

For those of us watching from home, how many of us envied the audio engineer whose job it was to press the right button for the appropriate canned crowd noise? Surely, it reminds us of the laughter tracks in the sitcoms of old! An "ooh" over here, an "aah" over there, the cheers without the jeers as Bayern Munich ran Barcelona ragged. (The jeers are an essential part of it, too, Mr Producer!)

The only way players were receiving their daily dose of heckling was through social media—slicing through the sanitised and safe bio-secure bubbles. One can picture Novak Djokovic checking his Twitter feed every night before bed, just to indulge in some soothing verbal volleys aimed at him for one of his recent public brain farts.

And since broadcasters are giving us a "feel" of the stadium with the artificial noise, would it be too much to ask them to give us more control? Maybe give us options to trigger a frustrated-looking Jose Mourinho with

some banter that blares out through the loudspeaker next to him. Or to start a virtual Mortal Kombat brawl with a fellow spectator as Khabib Nurmagomedov took a breather between rounds in his final UFC battle.

Nevertheless, the lack of spectators meant players in team sports could hear each other well. As viewers, it was heart-warming to listen to the different languages spoken on the field.... Until you hear all the cussing that goes on between players and your kid asks you what THAT word means.

All said and done, we are glad that sports returned. Because in a year when the Olympics was cancelled, we had to suffer the gymnastics of David Warner's and Robert Lewandowski's horrendous TikTok videos. Like watching that friend try really hard to pull off a (cringeworthy) dance move at a party, you feel like pleading with these sports stars to stop!

But remember, we fans are not the centre of this universe. The pursuit of sporting greatness will go on with or without us. So, whether sports returned on a screen or at the ground near you, keep the banter civil on social media. Unless you enjoy being heckled when you punch in the wrong figures at your work desk. ●

HOME CIRCUS

COVID-19 BROUGHT THE WORLD TO A GRINDING HALT, BUT HOMES WERE ABUZZ WITH ACTIVITY MORE THAN EVER

BY ANCY K. SUNNY

In March, when the novel coronavirus was picking up pace, a battle, sans the bloodshed, gathered steam inside many homes.

There were significant decisions to be made. Who gets the work desk by the window—the wife who just debuted into the work-from-home space or the techie husband who has been a veteran in the scene; who attends to the four-year-old's urgent 'poop-call' if both parents were on Zoom meetings; who is in charge of the groceries? The list kept growing.

Work-life balance seemed like a utopian theory and boundaries of time and space blurred.

"I have no clue how time passes. I am cooking curry for lunch at 9am, and still doing the same past noon."

Pratibha Anand, a 34-year-old mother of two, sounded desperate as she spoke of a typical day. While she worked on a presentation, stirring the curry in between, her toddler would decide it is time for a snack or her seven-year-old would need the force of parenting to stay glued to his online class.

Homes had turned into a circus-of-sorts, with juggling being the prime act.

The circus's soundtrack was a medley. In sync with the click-clack of laptop keys came the pressure cooker whistle, shrieks from sibling fights—all held together by 'Baby Shark' blasting on YouTube. If you

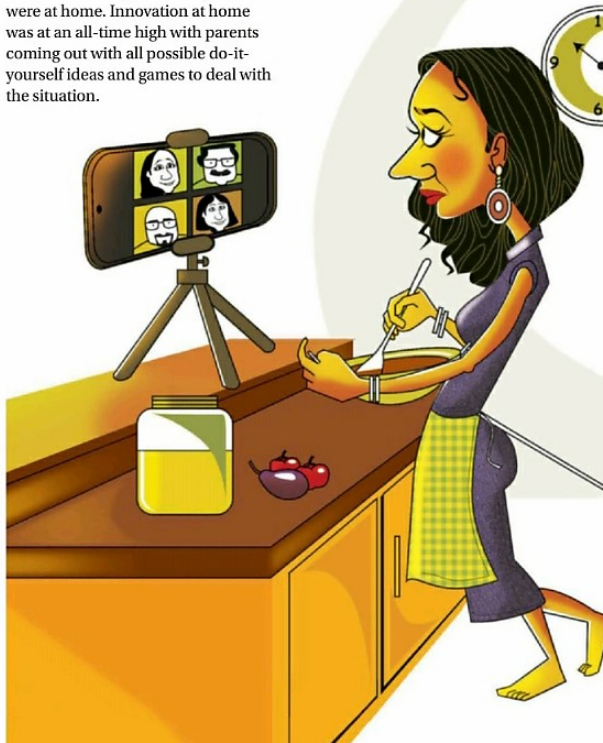
were luckier, there would be more action—a new form of indoor cricket ending in the vase on the shelf being consigned to the waste bin, and someone practising online Zumba in the apartment right above yours.

Children wondered if it was an extended holiday, now that parents were at home. Innovation at home was at an all-time high with parents coming out with all possible do-it-yourself ideas and games to deal with the situation.

The pandemic had also triggered a new home phenomenon. Everyone seemed to be hungry and craving snacks more than the usual.

"Father God, I am a child of God. What I am not is a home school teacher. God, I'm at home. But Lord, ain't no teaching going on around here."

This prayer by US mother and comedian Brandalyn Shropshire went viral amid the pandemic-induced lockdown and it is no surprise why. Shropshire's desperate plea for heavenly help in home-schooling reflected sentiments of moms and dads across the world as schools shut, and reopened in virtual avatars.





At-home workout

Lockdown proved that celebrities were also mortals who had to sweep, mop and do the dishes. After Bollywood actor Katrina Kaif cleaned her living room floor in a viral video, actor Vicky Kaushal shared a video of him cleaning the ceiling fan at home. "Thought I'd interact with my fans today," he said. Pun intended.

If achieving targets at home and work was not enough, parents had a new task at hand—revisiting their school days, only the academic part of it. And that was no fun.

From understanding the concept of fractions, differentiating between phonic sounds of 'c' and 'k' to relearning that Pluto is no longer a planet, the struggle was the same whether you were in the US, India or elsewhere in the world. Parents of kindergarteners who walked into the

world of schooling through the doorways of classroom apps, had to figure out 'pincer grip' and 'motor skills' and felt the weight of responsibility of ensuring their child was holding the pencil the right way. The future was in their hands for real now.

And there were significant learnings, too. The truth that nothing in the world can lure children into watching their school teachers on a screen dawned on adults.

"My parents realised I am not the same person they sent out to college."

Closure of college campuses during the lockdown meant that students had to return to homes—back to old rooms, household chores and parents' rules. It was also a return to fights over who gets to control the television, who gets the bean bag or who cleans the room.

For the likes of Asmi Roy, who has stayed away from homes after going to college, the lockdown has been nerve-wracking. "It's crazy. I miss my independence," she said, adding that she sometimes sneaked on to the terrace of the vacant house next door to plug in her headphones and be at peace.

With classes resuming online, hopes of finding that independence again were deflated.

The pandemic wrecked the experience of college life and simple joys are sorely missed—friendships, conversations at the tea stall, night-outs, and more. Bunking classes, however, is not on the list; it just got easier with online sessions.

Evolving with the times, 'network error' has become the substitute for proxy attendance. Professors

addressed soulless device screens. As their voice notes dissolved into the ether, at least one student snuggled up in bed or binge-watched a series.

And those who were not smart enough to turn off the camera or microphone, risked irreparable damage to their social image and relationship with the professor.

"Hello everyone, welcome to my channel!"

If time was to be classified into Before Corona and After Corona, the latter period will boast of the evolution of a clan—newbie at-home YouTubers. Homes turned into production rooms as the young and old launched YouTube channels.

Be it tips to look your best on Zoom calls or teaching the Marie Kondo style of folding your jeans, new YouTubers entertained with quirky content from homes. So much so that a nine-year-old Indian boy made his viral YouTube debut with a video on how to wash your underwear.

Homes also became spaces where self-love was explored and talents rediscovered. New recipes were tried, bottle art was everywhere and micro-green farming was trending. Septuagenarians picked up video chat skills and browsed for fresh content as beloved TV soaps disappeared.

The lockdown has not solely been about family members being at each other's throats. 'Family time' was back; conversations were in vogue again, the carrom board was dusted and playing cards made a reappearance.

Even amid the pandemonium, it is all these and more that make a home a home. ●



LOOSENING TONGUE

CORONA-SPEAK HAS CHANGED THE VOCABULARY OF OUR THOUGHTS

BY REKHA DIXIT

This autumn, World Wrestling Entertainment decided to bring back audiences for its shows like Monday Night Raw and SmackDown. With the 'pando', or pandemic, raging all over, it started hosting shows at the ThunderDome, a brand-new concept of augmented reality with a thousand LED screens arranged in an arena-like manner. Each screen space is sold as a seat, the 'virtual audience' can log in from home and attend the show, almost in person, with their faces beaming in real-time on the screen. With drone cameras, pyrotechnics, lasers and video boards, the experience cannot get more realistic in this age of the 'new normal'.

The pandemic changed almost everything that was normal. Even our reflexes have altered, and the step-out-of-home checklist—car keys, sunglasses, wallet—now includes a mask. A woman's vanity pouch in her handbag may or may not have that lipstick tube, but will certainly have a vial of sanitiser, most likely one with a dainty perfume that is more personalised than the industrial, hospital-smelling stuff you find at the entrance to any public place. And on those rare occasions when we actually meet and greet someone, we

no longer thrust our hand out for a handshake and try to judge the other person's character with the firmness of the shake. Instead, we fold our hands in a namaste, or more stylistically do an 'elbow bump', desperately hoping the other person does not hit our funny bone, instead.

The world needed a whole new vocabulary to describe each of these new experiences. Our language has been evolving as the pandemic progresses from a stage when we could optimistically think of 'flattening the curve' by 'breaking the chain', and when 'contact tracing' was still useful, to the bleakness of accepting 'community spread'. And now, we are grateful that we have survived the 'second wave' and hoping to tide over the 'third wave', too, even as we wait for the vaccine. Not everyone believes in vaccines, though. The 'anti-vaxxers' have always been around; now, they have been joined by the 'anti-maskers'. The more virtuous call them 'covidots'. These are trying times, what with 'pandemic fatigue' setting in.

In a year of unprecedented happenings, the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) did something unprecedented, too. In addition to its four quarterly updates on new words that have gained entry into this repository

of the English language, it did two special updates to accommodate the rapidly evolving Covid-19 lingo. And, these updates were done while the employees 'worked from home', and their cities were under 'lockdown'.

The most important word coined this year was the name of the disease itself, 'Covid-19' (made by fusing the words corona, virus, disease and 19 to indicate the year it began). The disease was christened by the World Health Organisation's International Classification of Diseases on February 11, but the dictionary had to be updated within months to better describe it, from an "acute respiratory illness" to a "disease characterised by fever and cough capable of progressing to pneumonia, respiratory and renal failure, blood coagulation abnormalities and death." However, 'corona' still remains a popular name for the disease, especially in India. The disease has also been given a female entity (no surprise) with names like 'Ms Rona', 'Aunt Rona' and 'la rona', in other shores.

On the same day, the International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses called the virus 'SARS-CoV-2', though in common parlance, it is still referred to as simply coronavirus.

Not every word that has gained currency this year has had such a



ILLUSTRATIONS JOB. PK

formal induction. Many have been thrown in by the shovelful into dictionary updates, a lot many still have not made it to the dictionary, yet. In fact, many words are not even new. Some, like 'personal protective equipment' or 'PPE' and 'quarantine', were around for decades, but have become popular now. Others, like 'isolation', have been repurposed to fit the requirement of the times, with 'self-isolation' becoming a yardstick of responsible behaviour. These, however, are finer points for the pedantic to deliberate over, who anyway miss the wood for the trees. The important point is that the post-corona language would be very different from what was being spoken last year.

THE MOST IMPORTANT WORD COINED THIS YEAR WAS THE NAME OF THE DISEASE ITSELF, 'COVID-19' (MADE BY FUSING THE WORDS CORONA, VIRUS, DISEASE AND 19 TO INDICATE THE YEAR IT BEGAN).

The progression of the usage of these new terms and slangs tells the story of how the world's understanding of things has changed over the last 12 months. Quarantine-inspired words were extremely popular in the spring when people had the novel experience of being forced to 'stay at home'. In those days, a relaxation was to have a 'quarantini', and while at home, what better to do than 'quarantine and chill'. (This slang echoes 'Netflix and chill' and, like the original, has a risqué element to it. While the innocent might just accept it at face value, it could also involve the taking of some telling 'quarantine selfies'). Any which way, this was a better choice than 'doom-scrolling' and falling victim to the 'infodemic',

which the WHO acknowledged as big a problem as the pandemic.

In the early days, while people were told to stay at home, the nuts and bolts of the world worked on those who had no choice but to step out. The doctors, nurses, sweepers, deliverymen and Vande Bharat pilots, all became 'corona warriors' or 'frontline workers'. In fact, 'frontliner' entered the OED as a new noun. Not every work could be done from home, so we created the 'quaranteam', or a group of uninfected work-mates or families, who isolated themselves from others, and therefore, could meet and work without fear. With the 'unlocking', 'quaranteams' have given way to 'bio bubbles', which more or less means the same. The IPL teams flew to the UAE and lived there in a 'bio bubble', isolated from external human contact. Travel restrictions have made those destination holidays impossible, but people are now enjoying 'staycations' as they discover the wonders of their neighbourhood, when they are not in WFH (work-from-home). Staycations were first mentioned after the economic doom of 2008 when money was tight, but it is in 2020 that they have come of age, with millennials even combining WFH with a staycation.

A change in destination, however close to home, is a welcome relief when work and socialising now involve a stream of 'webinars' and 'Zoom meets', and all that 'screen-time' is taxing on the eyes, especially for children. And, one has to be vigilant about 'zoom-bombing'; this attack can be so much worse than the photobombing phenomenon that was born in 2008.

Our hopes and disappointments with drugs can be recorded in how the use of certain pharmaceutical terms peaked and waned. Hydroxychloroquine or 'HCQ' was that

silver bullet in March and April, and India, sitting with a cache of these white pills, played drug diplomacy, doling out portions to friends and neighbours. As the summer progressed, HCQ fell from grace, and other mouthfuls like Remdesivir and Dexamethasone had their moments of glory. In India, giloy (also known as guduchi) has replaced neem as the healing leaf.

Language is a living entity, unless it evolves constantly, it will be dead. New inventions and new ways of life keep creating new words, or new uses of old words. A quick look at words that entered our lexicon in past decades creates a telling picture of the lives of those times. The 1940s was the time when the Nazis dug 'mass graves' for prisoners, while a shortage of nearly everything had people 'cannibalising' equipment to get one workable set. It was the time of 'GI brides' arriving in the US, with their husbands returning from 'Ground Zero', these women often sported a 'bob cut'.

The post-war decade of the 50s created the 'angry young man'; was his anger partly to do with the discomfort of squeezing himself into 'drainpipe trousers'? Indeed, fashion was an 'overkill'. Meanwhile, the 'Cold War' of the past years now created a 'space race', and the buzz was about 'moonshots', 'UFOs', and 'soft landings'. 'Fast food' had just come into being and was not the vile thing it now is considered to be.

By 1962, women began wearing 'miniskirts' and in three years, even shortened the name of the garment to 'the mini'. They also wore 'flares', and the 'flower children' liked sporting 'unisex' looks as they experimented with 'acid' and other 'psychedelia'. The 'peaceniks' raised concern about Agent Orange, while in the world of 'software', 'bytes' and 'chips' debuted.



The 'smiley' arrived, along with 'plastic money', in the 1970s. People took to eating 'junk food' at their 'workstations'. A new age of 'political correctness' came into being and fathers began thinking about claiming 'paternity leave'.

The 'yuppies' of the 1980s took to 'swiping their smart cards'. These '30-somethings' were often 'dinkies' or 'double income, no kids' couples (later DINKs). So much money made them 'shopaholics', and their lives swung between the extremes of the 'feel-good factor' and being 'stressed out'. They began worrying about the depleting 'biodiversity' by 'eco-terrorists' and advocated 'eco-friendliness'. They marvelled at 'email' and took to deriding 'snail mail'.

The 'power dressing' of the previous decade saw its contrast in the 'dress down Fridays' of the 1990s, which were better suited for going to a 'gastropub'. The worry was about increasing 'cybercrimes', 'spam messages', and the 'millennium bug'.

While that particular bug did not hit the new millennium, the 'tsunami' did. 'Global warming' became a concern and people became aware of their 'C-footprint'. 'Alpha moms' took charge of their children's futures, while soldiers and 'embedded journalists' moved to the new theatre of war, 'AfPak'. The UK, meanwhile, did a 'Brexit'.

This millennium has moved at a fast pace, with scientists agreeing that the age of the 'anthropocene' needs to be defined. Meanwhile, the world got busy 'unliking' and 'retweeting' social media posts, most of which were annoying 'selfies', always appended with 'trending hashtags'. All this has created so much 'e-clutter' that even 'cloud computing' is finding it difficult to handle it. No wonder people

UNPRECEDENTED CHOICE

Pandemic was declared as the 'Word of the Year' by Merriam-Webster and Dictionary.com. Lockdown was the word selected by Collins Dictionary. Oxford English Dictionary, however, decided not to give this title to any single word, instead announced a compendium called 'Words of an Unprecedented Year'. The list is dominated by pandemic-related terms, but it also gives a nod to other events that happened this year, from the bushfire in Australia to the Black Lives Matter movement in the US.

are putting useful content behind 'paywalls'. There have been so many terror attacks that people were having 'threat fatigue'. Yet, no one was prepared for the 'corona tsunami', though they are somehow managing to navigate these uncharted waters, with a new vocabulary being one of the surviving aids.

What will be the lasting impact of this pandemic on our vocabulary? Will this new language find usage even after the virus has weakened? Or, will, having served its purpose during an extraordinary time, the new lexicon get forgotten till it is needed again? Only time and the 'coronials' will be able to tell.

The staying power of the new vocab is not such a concern anyway, we are more worried about the staying power of the virus. ●



LAND FOR HEART AND SOUL

THE DHANNIPUR MOSQUE COMPLEX IN AYODHYA AIMS TO REFLECT THE SYNCRETIC TRADITIONS OF THE REGION, SKIPPING OVER CONTROVERSY

BY PUJA AWASTHI/Ayodhya



PAWAN KUMAR

SYMBOL OF UNITY

The shrine of Sharda Baba, within the plot allotted for the mosque, attracts people of all religions

A piece of land, shaped somewhat like an imprecise half of a set square, has put the small village of Dhannipur on the map. The plot of five acres was allotted by the Uttar Pradesh government for the construction of a mosque, as mandated by the Supreme Court. But, a 0.17-acre rectangular patch within the misshapen plot has drawn a steady stream of believers for as long as anyone can remember. This is the shrine of a seer now called Sharda Baba.

The seer, whose actual name is Shahgada Shah, is known as a bestower of boons. People of all religions and sects visit his memorial, asking for wealth, children and health. Vimla Prajapati, a clutch of incense sticks in hand, said: "You come weeping, you will go smiling. The Baba never disappoints." Prajapati comes from a village 10km away. Initially, she came every day for her failing health. Now better, she visits every Thursday—the most popular day at the shrine. When

the mosque complex comes up, the shrine of Sharda Baba will remain intact.

The grant of land to the Uttar Pradesh Sunni Central Waqf Board was a pleasant surprise. Athar Husain, spokesperson for the Indo Islamic Cultural Foundation (IICF), which will oversee the construction of what is for now popularly known as the Dhannipur complex, said: "We had never expected anything in case we lost the suit. But in this decision, there is a sense that there were no losers." Unlike the emphasis on grandness in the Ram temple coming up some 25km away in Ayodhya, the Dhannipur complex is to be an amalgam of the sacred and the secular. It will house a library, a publishing house, a community kitchen, a museum and a multispecialty hospital. It is the hospital that is most exciting to Dhannipur's *pradhan* (village headman), Rakesh Yadav. "Imagine a hospital, nothing like this area has ever seen," he said. Yadav felt that his village was poised for a greatness it had never known. "This village has had nothing," he said. "It is known for nothing."

The road that leads to the plot falls in the village of Raunahi, which is in a different *gram panchayat*. But both villages are part of the same *nyaya panchayat* (judicial component of the village council system). Raunahi is more prosperous; dotted as it is with concrete houses—many of them palatial—and large cars. Dhannipur has just a primary school to show for development. Raunahi spreads over 399.84 acres, Dhannipur a mere 16.61 acres. In the 2011 census, Raunahi had 9,131 people—almost seven times Dhannipur's population of 1,317.

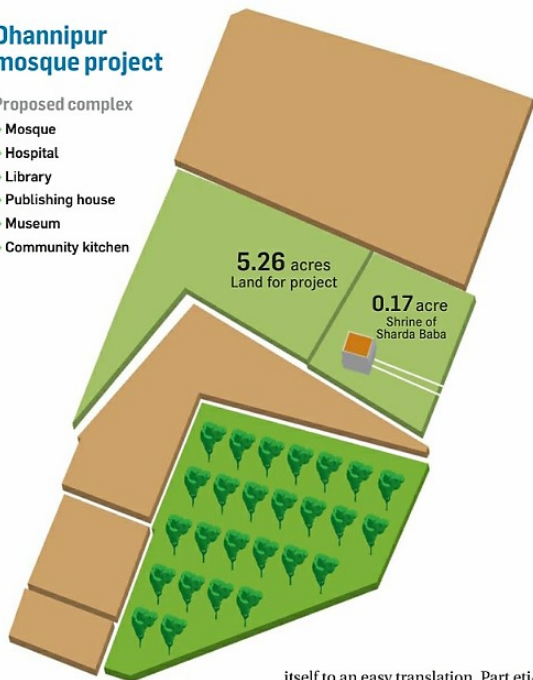
The two villages are bound by amity. In that dark winter of 1992, when the Babri Masjid was brought down, neither reported any violence or animosity. Both offered shelter to

AYODHYA MOSQUE

Dhannipur
mosque project

Proposed complex

- ◆ Mosque
- ◆ Hospital
- ◆ Library
- ◆ Publishing house
- ◆ Museum
- ◆ Community kitchen



those who fled Ayodhya fearing violence. Biboo Khatoun, a 98-year-old from Raunahi, was in Bombay when the mosque was attacked. “My heart almost stopped,” she said. “The only way I could reconcile with what had happened was that it was Allah’s will. When that memory returns, I still feel very angry. But, not against all Hindus. Every religion has its share of troublemakers.”

The choice of Dhannipur is fortunate. While the village itself might be bereft of much, the surroundings of the land granted to the complex evoke the famed “Ganga-Jamuni” *tezheeb* of Awadh—a region that today covers six divisions of Uttar Pradesh. *Tezheeb* is a word that does not lend

itself to an easy translation. Part etiquette, part culture, part refinement, part civilisation—it is an amorphous entity fed by varying strands. Hence the name Ganga-Jamuni (the intermingling of the culture of those who lived by the Ganga and those who inhabited the banks of the Yamuna).

Faizabad, the capital of the nawabs, was the earliest cradle of this unique confluence. But, in 1774, when Asaf-ud-Daula took over the reign of Awadh, he thought it best to pursue his pleasures away from the stern eye of his mother, Bahu Begum. So, he shifted his court to Lucknow (some 120 km away), taking with him the courtiers, the traders, the students and the culturalists, who, in time, made Lucknow’s court the most glorious in India.

Between these two cities grew a

deep and beautiful intermingling of beliefs and their manifestations. Thus, Lucknow’s oldest Hanuman temple was built by a Muslim begum, and the seers of Ayodhya only donned wooden strapless footwear crafted by Muslims. This confluence is not limited to Hinduism and Islam. Barely a kilometre from the plot for the mosque stands a massive Shwetambar Jain temple dedicated to the 15th Teerthankar. It oversees a Shahi Masjid. Chandrashekhar Tiwari, the priest of the temple, said: “I have been here for 29 years. Brotherhood and amity are the only two words I can think of to describe this place.”

Some distance away is the Digamber temple dedicated to the same Teerthankar. It shares a boundary with the house of a Muslim family. The manager of the temple, Sunil Kumar Jain, had the same praise for his neighbours and the village. “We respect each other,” he said.

Husain said the proposed complex would portray this *sanjhi virasat* (shared legacy). “This sharing was not confined to culture,” he said. “When Mahatma Gandhi came to Lucknow in 1919 [to sign an agreement between the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League] he stayed at the Firangi Mahal, [where the ulema were] strong proponents of the Khilafat movement that stood against the extremist ideology of the Muslim League.”

It is this splendid past that the complex is to reflect, while skipping over the years of controversy. “We look at this as a clean slate,” said Husain. “This is our chance to step out of all unpleasantness. The idea is to have a place that celebrates oneness and threads together the community, without giving the slightest chance to be a flash point.”

Pushpesh Pant, a retired professor of international relations (Jawaharlal Nehru University) and a historian with a heightened interest in culinary



PAWAN KUMAR

traditions, has been appointed the curator of the museum that is to be part of the project. Pant said he was surprised to be chosen for the task. "Imagine a non-Muslim, that too a Brahmin, being asked to step in," he said. "This is a great tribute to the syncretic traditions of this country."

The only request made of Pant was that there could be no archiving of dance and music as this would be against Islamic traditions. The archive he is planning, about 5,000sqft, will bring together exhibits of architecture, texts, embroideries, weaves, fabrics, utensils and much more. "The focus will be on Awadh but a person in Awadh should know what mosques elsewhere look like," he said. "That need not be delivered like a history lesson—just a picture of a wooden mosque in Kerala (wood is not used in mosques in Uttar Pradesh) will open one's eyes to the many great and little traditions that have shaped our ethos."

Mindful of his advancing years, Pant said that he was sharing his idea with many students who are as



I HAVE BEEN HERE (DHANNIPUR) FOR 29 YEARS. BROTHERHOOD AND AMITY ARE THE ONLY TWO WORDS I CAN THINK OF TO DESCRIBE THIS PLACE.

—Chandrashekhar Tiwari (in pic), priest at a Jain temple close to the plot for the mosque

excited as him to be part of the project. "We are harking back to the time when mosques were not just places of worship but of congregation," he said. "In this complex, one will be able to experience Awadh's myriad delicacies—kebabs from Jaunpur one day, and *nimona* (ground green peas curry) from Banaras the next, while gazing at different facets of life in Awadh." Space constraints mean that a large part of the exhibits will be

displayed digitally.

Syed Mohammed Akhtar, dean of the Jamia Millia School of Architecture, is the architect for the complex. He said he would bring an inclusivity to the project—the kind he has practised within the classroom. "Every year, I send my students to different directions of the country to soak in various influences," he said. The aim of the complex, he said, was "to serve humanity and bridge the gap between communities". He described the complex as Islamic in spirit and Indian in ethos.

"It will be contemporary, with contemporary themes," he said. "Architecture always creates newness, it does not replicate the past. As a contemporary complex it will be a reference for the world. The latest materials will be used. It will be a zero-energy building with immense foliage. Water conservation structures will be built into it."

That imprecise land will thus offer a precise glimpse into what it means to be secular and profoundly all-embracing of beliefs and manners. ●



DREAMS ON HOLD

With her stage shows cancelled because of Covid-19, Ranu Mandal is confined to her home

BITTERSWEET MUSIC

RANU MANDAL'S FALL FROM FAME WAS AS SUDDEN AS HER RISE. SHE IS BACK TO WHERE SHE STARTED AND BEREFT OF ANY REAL ASPIRATION

BY RABI BANERJEE

Begopara village in West Bengal's Nadia district stands out in the region. The houses, many of them with gardens, indicate that the residents are wealthy. This oasis in the Ranaghat area owes its affluence to remittances from the Middle East.

However, one woman was an exception. She had no one in the Gulf; her first husband died and she was deserted by her second husband and her four children. So, the woman, who is in her early fifties, lived alone in a shabby house. Then, her luck changed. Overnight, Ranu Mandal became an internet sensation.

Her rendition of Lata Mangeshkar's *Ek pyar ka nagma hai...* took the internet by storm. Soon, Mandal left Begopara for Bollywood. Money was flowing in and she was booked to perform countrywide and also abroad. But, even her fairy-tale story was not immune to Covid-19. Half-a-dozen stage shows—in Kerala, Hyderabad, Dubai, Abu Dhabi and two in West Bengal—were cancelled. Mandal, now back in Begopara, is confined to her old house. Perhaps unwittingly, she had not used her newfound wealth to improve her

living situation. She was off chasing bigger dreams.

The house was surrounded by bushes and the interior does not reflect what is expected of the quarters of a singer who had moved millions with her voice. Her only hope now, she says, is Jesus Christ, whose image hangs on her wall.

"Christ has given me whatever I have received in my life," says Mandal. "What is happening today is also perhaps because [I] deviated from his path of truth. He will not deprive me in the future, as I am [back] on the right path." Her wealth has eroded considerably. Fearing rash decisions by her, the local cultural club has taken over her finances.

"I do not have money to purchase anything," says Mandal. "Whatever I need, I ask the club head Tapan [Das] and he brings it." Das says: "The money is safe in our account. We give her everything she needs. The money is not being misused." Das refused to disclose how much money she has, but said, the amount was "good". "We will not waste the money and will not give it to the relatives who deserted her," he says.

Mandal was a professional singer when she was young and used to do

shows with her first husband, Babu. Their children, a son and a daughter, are now married. After Babu's death, Mandal married his cousin. He abandoned her after a few years. She has two children with him, too; both are well-settled in Mumbai. Her second husband, whose name she did not want to share, is a cook in Mumbai.

None of her children were in touch with her. Her daughter from her first marriage, Elizabeth Sathi Roy, who stays in Birbhum, West Bengal, came to see her after recognising her in the video. Elizabeth alleges that the club has "destroyed" her mother's wealth. "They have duped her and are not looking after her," she says.

"Ranu di's daughter knew her mother was having a difficult life before her song went viral," says Das. "Why did she not look after her mother all these years? Her mother used to beg at the railway station. Does she not know that?" Mandal prefers not to talk about her daughter's allegations against the club and Das's tough questions. "Please do not ask me these," she says. "I have no idea about it."

The man who 'discovered' Mandal, Atindra Chakraborty, says she could be mentally unstable. Chakraborty,



MELODIOUS MEMORIES

Mandal with mementos received from her stage shows

suspects she may have misbehaved with Reshammiya and others in Bollywood, too. "Perhaps that is why they turned their backs on her," he says.

Chakraborty said he is also staying away from her. "I am not famous, but I was worried that her behaviour would impact me and people would see me differently," he says. "I go to meet her at her home, albeit rarely, but I do not take part in crucial decisions in her life."

Das said it would be unkind to call her mentally challenged. "She was neglected for years," he says. "It is natural for her to react that way.

We must understand that she could never be normal again. Her soul as a singer died long back and she does not have any aspirations. But what was not lost is her talent."

Perhaps surprisingly, no attempt was made to upload a fresh video of her singing during all the time she was confined to home. Das and Mandal felt that uploading more videos online would get them nowhere.

Many residents of Begopara continue to visit Mandal. She often gets irritated when conversations with them remind her about her brief stint in tinsel town. "She asked me to visit her with things like biscuits and cake," says Raju Banerjee, a businessman in Ranaghat. She would not sing for visitors unless they make her happy, he adds with a smile.

Das says that once normalcy resumes Mandal will make a comeback. "And this time, things will be different," he says. What does Mandal have to say about it? She smiles and says: "How can I know what will happen? Am I God? Only Lord Jesus knows what will happen in the future." ●

an electronics engineer from Ranaghat, heard her sing at the town's railway station. "You would not believe how she looked," he says. "Just watch my first video on the internet. She used to sit on the railway platform with a jute bag. People used to offer her food or money. In return, she sang some of Lata Mangeshkar's all-time hits."

One day Chakraborty shot a video on his phone and uploaded it on social media. "I never thought it would go viral," he says. The video reached Sony TV, who invited her to their music reality show. Chakraborty and Das took Mandal to Mumbai. Music director Himesh Reshammiya and lyricist Javed Akhtar were impressed with her. Reshammiya gave her a chance to sing in his project, Happy Hardy and Heer. "The song, Teri meri kahani, was shared 200 million times on social media," says Chakraborty.

He says that Reshammiya also arranged foreign tours. As Chakraborty did not have a passport, Das, who had been a cook in the gulf, accompanied Mandal to Dubai, Qatar, Oman, Abu Dhabi and Saudi Arabia.

Her voice caught the attention of the Indian community abroad and her rags-to-riches story was celebrated in the media.

Mandal rented a flat in Mumbai; there was speculation that it was a gift from super star Salman Khan, who had met her at another reality show. But, this is not true. The sudden celebrity status was too much for Mandal to handle, says Chakraborty. He says she was rude to fans who tried to take selfies with her. "I tried to make her understand that she would have to accept it and take it in her stride as fans are everything in the lives of celebrities," he says. "But, she refused to learn." Chakraborty says she misbehaved with him, too, and though he understood her "mental condition", it was too much to accept at times.

"I think she was not at all mentally prepared for such a big leap in life," he says. Her behaviour, like her songs, went viral on social media and was widely reported. Mandal's image took a hit. Once she became unpopular, opportunities in Bollywood dried up. Chakraborty says that he

THE WEEK
ANNIVERSARY
SPECIAL

CARTOGRAPHY



**NEW
FRONTIERS**

Payal Arya
maps on a
plane table
in Antarctica

MAPPING INDIA

MEET THE NEW GENERATION OF
CARTOGRAPHERS, WHO COMBINE TRADITIONAL
KNOWLEDGE AND TECHNOLOGY TO SURVEY
A COUNTRY AS DIVERSE AS INDIA

BY SNEHA BHURA

Sagar Gurung, a senior surveyor with the Survey of India (SoI) in Dehradun, has worked through landslides, 3,000m above mean sea level. Carrying his high-precision levelling instruments weighing over 10kg, apart from a barcoded staff and iron shoe that stabilises it, he has evaded rocks from heights on the Uttarkashi-Gangotri route, all the while praying that bears do not hound his survey party at night. "I have also seen snow leopards while doing my work," he says. When THE WEEK spoke to him, the 28-year-old was in Port Blair, working on a geoid model project in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

But his most dangerous assignment, recalls Gurung, was in 2018 for the National Mission for Clean Ganga at Jamui district on the Bihar-Jharkhand border. The district sits in the red corridor that sees significant Maoist activity. The CRPF personnel were amazed at the presence of Gurung and his team of field surveyors. They refused to offer any help directly. "But I had to finish my work. I was the team leader and I could not betray any nervousness or cowardice," says Gurung. He recounts an incident when a Naxal came charging at his team, with an arrow knocked into his bow. "We were six of us, and I was the most vulnerable being the leader," he says. "I stayed calm and mumbled something like we do not work for the government of India. We had removed the sticker from our vehicles, too. He stared into my eyes for a few seconds, but it seemed like a minute. I have never been more scared in my life." His local help in the team had all but given up. "He said, 'Sir, why don't you just drop out of this? What kind of work is this?'" says Gurung.

The adventures of surveyors make for fascinating thrillers. After the

Battle of Plassey in 1757, Robert Clive, governor of the Bengal, wanted a general map of the areas under his administration. He chose 24-year-old James Rennell for the task. Clive wrote to the Court of Directors, the executive body of the East India Company, around 1767, "We have appointed Captain Rennell, a young man of distinguished merit in this branch, to be Surveyor General, and directed him to form one general chart from those already made.... This though attended with great labour does not prevent him from prosecuting his own surveys, the fatigue of which, with the desperate wounds he has lately received in one of them, have already left him but a shattered constitution...."

The "wounds" had been inflicted on Rennell while fighting off a band of robbers in the dense jungles of north Bengal. After a leopard killed five men from his survey party, Rennell stabbed the rampaging animal through its mouth when it was his turn. A 1968 academic writing for the Royal Geographical Society, thus opined, "In fact, in those days a survey assignment in some areas was virtually equivalent to a sentence of death."

In a telephonic chat from Dehradun, Surveyor General of India Lt General Girish Kumar laughs at the suggestion of punishing fieldwork "for our robust surveyors". He talks about his own walk across the flat and featureless Rann of Kutch with a magnetic compass on an assignment in the 1980s when there was no GPS. And how he found his way out of a quicksand. But any further border area survey talk is always met with a genial "no comment".

When asked about his views on how post-colonial border disputes in India invariably get attributed to the "cartographic aggression" of the British Raj, Kumar shares another



laugh. "We have been continuously improving our positioning infrastructure," he says. "When the Great Trigonometric Survey started, how many millions of people died because the terrain was difficult? Border areas are difficult to map. I am the last person to blame anyone for any dispute. It is all created by circumstance and we need to improve and work with our neighbours. Where is the problem? I never blame my predecessors for anything. Any decision has to be taken at that particular moment."

Kumar names William Lambton (1753-1823) and George Everest (1790-1866) as the two most crucial names in the history of Indian map-making. The duo was responsible for conceiving and completing 'The Great Indian Arc of the Meridian, which began in 1802 with Lambton. Officially called The Great Trigonometrical Survey, it covered the length of the country with a colossal web of triangulations over



CHARTING PROGRESS

Sagar Gurung does high-precision levelling on the Uttarkashi-Gangotri route

a distance of 2,400km in the north-south direction. Using theodolites (a 50kg instrument with a rotating telescope to measure horizontal and vertical angles) and 100ft-long chains, the English surveyors mapped British India with a scientific precision unknown at the time, making cartography in the subcontinent the most advanced in the world then. "The contributions of these two are remarkable," says Kumar. "They laid the groundwork. If the framework is not there, then no other ground survey can commence." Even till the 1990s, says Kumar, theodolites and star observations from the ground were much in use to determine latitudes and longitudes, until GPS technology came into the picture. But such is the astounding science of precision behind triangulation, which uses three mutually visible reference points on prominent hills or buildings to measure distances and angles using trigonometry, that

even GPS often fails to account for minute differences. "GPS does not give real-time, accurate coordinates," says Kumar. "It has to be processed to get those accurate coordinates."

As we enter 2021, Kumar says that the triangulation method will be phased out in the next two-three years, except in the northeast. "We are now moving to the third stage of Continuously Operating Reference Stations (CORS)," he says. "These stations are very accurate and provide a virtual base station. CORS has given us a new dimension, how the positioning infrastructure has to be created within a country. We created Great Trigonometrical stations, then we converted them into GPS stations and now we are converting them into CORS. They will be like mobile towers."

Kumar says that they have already started establishing CORS in Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka and Maharashtra, and it will soon be a pan-India

thing. While we wait for CORS to take over the length and breadth of the country, intrepid field surveyors recount their own dramatic tales and travails of mapping India. As Kumar proudly declares, "Sovereignty of a country is defined by three actionable objects—its flag, its currency and its map. As surveyors, we uphold the sovereignty of the country."

PAYAL ARYA specialises in marine geodesy. The 28-year-old surveyor, based in Dehradun, makes advanced tidal predictions from water level monitoring stations to help shipping companies, navies and coast guards. In 2018, on a whim, she filled in a form for the 38th scientific expedition to Antarctica for a contour mapping exercise. Little did she know then that she would become the first female surveyor in the history of SoI to work in the coldest, windiest and driest continent. She underwent rigorous physical training imparted by the Indo-Tibetan Border Police at Auli in Uttarakhand, had counselling sessions for psychological preparedness at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences in New Delhi and attended discipline and fire-fighting classes at the National Centre for Polar and Ocean Research in Goa. But none of these could give her a fair grasp of the polar terrain for her "summer" sojourn to Antarctica from December to March, with normal temperatures at -10 degree Celsius.

"I was very happy to reach Antarctica. I was ready to face anything," recalls a chirpy Arya on the phone. "For three months, I did not miss anything from India." Born and raised in Manipur, where her father was an Assam Rifles officer, Arya was toughened by the National Cadet Corps. In Antarctica, as she left the Maitri base at 8am every day—trussed in three layers of suits and carrying a bag weighing at least 20kg along with

her surveying equipment, including total station (advanced version of a theodolite) and a prism—Arya would brace herself for continuous walking. Her senior officer would find a reference point on an elevation where he would record measurements in his total station, while Arya would follow his directions and record coordinates in pencil on a map using plane tabling, the oldest method of mapping. “You never know where it is an ice sheet and where a hard surface. My job was to keep walking round and round and my senior would dictate points from one station. So many times I would fall over and my socks and shoes would freeze,” says Arya, giggling. “The terrible blizzard there is so strong, it rips through your body.” Protecting the map, however, was her priority. “Sometimes, I would lie over it to prevent any snow from falling on it. The pencil mark cannot get smudged, otherwise the accuracy of the map will [suffer],” recalls Arya, who never ate anything between breakfast and dinner; her packed lunch would freeze over outside the research station anyway.

Out in the snow there was no way to attend nature’s call. With a radio receptor in one hand and her earphones plugged in, Arya could only compensate for her constrained circumstances with music. Once when she slipped on an ice sheet, along with her radio and prism, Arya panicked, for she knew the instruments had to be protected at all costs. Then she remembered her mother. “She made me watch a lot of Bear Grylls before going there. In a similar situation, he showed how to just lie down and spread one’s arms and pull the leg out slowly. That really saved me,” says Arya, who had six minutes of satellite phone connectivity to India, to be used only once a month. But she dismisses all these difficulties to reveal the most complicated part of



TALL TASK
Swarnima Bajpai does high-precision levelling on the Jhansi-Kanpur highway

living close to the South Pole. “One day in a fortnight, all officers at the research station, irrespective of their titles, would be assigned ‘galley’ duties,” she recalls. “Everyone had to mop and clean that day. It was also the day you could take a bath. The most dangerous work for me was when we had to collect human excreta from the station and burn it in an incinerator. The wind would often make the ashes from it fly into our faces. The first time I did it, I vomited. Then I realised even the king has to do this here.”

In the geodetic and research branch of SoI where Arya works, she is one of four female surveyors in a department of around 250. Professional female surveyors are still

hard to come by, long demanding hours in the field being only one of the reasons why it is not considered the most fulfilling career choice. Yet their eye for detail and patience for continuous observations are a much-needed asset. When women map, it is said, they can drive local policy change by highlighting their gender-specific needs like toilets, domestic violence shelters, women’s health clinics and child care services. A lot is changing; SoI is now attracting more female candidates.

For Swarnima Bajpai, posted in Kolkata, field surveying opportunities stretching into months have not really presented themselves. Neither is she too keen. Yet, during her training at the Indian Institute of



BORDER AREAS ARE DIFFICULT TO MAP. I AM THE LAST PERSON TO BLAME ANYONE FOR ANY DISPUTE. IT IS ALL CREATED BY CIRCUMSTANCE AND WE NEED TO IMPROVE AND WORK WITH OUR NEIGHBOURS.

Lt General Girish Kumar,
Surveyor General of India

Surveying and Mapping in Hyderabad, she went to Uttar Pradesh for three months to work on a levelling line project, running for 200km from Jhansi to Kanpur, as part of the National Hydrology Project. "You can sit in a car and collect data on the latitude, longitude using wide-angle cameras and mobile mapping devices. But for the orthometric height (height above sea level), you have to walk," says Bajpai, who would cover around 6km every day with her instrument and with columns as tall as her. She had help from Group D staff from SoI. "Sometimes when Group D staff are not there, we hire locals," says Bajpai. "We cannot hold the [columns]. They often drink and run away. Handling them is difficult. Levelling requires skilled group D staff."

Mapping a territory is no easy task, for people are territorial. Bajpai recounts one incident in February 2020 in West Bengal's Bardhaman district. Residents, sitting in protest against the Citizenship Amendment Act, reacted sharply to the survey party in a village there. "They took our surveyors hostage and the local police refused to lodge FIRs," recalls Bajpai. "Our team tried explaining that we were not conducting surveys for CAA, but the villagers absolutely refused to listen. They tore all our official documents. Their mukhiyas carry guns, you know. For two-three days, survey teams had to halt the work. We were collecting data in the 2,000th scale, taking details even of ATMs. Locals got suspicious. But ground survey has to be done for verification even if it can be plotted with satellite imagery."

THE NORTHEAST makes for one of the most challenging terrains for a surveyor, with hundreds of kilometres into forward areas untouched by any transport network worth its name.

Banshailang Kharmawphlang, from Shillong, carries out GPS observations in Meghalaya to produce hi-resolution satellite imagery as part of the geospatial data centre department of SoI. He has worked extensively in the border areas of the region. He often crosses rickety bamboo bridges or finds himself encountering militants in Manipur and Nagaland or a herd of elephants in Gossaigaon in Assam. "Field surveyors at Survey of India need to know how to work the GPS, total station, labelling and they can also do astronomical observations. We are jack of all trades," says Kharmawphlang. "But we need more latest machines and specialised experts in the region."

One legendary name in the field is Nain Singh, who was hired by SoI as a "pundit" for explorations in Tibet in the mid-19th century. He disguised himself as a Tibetan lama to reach Lhasa, where he stealthily conducted astronomical observations. His cousin Kishen Singh was robbed by bandits and reduced to begging while crossing the Tibetan plateau, but Kishen continued to record his observations incognito and resurfaced four years later with geographical data—after being assumed dead.

Today one would be hard-pressed to find intrepid encounters of the vintage kind in the accounts of field surveyors, but the work continues to be daunting. Prakash Chand, 50, from Mandi, has conducted mapping exercises across Himachal Pradesh for 29 years now, including for defence purposes. "First we used to traverse, now latitude and longitude can be given by GPS. Five years ago, there was no hotel facility. We lived in tents." But there are wild encounters still. He recalls a recent night at Una district when he saw the gleaming eyes of a tiger outside his tent in the glow of a torch. "In the jungle," he says, "you are on your own." ●

DOWNLOADING MONEY

THESE MONEYMAKING APPS WILL NOT MAKE YOU RICH, BUT THEY CAN EARN YOU SOME EXTRA POCKET MONEY

BY OSHIN GRACE DANIELL

The world is at your fingertips. In every literal sense, yes. This applies to making money as well. With internet explosion and a surge in the number of smartphone owners, a vast majority now have access to doors leading to new opportunities. However, it is important that we unlock the right door.

Be it a side-hustle or just something to do in your spare time, there are hundreds of mobile apps out there designed to generate supplemental income. You may not become rich with these apps but you can make some pocket money by performing some simple tasks from the palm of your hand. On that note, make sure that you do not fall prey to those click-bait adverts that scream 'become a millionaire overnight.' Cybercrime is rampant now, and with easy advertising legit-looking scam accounts and businesses are booming. "It is all fake," says Brinda Menon, a 22-year-old law student from Mumbai. "I heard this YouTuber called 'Investor' talk about earning around \$150 per day for just listening to music. He was so convincing. I followed all



his instructions but did not earn a penny," she says. Like Brinda, several others have been tricked by various YouTubers who claim to have earned a fortune using the apps suggested by them. According to Akhil Khatri, a YouTuber and an expert in the online money-making field, out of one thousand videos on ways to make money online, two might be legit. "Most people are confused and they think that easy money means no work. But making money, be it on an online platform or offline, needs dedication," he says. His YouTube channel 'Paisa Waisa'

MOST PEOPLE ARE CONFUSED AND THEY THINK THAT EASY MONEY MEANS NO WORK. BUT MAKING MONEY, BE IT ON ONLINE OR OFFLINE, NEEDS DEDICATION.

—Akhil Khatri (in pic),
YouTuber

not only informs people of legit online methods to make money but also calls out scams. Akhil started his journey in 2007 when he was in college. He started with blogging initially but curiosity led him to try out other verticals. "My first payment was \$8. I wrote four articles for \$2 each," he says. But before you get started, be wary of potential scams that ask for a fee to register or over-exaggerate the potential earnings. Always, look at the app ratings and read the user reviews. Surely, most of us use our phones to access our bank accounts and pay bills, so why not leverage the device to earn some extra money?

For the freelancer community

Recently, the concept of freelancing got popular among young people for all the right reasons. From flexibility in working hours and environments to getting paid for a tiny bit of extra work, the concept is too good to ignore. But it definitely takes some patience to get the ball rolling. One of the oldest freelancing websites in India is Freelancer. One can find on this platform roles like basic data entry, research, writing, web designing, building blogs and digital marketing. The app is now available on Android and iOS. Although it is trustworthy, it does not have a user-friendly design. But with a little patience, you can zero in on a project. Another popular freelance platform is Upwork. While getting accepted on Upwork can be tricky, once you are in, you can make a lot of money. And again, staying on this platform demands consistency and building a good reputation. Among the lot, Fiverr is an app that stands out, both in terms of app design and usability. Besides programming, technical writing and translation projects, one can find freelancing



options in voiceover, video editing, photography, music composing and mixing and even astrology. “Fiverr SEO is extremely important,” says Akhil. “Do not create a gig just for the sake of creating one. It is key to put in thought and be creative. Another thing to keep in mind is to create all seven gigs. Not by copy pasting your previous gig content but with proper Fiverr SEO marker.” He also emphasises on going through competition and finding loops in creating gigs that draw attention and putting out sample work.

For Shikha Singh, a former English teacher at a private school, Fiverr is her main source of income. “I earn around ₹50,000 per month sitting at home. It started after I got pregnant with my first child and I had to leave my job as I was asked to be at home for medical reasons. I did not want to sit idle and I needed an income,” she says. Shikha does ghost writing and proofreading for a minimum of \$15 per gig. “People need to understand that without doing work, money does not come.”

For the photographers

If you are into photography, you can make a few extra bucks.

The ability to make money as a photographer, like a YouTuber or Instagrammer, is all about harnessing that same creativity at the heart of your work and applying it to the monetisation of your talents. “Someone who is into stock photography won’t rely on just one platform to sell their work, but multiple ones. I am on over 30 platforms,” says Akhil. Shutterstock tops the list in this category. It is a micro-stock site where photos are cheaper and non-exclusive, and the way to increase downloads is by contributing a large quantity of images that can be used as visual metaphors. “It is an excellent platform if you are just starting off,”

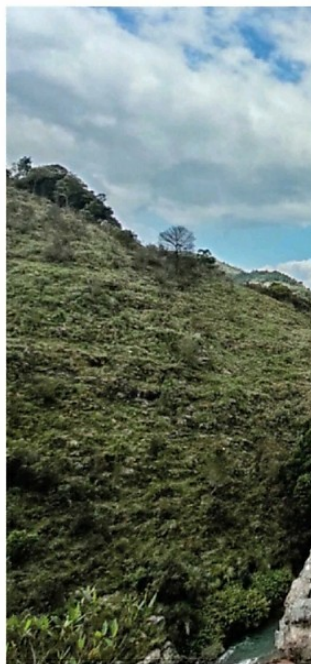
says Samuel Soundararaj, a wildlife photographer. “Don’t expect to earn a lot here. But this platform gives you an idea of what kind of photos get more traction. Currently, I use 500px which is a great platform for serious photographers.” Payouts are based on your earnings over time. There is also an affiliate programme where you can earn additional money if you refer new photographers or customers. On the higher end of stock photography sites, Getty Images attracts brands and publishers looking for high-quality or hard-to-find exclusive images to license. The standards for becoming a contributor are predictably higher than many other stock photo sites. Next on the list is Twenty20. It started as a tool for Instagram photographers to sell their images to brands. Now, it is an extensive stock photography site where you can sell photos online and connect with potential clients. You can earn money three ways: selling a photo, cash prizes from photo challenges and commission from whatever brands hire you for scheduled shoots.

Adobe Stock is also consid-

**CURRENTLY,
I USE 500PX
WHICH IS A
GREAT PLATFORM
FOR SERIOUS
PHOTOGRAPHERS.**

—Samuel Soundararaj (in pic),
freelance photographer

ered one of the best places to sell photos online because when you list a photo sale here, it is also available on stock site Fotolia. One can earn around 33 per cent commission on the photos that sell through Adobe Stock. The last one on the list is Foap. It offers contributors five ways to earn money: \$5 for every photo sold, \$100–\$2,500 for missions, \$0.25 per photo for album-specific photo sales, submitting photos to Getty Mission (payouts vary), and selling photos online via partner platforms, such as Adobe and Alamy. Basically, it is a crowdsourcing platform for brands and advertising and marketing agencies to find and purchase images from Foap’s registry of more



than 2.5 million photographers around the world.

For the opinionated

Your opinions matter. At least that is what most companies base their business plans on. And the best part is that most companies are ready to pay for your honest opinions. Google is one of the trusted platforms and its rewards-based programme Google Opinion Rewards tops the list in this category. With this app, one takes surveys that are run by market researchers. Survey frequency may vary and one does not have to answer all of it. Payouts are usually through Google Play or PayPal credit for each completed survey. Topics

include everything from opinion polls to hotel reviews and merchant satisfaction surveys. You can redeem the points to buy Android apps, movies, books, and music from the play store. "I would not call this the best survey app but I have managed to earn some Google Play credits for buying paid apps on Play store. Once you register for this app, Google offers you approximately 20 surveys a week," says Shibin Mathew, a software engineer at private company. If you are looking at more than just Google Play credits, then Swagbucks is the app for you. You can find it in the Play Store under the name SB (Swagbucks) answers. This is one of the most straightforward money

I WOULD NOT CALL THIS THE BEST SURVEY APP BUT I HAVE MANAGED TO EARN SOME GOOGLE PLAY CREDITS FOR BUYING PAID APPS ON PLAY STORE.

—Shibin Mathew,
software engineer

earning apps. Swagbucks lets you complete a number of tasks and activities to earn money. Here, all you need to do is take up surveys and answer them promptly. Each study on Swagbucks carries a certain amount of earning points which can be redeemed later as gift cards on Amazon and PayPal. It goes beyond surveys though, Swagbucks offers activities like playing games and watching videos as well.

The truth is that although your opinions are taken into account, it does not fetch you a lot of money. Definitely not the price it deserves. But again, tiny drops of water make an ocean. Going by that, every penny counts. However, is it worth the time we put in? Maybe not. What about gamers who claim to earn big bucks by just betting or creating a virtual cricket team? "Don't fall for it," says Akhil. "There are several apps in India that are designed for people who are into betting and fantasy cricket and football. However, I feel that it is all a scam. From my experience, I have found that people who claim to win these fantasy cricket challenges are mostly bots." Looks like it is all about taking a risk, a lot of trial and error and, most of all, patience. ●





A LOST WORLD

FROM THE CAVES OF MEGHALAYA
TO THE SUMMIT OF THE RUPIN
PASS, THE WEEK PRESENTS
DESTINATIONS WHERE YOU CAN
FULFIL YOUR WANDERLUST

BY ANJULY MATHAI



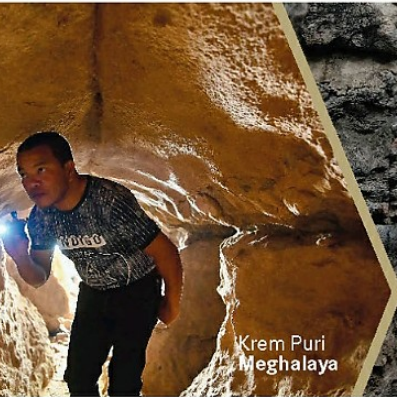
Golden Temple,
Amritsar



Ziro Valley,
Arunachal Pradesh



A dairy farm,
Goa



Krem Puri
Meghalaya



Martand temple,
Kashmir



Lower and Upper Waterfalls
along the Rupin Pass trek



Movement is inbuilt in the human DNA. Right from two million years ago, when some of our ancestors left their homeland in East Africa to settle in North Africa, Europe and Asia. As early as the beginning of last millennia, the world started getting interconnected. Arab and Indian merchants brought cum-in, ginger, nutmeg and cinnamon to Egypt via the Red Sea. Slaves from Russia and North Africa were traded in Byzantium and the Balkans. The Vikings travelled to Canada, connecting many trade routes. Movement

is never just a transportation to another place, it is a transformation from within. Different cultures get internalised and new ideas become ingrained. Each time we move, we change. And when we move collectively, the world shifts a little.

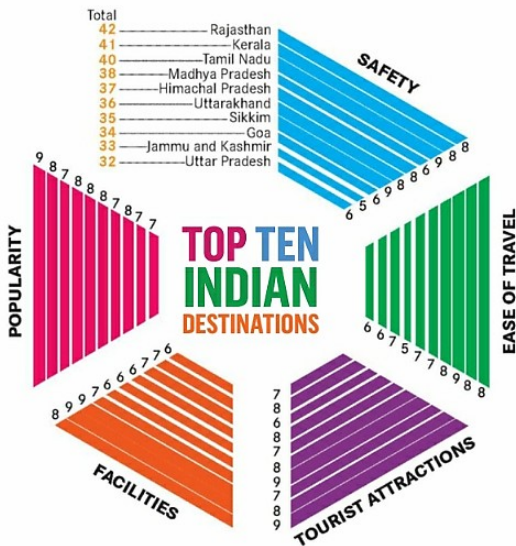
And then it all came undone when a virus brought us to our knees. Borders were closed and travel restrictions imposed. That age-old impulse to move had to be curbed. The northern lights of Scandinavia, the hot springs of Bali and the subtropical volcanic islands of Portugal became merely photographs on the Instagram pages of travel bloggers. Travel turned second-hand.

Ranking done by

CHARUKESI RAMADURAI



Charukesi Ramadurai is a freelance journalist who writes on travel, food, art and culture for many Indian and international publications. She has travelled to 48 countries in six continents and has Antarctica firmly in sight. Her travel experiences range from playing pied piper to curious street children in rural India to playing the alphorn in the Swiss Alps. From taking a microlight flight over the Victoria Falls in Zambia to learning to kayak on the Shannon river in Ireland. From rising at the crack of dawn to go bird-watching at the Ballestas Islands in Peru to cooing over endangered baby green turtles at the Ras al-Jinz Turtle Reserve in Oman. She tweets and instagrams at @charukesi.



In a Covid-struck world, one thought twice before indulging in the smallest pleasures—canoodling inside a cinema theatre, stress-shopping at the nearest mall, going to a fancy party (with all your party clothes now gathering dust in your wardrobe).... Whoever knew you would start to miss the freedom of haggling with your neighbourhood vegetable seller? Only a virus could turn our erstwhile complaints into privileges we took for granted.

When we prepared this travel package last year, the world was a different place, pulsing with life and vigour. One could travel to the caves of Meghalaya and wonder at how they are an evolutionary playground for age-old cave creatures. They bear in them the imprint of the world in its making, ancient secrets that will not survive in the light. One could take a train journey around India and discover how the country seeps into you in indelible ways. One could trek to the summit of the Rupin Pass, and right at the top, reach out for a fistful of heaven. Disillusionment, after all, belongs on level ground. One could

spend a fortnight with the Apatani Tribe in Arunachal Pradesh and be in awe of how they straddle the ancient and the modern. They put up videos of their age-old customs on YouTube. They wear designer rip-offs and nail chicken feathers to their doors. Perhaps happiness is to be found in this no-man's land where time has come unmoored.

Nothing can replace the joy of travel. That losing of the self in something larger than itself—a sun-drenched vineyard, the musty inside of an antique shop, the ruins of a lost city.... The stories in this package are more relevant today because they exude the bitter-sweet fragrance of the world that was. They are an ode to the hope that we will reclaim it soon and a pledge that we will never again take it for granted. ●



In addition to our stories, we got some well-known travel writers to recommend the best places to visit under these categories: adventure, beach destinations, wildlife and nature, and art and culture.



MARY ANN ISAAC

Mary Ann Isaac loves to travel and immerse herself in new cultures. Her solo travel experiences around the world are documented in her blog, *Stories from my Backpack*. She hopes to inspire more young women to experience the delights of solo travel.



ELITA ALMEIDA

Elita Almeida is a facilitator, freelancer and blogger. An ex-development sector professional, she currently runs workshops on expressive writing, works with organisations to create content, and gives in to her inner nomad when her spirit needs recharging.



SHIVYA NATH

Shivya Nath is the author of the best-selling travel memoir, *The Shooting Star*. At 25, she sold most of her belongings, left home, and embraced a nomadic life. She is a passionate vegan, and advocates slow, solo and meaningful travel. She tweets and instagrams at @shivya



SHUBHAM MANSINGKA

Shubham Mangingka is a travel blogger with an avid interest in photography, culture, heritage, trekking, slow travel and food. He loves listening to the stories of villagers and exploring offbeat places. He chronicles his trips on his travel blog, *travelshoebum*.



Life's whistle-stops

TRAVELLING AROUND INDIA
IN 80 TRAINS

BY MONISHA RAJESH

A warm breeze swirled through the carriage carrying the scent of frying coconut. As the Island Express jerked and jolted its way down the Malabar coast, my stomach growled, and I edged towards the aisle dreaming of fish moilee and appam as giant waxy leaves thwacked against the window, twigs snapping off through the bars. From my seat, I peered between the branches at clusters of villages, houses painted the colour of cotton candy, and listened to the distant toll of church bells. Locals sat in the shade playing cards; they raised their palms in greeting, beedis between thumb and forefinger.

In four months I had travelled on almost 80 trains around India and was still in thrall to the way in which they could burrow into the nooks and crannies of the country, inching through jungle, skimming coasts, climbing towards hill stations and cutting deep into the guts of cities. No other form of transport laid bare a country with such verve and flair.

When I set off on my journey, I knew that the Indian Railways had

more than 12,000 passenger services every day, rolling on 40,000 miles of track. But I never imagined that the trains could take me almost anywhere I wanted to go—to see the Golden Temple at dawn, to spot tigers in Ranthambore, and to taste tea at an estate in Ledo, Assam.

One afternoon, I decided to see how far north the track extended from Jammu Tawi station and boarded the train to Udhampur with a hot omelette sandwich in hand and no clue about what I would do once I got there. In just over an hour the Jammu Mail drummed around the rocky faces of the Shivalik mountain range, circling wide-mouthed rivers the colour of chocolate milk. It disappeared in and out of flimsy tunnels, clattering across 158 bridges.

On the approach to Udhampur, the land flattened out into meadows, the sky a sad and soulless white. Passengers disembarked in the rain, holding carrier bags on their heads, as they made for the exit. Soaked, I picked my way through the wet clay and followed the final strip of track until it tapered off into the dirt. The station emptied. There was nothing left to do

TRACK RECORD

In four months, Monisha Rajesh covered 25,000 miles on various trains





but board the same train, wait for the engine to rev and shudder and return to Jammu, but it did not matter to me; the joy was in the journey.

However, as much as I relished the rickety old trains—paint peeling from the walls, fan wheezing overhead, the carriages wearing belts of rust round their waists—I had no idea of the luxury that lay in wait. For so long I had been indoctrinated by the post-colonial puff of BBC documentaries fixated on passengers riding on the rooftops and the Victoria Terminus heaving at rush hour, to realise that India does extravagance, opulence and flamboyance like nowhere else on earth—especially on the railways.

Boarding the Indian Maharaja Decan Odyssey in Mumbai, now known as the Deccan Odyssey, I was instantly relieved of my bags by Benoy, a butler in a white suit, who garlanded me with wet marigolds and showed me to my suite, which smelt of fresh sheets and old dust. On the double bed, four pillows puffed out their chests with pride and a snip of hibiscus lay in the middle of the tight white duvet, along with a note that read: "Welcome aboard a journey to the depths of your soul!"

Along with not one, but two flat-screen televisions, the carpeted living area comprised a chaise longue and a carved wooden table, upon which was a silver platter stacked with fruit. Two bathrooms flanked the room, both fitted with showers and the added luxury of constantly running hot water. Even the compartments on board the Venice Simplon-Orient-Express contained nothing other than a mahogany wash basin, forcing passengers to go without showers and queue up sheepishly for their morning ablutions.

In preparation for lunch, diners swayed up the corridor amid the clink of gin and ice cubes and were greeted by white-gloved waiters performing all kinds of gymnastics in an effort to hold steady their trays of crystal and



cutlery. A thali arrived with a tower of biryani in the middle, topped with a papadam that opened like a lotus to reveal salad, clustered and shining like a jewelled brooch. Everywhere I walked I was greeted with deep bows, the smell and sight of rose petals, even the skin-soft feel of them scattered on my bed in the evening. Over seven days and nights, I was brought tea and biscuits in bed, my coasters were changed while I read, my clothes pressed while I slept, and my expectations surpassed beyond belief.

Travelling for four months, along 25,000 miles, I developed a stomach of steel and, to my surprise, a taste for vegetarian food. Carnivorous by nature, I found myself gravitating towards freshly-fried bondas, hot vadas on foil plates and crisp dosas

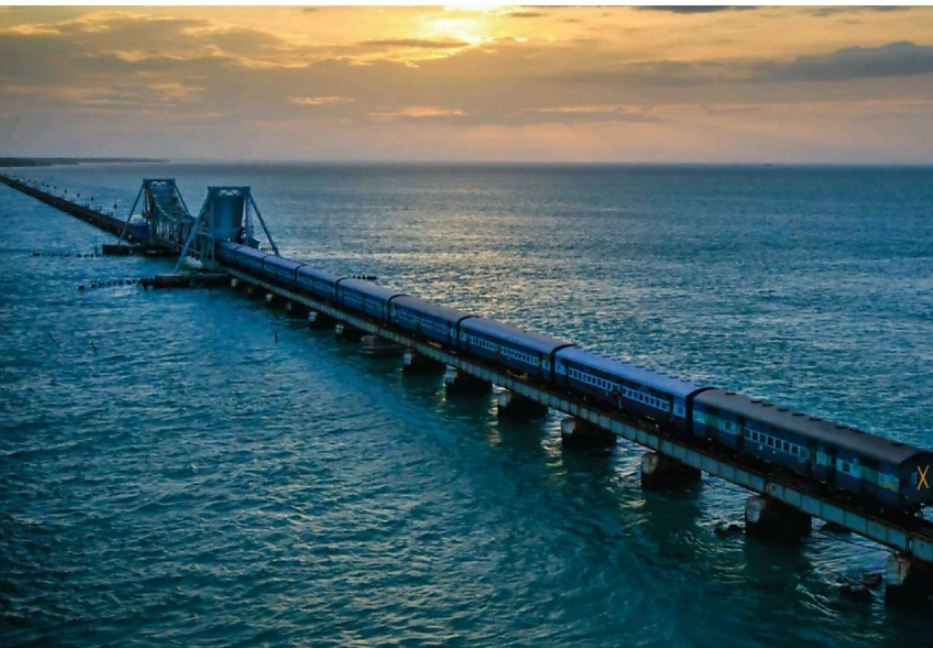
scraped up and folded over with dollops of cold, creamy chutney.

I began to talk to my fellow passengers about the on-board food, picking up tips on the best dhabas for chana bhatura in Chandigarh, the cleanest hawkers for pani puri in Chennai, and the stations with the softest idlis. It was not long before my train journeys took on a gastronomic twist and the routes began to morph into a culinary quest.

One afternoon, I boarded a Mumbai local to Vile Parle West and went in search of Mithibai College, opposite which is Anand stall, famed for its vada pav. Under a green and purple awning, already surrounded by a mob of students from across the road and couples perched on motorbikes, the vendor was frying,

CHUGGING ALONG

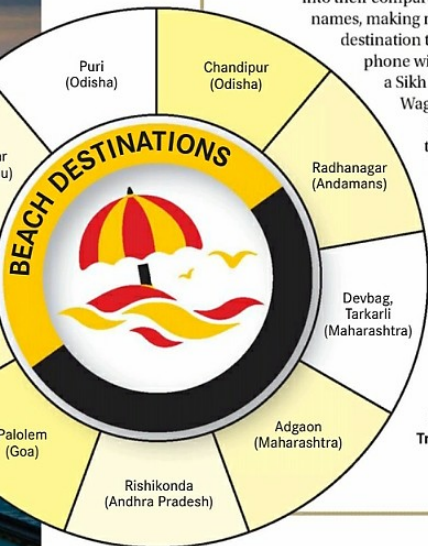
A train passing through Rameswaram in Tamil Nadu





INTO THE DISTANCE

Monisha Rajesh in a Mumbai local



flipping, slicing, buttering and spreading faster than the human eye could see. I waited impatiently, watching customers bite into their food, mouths burning but too hungry to wait or walk even a few paces from the stand. Holding my springy soft bun, I sank my teeth through the buttery layer into the fried potato patty, delighting in the salty lick of hot oil before the tang of coriander chutney and a smack of garlic and chilli powder. This was that falling in love tasted like. Munching on a handful of rock-salted fried chillies, I made my way back to the station, licking the crystals from my fingers and smiling all the way back into the city.

Distance, luxury and food aside, the one thing that surprised me on my journey around India was how safe I felt. While I began my trip in the company of a photographer friend, we soon went our separate ways. And, I was wildly aware of being a single woman travelling alone. Having read the multitude of horrifying reports of the "eve-teasing" and sexual harassment of women on a daily basis, I wore a ring on my wedding finger and a scarf around my shoulders, sitting hunched in corners with my nose in my diary, refusing to make eye contact with anyone. Despite these precautions, I was still groped one night in my berth, stalked down an empty platform, and often entered into staring matches, pulling out my phone to photograph creeps and latches, but these instances were few and far between. Perhaps my lack of showers and deep tan went some way towards repelling the crowds, but I found that most attempts to strike up conversation stemmed from concern, friendship and hospitality. Families would always invite me into their compartments, sharing their food, advice and hotel names, making me promise to call once I had arrived at my destination to let them know I was safe. Even now, my

phone will buzz with the occasional text message from a Sikh grandfather who helped me find a taxi to the Wagah border—just to check in.

In between hanging from doorways, squatting on steps and snoozing on piles of laundry, I came to understand where I fit into India and where India fits into me. I did not realise it at the time, but when I left the country, a small part of the railways followed me home to London—their dust in my hair, their rhythm in my bones and their charm infused in my blood. Little did I know that this was just the start of a long-term love affair with the railways, one that would one day take me around the world in 80 trains.

Monisha Rajesh is the author of *Around India in 80 Trains* and *Around the World in 80 Trains*.



Into the dark

EXPLORING THE CAVES OF
MEGHALAYA

TEXT BY ANJULY MATHAI
PHOTOS BY SALIL BERA

In my younger days, I have gone bungee jumping, scuba-diving, jet-skiing and indulged in a few other adventure activities which, with age and wisdom, I might not repeat. Caving was something I had never tried. The only time I had gone underground was at the Catacombs of Domitilla in Rome—a network of burial sites of early Christians dug into volcanic rock. The walls are covered with elaborate paintings of Christian symbols and scenes from the gospels. But exploring the caves of Meghalaya, of which there are more than 1,700, was a radically different experience.

The two kinds of underground spaces that I visited in Rome and Meghalaya could be called a theatre in which the battle between religion and science was being played out. While one documented the origin of Christianity, the other advanced scientific discovery—like a stalagmite from Krem Mawmluh, a seven-kilometre-long limestone cave in Sohra, that helped prove the existence of a 200-year-long drought which took place around 4,200 years ago, after

the Ice Age. The term Meghalayan Age was coined to describe this period. The drought destroyed many civilisations around the world, including the ones in Mesopotamia and in the Indus Valley.

Caving expert Bryan Daly Kharpran—who founded the Meghalaya Adventurers' Association (MAA) in 1990, and was part of the team that discovered the stalagmite in Krem Mawmluh—says that the eco-system of the caves provides a clue about the evolution of life forms on earth. "Since cave fauna have lived in total darkness, they have, over generations, adapted and evolved," he says. "They have no eyes, since they have become redundant. They are white because of lack of pigmentation. They feel about using extra-sensory hairs that are ultra-sensitive. So a cave cricket might be five centimetres long, but its antenna will be ten times its body length."

We visited Krem Mawmluh on a beautiful, glossy morning, which is a rarity at one of the wettest places on earth. Sunlight pooled on a pebbled stream, which we crossed to reach the entrance of the cave.

CAVING IN
Inside Krem
Mawmluh, a
seven-kilometre-
long limestone
cave in Sohra



A rough-hewn wooden ladder sank into a black void. My colleague, our guide Rishan Wahlang, and I climbed down into a cavern. A little way in, the light converged into total darkness, and there was only a slim shaft of it from our headlamps slicing the darkness.

I felt my way from one slippery rock to the next, praying that I would not fall. Then, a moment before hearing Rishan's warning, I stepped into freezing water and yelped out. The water reached up to our thighs and we splashed our way across it as fast as we could. After shaking it out of our gumboots, we encountered the next obstacle—the roof of the cave slanted in, so that we could not move without bending low. It gave the phrase 'back-breaking' a whole new meaning. Rishan disappeared out of sight, and I heard my colleague calling out to him, his voice eerily hollow. Desperate to catch up, I crawled ahead, my helmet clunking against the roof. All that creeping, ducking, balancing, wading and climbing could perhaps be called a low-grade version of a Navy SEAL training session.

"Are there snakes here?" I asked Rishan. "Oh yes," he answered. "Some of these caves are breeding grounds for snakes."

I stopped dead in my tracks. Snakes ranked pretty high on my list of things to avoid in life, right up there with syringes, screeching children on airplanes and books by Greek philosophers. One kilometre into the cave, we were spent and had to turn back. Upon surfacing into the light, I had a newfound appreciation for the sun, level ground and life without gumboots.

"You didn't go far enough to see the formations?" Bryan asked when we met him the next day in Shillong. Apparently, we had missed some beautiful stalagmite formations in the cave. (I thought it was a fair exchange for the pleasure of missing snakes.) Bryan lived in a charming house full of framed photographs, with a front yard where several children were playing. Only six or seven caves had been discovered in Meghalaya when he founded the MAA. Now, almost 30 years later, his team



has identified over 1,700 caves, of which around 1,000 have been mapped.

“More than any other adventure [activity],” he told us, “Ninety per cent of caving is scientific work. If you climb a mountain, whether you succeed or not, it is finished. The pleasure of discovering a cave is different. You are exploring something that is unknown, going completely into the dark, and not knowing what obstacles you are going to encounter or how big the cave is. That is the beauty of caving.”

Bryan and his team have just finished mapping the longest sandstone cave in the world—Krem Puri—over 25 kilometres long. We were possibly one of the first travellers to visit the cave after it was mapped in February. Getting there itself was an adventure. A trail cut through a dense forest. The loose sand and slippery rocks made it a treacherous trek. On one side, the mountain sloped into a gorge, and I tried not to look down. Around 45 minutes later, we reached the entrance of the cave, a shadowy portal into the unknown. We did not have a guide with us, so we only went a little way into the menacing darkness.

Krem Puri translates to ‘cave fairy’ in Khasi, a fitting name because of all the treasures it holds, from the fossils of shark teeth to, possibly, those of marine dinosaurs. According to Bryan, it is one of the most complex cave systems in the world. Every day people get lost there. “It is a complete maze,” he says. “Even I would think twice before entering unknown passages.”

The first time Bryan saw a cave was in 1964, when he went for a picnic with his family. Inspired by the adventures of Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer, he wanted to explore it but the others forbid him. So he got some local boys to accompany him inside. Today, the cave has become a show cave called Mawmsmai, with ticketed entry and artificially-lit corridors.

It was the last cave that we visited in Meghalaya. Inside, a woman in a salwar kameez knuckled past us, ignoring



LONGER, DEEPER, DARKER

Bah Shim, our guide, inside Krem Puri, the longest sandstone cave in the world

the entreaties of her husband—a portly man struggling to keep up with her. A group of boisterous youth with pushed-back sunglasses and slick hair ambled ahead of us, seemingly more interested in their selfie sticks than in the cave.

After our ‘SEAL training session’ in Mawmluh, Mawmsmai felt bland—like eating spinach after steak. It is not like I will ever be an experienced caver like Bryan. I will never get excited at the prospect of freezing water and claustrophobia. But I will no longer be puzzled about why people explore caves. There is something about the sufficiency of nature that calls out to the insufficiency in us. We are built to seek the unsought after. Sometimes, our minds are brightest when the light is dimmest, and each step we take is a step into the unfathomable. ●

Road to the Rupin

WATCH THE WORLD UNDULATE BELOW YOU, FROM THE SUMMIT OF THE RUPIN PASS, DURING A HIGH-ALTITUDE HIMALAYAN TREK

BY ARPIT KOTHARI

When was the last time you went without checking your phone for six days together?

When did you last drink mineral water, not out of a plastic bottle, but straight from glacier-fed Himalayan brooks? When did you last—or ever—play frisbee standing on opposite banks of a river. If you are still thinking, setting out on the Rupin Pass trek might give you the answers!



COMBINED EFFORT
Part of the group at Upper Waterfall

This high-altitude Himalayan trek, graded moderate to difficult, takes you from Dhaula in Uttarakhand to Sangla in Himachal Pradesh, across the Rupin Pass situated at 15,350ft. I set out on this incredible journey last summer with 17 other trekkers. The trip starts in Dehradun, and after an eight-hour drive via Mussourie, we reach Dhaula, where our camp is already set by the Rupin river.

"Chalo guys, out of your tents, everyone. I want all backpacks and sleeping

ARPIT KOTHARI



bags out. Kanav, react,” bellows our trek leader Taarak the next morning. “Everyone, have your breakfast, and let’s go, let’s go.”

It may sound a bit pushy, but in all fairness to him, it was necessary. We were snug in our tents, tired after a long drive. The collective lethargy of 18 of us is a formidable force that needs to be countered.

By 7am, we begin our trek in all earnestness. Destination: Sewa village. The initial climb is steep, but the trail soon softens to a comfortable gradient through coniferous forests that trace the course of the Rupin, a constant companion in the valley below. By afternoon, we reach Sewa, where we have lunch by an intricately carved, wooden temple that has many coins wedged into its walls. It looks as though its architects started

out by building a clock tower, but then figured that a Buddhist monastery was more what they wanted, so they topped it off with a pagoda-like roof.

We reach our camp early enough in the evening to enjoy a cool dip in the many rocky pools that form as the turquoise Rupin thunders past, dashing against massive boulders along its path. As the sun dips, and the shadows lengthen, the dimness of the woods creeps over our camp. Slowly but surely, it gets darker and quieter, and the cold, clear night, with its noiseless tread, is upon us. Our destination on day three of the trek is the tiny hamlet of Jiskun in Himachal Pradesh. It is the only night we will be staying indoors in a home-stay. The journey takes us through apple and apricot orchards and past

many waterfalls.

Once at Jiskun, we rid ourselves of the trekking gear, and wander about the village, ending up at the local primary school. Everyone has gone home for the day, except three students who invite us to play kabaddi in their playground. It is a closely contested match, which, unfortunately, is called off due to a steady drizzle. We rush back to our home-stay, where our hosts, a pahadi couple, have prepared steaming hot momos and the most delicious homemade sauce. It is the ultimate mountain luxury, and our hosts do a great job of keeping up with the ravenous strike rate of 18 hungry trekkers.

Well-rested and well-fed, we head towards Jhaka on the fourth day. It is a fascinating walk early on, as we



wind our way single file on narrow mountain ledges, with rough overhangs on one side and vertical drops into the valley on the other. The dense, swaying canopy of pine and deodar trees spreads out like a green ocean below.

Beyond Jhaka, the trail cuts through a dense fir and pine forest and the century-old trees tower so high that their tops are lost in the thick canopy. The sun barely manages to sneak in to the forest floor. This leg of the journey, on foot trails made by shepherds with their flocks, is as relaxing as it is pretty.

On the fifth day, the camp at Dhanderas Thatch is arguably the prettiest of the entire trip. Situated in the alpine meadows of the Rupin Valley, the Lower and Upper Water-

falls, as they are commonly known, make a formidable backdrop, while many smaller ones run down on either side of the camp. Once we are settled and the tents pitched, the brave among us take up the Ice River Challenge. A dunk in and out of the chilled snow-melt is a brain-numbing experience, and definitely not for the faint-hearted. Day six is the toughest and longest day of the trek. We reach the Lower Waterfall quickly, crossing over thick ice bridges. The journey to the Upper Waterfall, however, is a steep and arduous climb. The roar of the cascading water drowns us in surround sound, quite literally. Slanting sun rays, just beginning to slice the ragged peaks, strike the waterfall and split into a magnificent rainbow. The sheer, mad beauty of it all makes the ascent a most rewarding experience. We rest here awhile in silence, letting the magic sink in. It is difficult to resume

the trek and turn our back on this grand panorama. By the time we reach our camp at Rata Pheri, we are exhausted.

"Guys, tomorrow is the big day," Taarak briefs us before we hit the sack.

It is summit day and, incredibly enough, the trek starts on schedule. It is important to start well before sunrise because the snow that has turned hard overnight will turn soft and slippery during the day.

The final ascent to the pass is a stiff 70-degree climb that is done in single file with utmost caution. Each trekker uses the foothold that the one in front has carved out of the hard snow. And, step by step, foothold by foothold, we conquer Rupin Pass. The many hours spent at the gym strengthening those quads and hamstrings finally pay off. We are at 15,350 ft above sea level, and our collective egos, proud of the achievement, are a dozen metres higher.

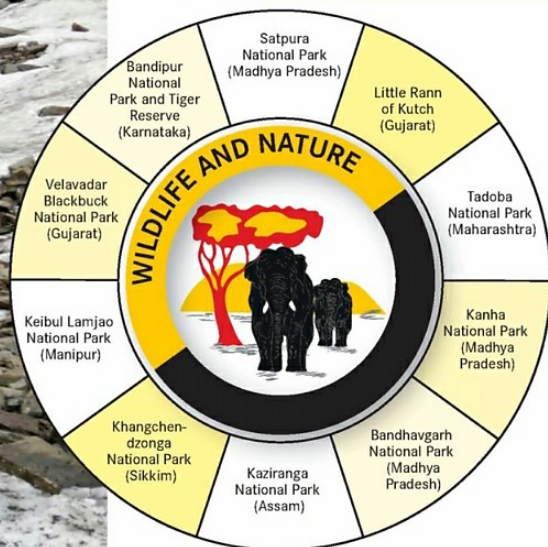
It is time to put our feet up and lord over the Dhauladhar range of the Himalayas. Up here, you cannot but be awed by the majestic mountains, the pristine rivers, the thundering waterfalls and the star-studded night skies. And the pure mountain air—that rarest of commodities. As I breathe in deliberate lungfuls, I am reminded of Henry David Thoreau's experiment, which he describes so beautifully in *Walden*:

"I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."

This summer, trek to feel alive. Trek to disconnect with your phone and reconnect to something else. Trek just to feel humbled and insignificant in the mighty mountains. God knows we need that the most. ●

TOP OF THE WORLD

The group summiting the Rupin Pass





Ruins and reminiscence

EVEN IN THEIR STATE OF NEGLECT, THE AGE-OLD TEMPLES OF KASHMIR MANAGE TO TELL THEIR STORIES ELOQUENTLY

BY CHARUKESI RAMADURAI

**RENEWED
INTEREST**
Ruins of the
Martand
temple

Standing in silent awe amidst the ruins of the Martand sun temple, I find myself wondering how this has managed to remain hidden for so long. My reverie is broken by the raspy voice of the guide asking me if I have seen the song sequence in the movie *Haider* shot here.

And, that is what it has come to—a stunning heritage site reduced to a film location. Built by King Lalitaditya Muktapida in the eighth century CE and destroyed by Afghan invader Sikandar Butshikan nearly 700 years later, the Martand temple dedicated to Surya, the sun god, remains forgotten and forlorn just outside a small village near Anantnag.

When I visit around noon, Martand feels open and exposed. The lime-



stone pillars in Greek style hold the broken walls and high arches. Intricate carvings of gods and goddesses, musicians and dancers, flowers and creepers cover the outer walls. The overall design ensures that sunlight fell on the main idol throughout the day.

A couple of days later, I head to see the temples in Awantipora, more commonly known as Awantipur. As it is located between the two popular destinations of Srinagar and Pahalgam, there are more visitors here. The gardens near the entrance are in full bloom with roses and dahlias; the fir trees lining the path that leads to the main temple look trimmed and watered.

There are two temples here: one dedicated to Shiva as Awantishwar; the larger and more popular one is dedicated to Vishnu as Awantiswami. The guide tells

Did you know?

BUDDHISM WAS ESTABLISHED IN KASHMIR IN 300 BCE, BUT WAS ECLIPSED BY THE FLOURISH OF HINDUISM IN 800 CE. THE REGION CAME UNDER MUSLIM RULE IN 1400 CE.

me that they were built by King Awantivarman of the Utpala dynasty. There is a stone relief featuring the king, queen and their retinue on the walls of the core temple area.

Like Martand, the main temple structure is built on a raised platform, in the Nagara architectural style. But, unlike the former, this temple was reduced to rubble by an earthquake, way before Butshikan set his sights on the kingdom.

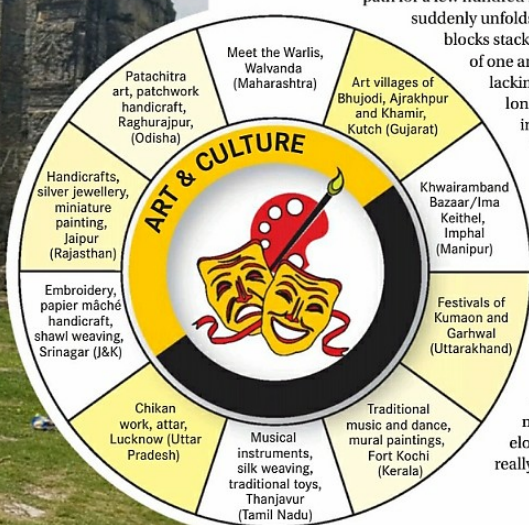
Back in Srinagar, after experiencing the floating vegetable market on Dal Lake and an overnight houseboat stay on Nigeen Lake, I wanted to take a day trip to Gulmarg to catch the last snows of the season. But a local friend suggests Naranag.

Naranag is the stuff of picture postcards. Just over an hour from Srinagar, on the route to Sonamarg, the ruins of the Shiva temples lie scattered in a valley ringed by snow-clad peaks and a pristine stream.

From the deserted parking lot, we walk down a rough path for a few hundred metres, and the spectacle suddenly unfolds—the ruins, massive granite blocks stacked almost carelessly on top of one another. The temples are all lacking complete roofs or walls; a lone Shivaling still stands intact in the inner sanctum of one.

While Martand and Awantipora felt secluded, Naranag comes across as even more of a recluse, without a single Archaeological Survey of India signboard or the usual stern warnings to vandals.

I am not entirely sure if that is a bad thing, leaving these ageless ruins to themselves. After all, even in their state of neglect, they manage to tell their stories eloquently enough to those who really care. ●





Vegans, this way

GOA IS MUCH MORE THAN ITS BEACHES AND PARTIES; EXPLORE THE VEGAN MOVEMENT SWEEPING THE STATE

BY SHIVYA NATH



Under a moonlit sky, I am biking along Goa's verdant paddies. The smell of wet earth, the cool breeze on my cheeks and the narrow leafy lanes welcome me back to the Goa I love.

As I drive out of the quiet lanes and on to a busy road, something feels amiss. A miserable-looking cow and her two calves are almost blocking the road. Of course, cows are not a novelty on Indian roads. But, in a place like Goa, where most cows are owned by small-scale farmers, one assumes that they would not be left to fend for themselves on busy roads.

My dreamy notion of cows in green spaces in the countryside is shattered, replaced by sympathy for their overwhelming presence amid traffic, feeding on scraps of food from the trash. A local resident suggests that I visit a cow sanctuary in Siolim, founded by Atul Sarin, who came to Goa 12 years ago. Sarin's Welfare for Animals in Goa (WAG) is an organisation dedicated to rescuing and rehabilitating abused animals.

Nearly 60 rescued cows greet me at WAG's cow sanctuary. I am amazed to know that like other pets, cows, too, love to play and cuddle.



As I learn about the bruised and battered cows rescued by WAG, it strikes me that they are relentlessly being abused—not just in Goa, but globally—to meet the demand for milk products.

It turns out that similar concerns moved Shawn Rodrigues to start his vegan restaurant, Bean Me Up, in Goa. He turned vegan nine years ago, while working for an animal welfare organisation. I am sold on my first bite of Bean Me Up's vegan chocolate mousse cake and convinced that being vegan does not mean sacrificing delicious food. Each time I visit Bean Me Up, it is packed with travellers and locals alike.

The longer I spend in Goa, the more I learn how the state's vegan movement extends beyond food. Apurva Kothari, owner of No Nasties—a 100 per cent organic and vegan clothing brand—turned vegan when he moved to Goa four years ago, after giving up his tech career in the US.

PARADISE'S PALETTE

(From top) WAG cow sanctuary; chocolate mousse cake of Bean Me Up; Shiyva wearing No Nasties vegan apparel



Did you know?

VEGANISM IS AGAINST THE USE OF SILK SARIS, LEATHER SHOES, CERTAIN TOOTHPASTES AND EVEN SUGAR THAT HAS BEEN REFINED USING CHARRED ANIMAL BONES.

As I browse through the chic apparel at his flagship store in Assagao, I wonder if people care enough to seek out vegan brands. Apurva candidly answers: "The condition of animals used for food, apparel, cosmetics and animal testing in India is shocking; as shocking as the very few consumers who care about where their food comes from." And, yet, he thinks it is a sound business decision to stay ahead of the curve in ethical fashion, for awareness will grow with time.

Not everyone is aware of the globally-growing vegan movement, yet, and eyeballs are often rolled at me, even in Goa, when I try to order shakes with nut milk or pizza with cashew cheese. But, The Secret Garden Goa of Helene Menezes—an ancestral, Portuguese-style house-turned-homestay—is different.

British by birth, Helene came to Goa 24 years ago. She fell in love with a Goan and gradually began hosting discerning travellers from around the world. In the organic garden surrounding their house, she grows many of the vegetables, fruits and herbs used in her kitchen. Having lived a meat-free life for over 40 years, Helene delights in experimenting with creative and flavourful breakfasts for her guests—nearly 50 per cent of whom are vegan or vegetarian.

When it is time to say goodbye, I feel inspired by the vegan movement sweeping across Goa. Most people leave the state with a temporary suntan. I leave the state with a permanent imprint on the animal lover in me. ●



Going with the wind

AMONG THE APATANI TRIBE OF
ZIRO VALLEY, A NEW WAY OF LIFE IS
REPLACING AGE-OLD TRADITIONS

TEXT BY ANJULY MATHAI
PHOTOS BY SALIL BERA

We are at the Myoko festival of the Apatani tribe of Ziro Valley in Arunachal Pradesh. It is a month-long festival of friendship, which is hosted by one of the seven villages of the valley every year. This year, it is being hosted by Hong village. This is the first day of the festival, when each clan—there are several in a village—inaugurates it with ceremonial chanting by a shaman or priest, the examining of a chicken liver to predict the success of the festival, and the passing around of home-made rice beer and tea.

I stood at the periphery, watching the ceremony. My companions had gone to our car to collect some equipment.



WEDDED BLISS

Apatanis during a marriage procession called mida



Suddenly, a man said something to me in Apatani. Almost the whole clan stopped what they were doing and turned to me. I froze. How could I communicate to them that I meant no harm? Then I heard a loud voice behind me. A woman emerged from the shadows, and I realised to my immense relief that they were not talking to me.

In fact, the Apatanis are a friendly lot. Several of them asked us where we were from and insisted we try the rice beer. When my colleague shot a video of one of them, he joked, "I will see myself next on YouTube." There are around 30,000 of them in Ziro. They believe they came from Tibet and settled in the valley more than 500 years ago. They are best known for their sustainable agricultural practices. While other parts of the northeast practise the destructive slash-and-burn or jhum cultivation, the Apatanis have maintained the fertility of their paddy fields by an elaborate network of streamlets.

We arrived at Ziro Valley on a damp March morning. It is a four-hour drive from the Naharlagun railway station. Ziro itself is a picture of serenity. The 50-square-kilometre valley is best visited in September, when tourists descend en-masse to attend the annual Ziro Music Festival. Then, the paddy fields, girded by forested hills, are an emerald green. When we visited, though, the land had just been tilled, and it lay desolate and naked.

The next day, we took a walk around Hong village, passing fenced bamboo huts, goats tethered to backyards, old women with betel nut-stained smiles and teenage girls in tight jeans. The Apatanis are nature worshipers who believe that everything in nature is sacred. "We offer sacrifices to the gods of agriculture and the gods of the forests," says Tage Kanno, a paediatrician from Ziro. "When we go to the fields, the work we do is not just physical but also spiritual."

However, around 10 years ago, Christian missionaries came to Ziro, and since then, there have been several conversions to Christianity. Many of the traditional practices and customs are under threat, especially with youngsters leaving Ziro to

study or find work elsewhere. Families are building houses of concrete and cement instead of bamboo.

There are only a few remaining Apatani women, mostly elderly ones, with the nose plugs and face tattoos they used to be famous for. "I got my nose plugged when I was seven or eight and face tattooed at 14 or 15," an elderly woman called Ya Sung told me. "It was done during winter, so that the chances of infection were less. My friends did not want to do it and their parents had to force them. As for me, I was looking forward to it." I ask her why she continued to wear the nose plug when so many Apatani women have got it removed. "It is what gives us our identity," she says with a gap-toothed smile. ●



MARKED FOR LIFE
Ya Sung got her nose plugged at seven or eight, and face tattooed at 14 or 15



Look who's surprised

Why does the government of India always insist on acting so coy? Like, with information? Why don't they ever just tell us before they pull a major piece of legislation out of a hat? Seriously, they remind me a little of those over-enthus, slightly obsessive boyfriends who always want to throw surprise parties for you on your birthday. You are walking around all chill and clueless, humming a little song perhaps, and bam, they leap out from behind the sofa holding a cake you never asked for, blazing with candles, dripping wax all over your clean floor, and bellow SURPRISSSSSE so loudly that you die of a heart attack. Right now, it is our farmers who are in danger of dying of a heart attack.

Last year, pretty much on these dates exactly, it was our minorities. A little before that, it was the much-put-upon Kashmiris. And before that, of course, it was all of us, reeling wildly in shock as GoI, beaming from ear to ear, leapt out and branched a two-tiered cake at us, the lower one iced 'Demonetisation' and the upper, 'GST'.

"Isn't it pretty?" they chortled. "Aren't you happy? C'mon, let's all sing Bharat Mata Ki Jai and blow its candles out! Lol, don't be afraid of this big knife we're holding! We're not going to slit your throat with it! So funny!"

And just like the toxic boyfriend, they sulk if you don't like the surprise. Sometimes they get nasty. They call you ungrateful. Like, look at us busting ₹20,000 crore on giving New Delhi this amazing new Central Vista, and you are so ungrateful you don't even like it! What do you mean we should have asked you what sort of new Central Vista you wanted, or if you wanted a new Central Vista at all? What do you mean you won't pay for it? How ungrateful! You think

this is some sort of democracy? Just say thank you nicely, and suck it up, okay?

The reason why toxic boyfriends love throwing surprise parties is that they are control freaks. They like to micro-manage everything, while keeping their 'loved' one in the dark, high-handedly avoiding all debate and discussion and the seeking of consent, and after the party, hogging all the credit for being so loving and sensitive and proactive. While a genuinely loving boyfriend may actually surprise his partner with something she wants, a sociopath will generally give her what is good for him, not her.

Which leads one to suspect that the reason why our government holds its cards so close to its chest is similar. They don't want us to know *ki choli ki peechay kya hai*. They don't want debate and discussion. They don't want Nobel Prize winners in Economics or (God forbid!) actual farmers weighing in on these issues and confusing everybody. They don't want 'too much of a democracy'. Just fait accompli after fait accompli.

But the farmers don't seem to have gotten this memo. They are persisting in calmly but very firmly rejecting GoI's three lavishly decorated cakes, one iced Minimum Support Price *ka* The End, one iced Legal Recourse *ka* The End, and one iced Hoarding and Stockpiling. Your surprise cakes are poisoned, they are saying politely. We won't eat them. Because if we do, we will be the new cake. And the people who will blow our candles out, and eat us up, are Big Business.

I don't know, but there is something about the look in their eyes. They have sowed their crops, packed up enough food to see them through the winter, and come to town to settle in for the long haul. Maybe this time, the surprise givers will end up being surprised themselves.



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