

**BOLLYWOOD: NO MORE DOLLAR DREAMS**

SPECIAL DIGITAL ISSUE

# Outlook k

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IS  
MY

# JOB

SAFE?



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## COVER STORY

It's appraisal time. But a pandemic barreled in and 1.3 billion people were ordered to stay indoors—a lockdown of the country, it's economy and more. People were furloughed; salary delays and indefinite leave without pay have been increasing across sectors. Fear of catching the virus is now running alongside another anxiety: 'Will I retain my job?'

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20/4/2020



## Trauma And Turmoil

### NEW DELHI

**Sangeeta Kampani:** This refers to your cover story *Losing Sanity?*. It is difficult to stay composed as the world falls apart, but we must keep striving. I have written some verses about this.

Like all of you,  
I am being told to welcome,  
Each dusk, each dawn  
Savour, they say,  
Every moment,  
Forget things bygone.

Suddenly there is  
A premium on life.  
Rumours are rife,  
Some say, clap  
Some say, chant  
Yet others recommend,  
The power of an esoteric plant.

Like all of you  
I am a little nervous,  
Sad and mirthless.

I know I am at a sniffing  
distance  
Of this little big virus  
That attacks one and all,  
Without any prejudice or  
bias.  
Bored, I fret and fume  
Oh God, why so much  
gloom?

Don't get me wrong  
I mean to write no  
swansong.  
It is not death I fear,  
However close,  
It may appear.  
What terrifies me is loss,  
How to come to terms  
With this tragedy gross!

Even if I survive,  
How will I live with this  
trauma,  
This turmoil,  
An entire civilisation on  
boil.  
Oh God, such immense  
loss!  
Whichever way the coin  
lands,  
Heads up or tails,

I stand to lose the toss.

### ON E-MAIL

**Rakesh A.:** The pandemic was imminent as humans have been destroying nature for centuries. It seems as if the earth is now shut for much-needed repairs. The sky is so blue, the water in Venice's canals crystal clear, and dolphins and whales are visible off the Mumbai coast. What thousands of crores of rupees couldn't do, the lockdown did—clean the Yamuna and Ganga to a great extent. Our world, however, remains divided into more than 200 quarters, barred by the wires of visas and passports. About a hundred individuals and their companies hold more than half of the world's resources. They have not learned any lessons from previous pandemics and continue their self-centric, divisive agendas. Human grit and determination may soon deliver a vaccine for coronavirus, but unfortunately, there is no vaccine for the more deadlier viruses of hate, animosity, divisiveness and discrimination.

TRIBHUVAN TIWARI





## No Way Forward?

### GREATER NOIDA

**Alok Kumar:** This refers to your story *The Economy And The Virus*. Thanks to demonetisation and GST, the economy was already in a terrible shape. Now with the coronavirus pandemic and ensuing lockdown, things are only going to get worse—not just for India, but for the entire world. I wonder what life will be like once the threat of coronavirus passes.

### DEHRADUN

**Rakesh Agrawal:** The way the government of India is handling this pandemic is not just highly inept, but also insensitive to the core. Millions of poor, deprived and hungry people have

been left at the mercy of a few men who have failed them. These impoverished millions are being treated as criminals, condemned to rush back to their homes, creating a scene reminiscent of Partition. Alas, there is a pattern in this madness: first, Modi tested the obedience of the people on March 22 and after being totally satisfied, he declared a national lockdown two days later with just a four-hour notice! This impromptu announcement reminds one of demonisation, which he used to quell dissent and opposition. As we cannot expect him to share any long-term plan or vision for the tattered economy, we will be condemned to live in a dark tunnel for a very long time. And, there is no light visible at the other end!

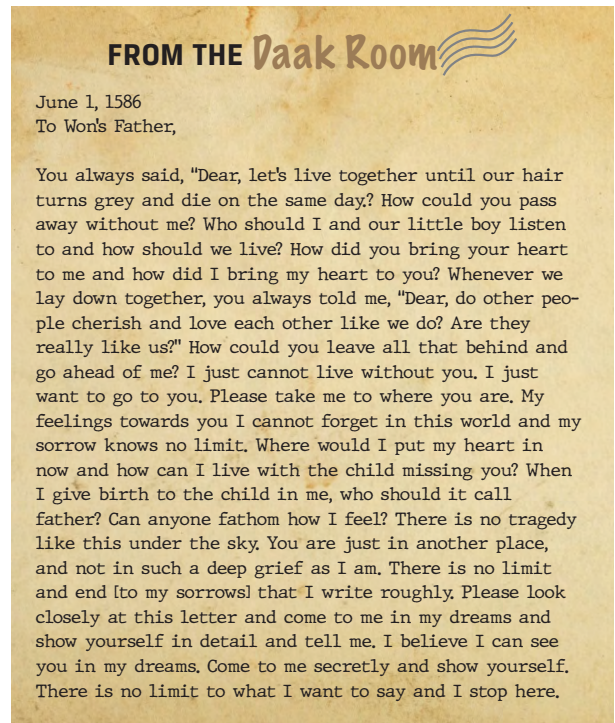
### LUCKNOW

**M.C. Joshi:** This refers to your cover story *Ration State* (April 13). The lockdown was declared on March 25 and the number of COVID-19 cases in the country then was 721. According to a media report, had the lockdown been not imposed on March 25, the number of cases would have been 5,000 after 10 days; and 30,790 in the next 20 days. The imposition of the nationwide lockdown is a wise and timely action. Lockdown has made life difficult, but governments are trying hard to cope with the situation by transferring money to people's accounts and delivering rations to them. A ground report from a village in UP says that if all goes well and the bumper crop reaches the home of the farmer, the rural

economy will shine. Your cover story narrates the difficulties faced by farm producers in selling their produce as well as in inter-state movement. The priority of the governments, Centre included, should be to remove hurdles and restore the supply and delivery chains of farm produce.

### MARUTHANCODE

**David Milton:** By organising a religious conference



**Unfathomable** Excerpts from a letter a woman wrote to her dead husband in Andong, South Korea. Archaeologists uncovered it next to his coffin in 1998.

PRABHJOT GILL



during the coronavirus outbreak, the Tablighi Jamaat cast prudence to the winds. It is true that the event preceded the ban on large gatherings in Delhi and the national lockdown. Still, the Jamaat should have shown prescience and farsightedness, and called off the conference beforehand. At the same time, it is wild exaggeration to say that the Jamaat deliberately “sabo-

tagged the lockdown” and “spiked the spread of the disease”. Minority affairs minister Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi’s description of the religious gathering as a “Taliban-type crime committed on purpose” is clearly beyond the pale. The terms “Covidiot” and “super spreaders” are religion-neutral and not problematic, but “corona jihadists” reeks of Islamophobia and Muslim bashing. It is wrong to use a health crisis to open religious faultlines and malign an entire community for what a bunch of Covidiot did. The last thing India needs during a pandemic is communal politics or polarisation of society. This is the time to be united and single-mindedly fight the virus. **Q**



**India** will receive normal rain this season, the Met office predicted in its forecast for the southwest monsoon that covers 75 per cent of the country. But it is likely to arrive late in several states.



**A special court** in Mumbai put Dalit scholar and activist Anand Teltumbde in NIA custody till April 18 in the Elgar Parishad-Maoist link case. The SC had declined to extend his interim protection from arrest.



**The US** has announced that it will accept H-1B visa applications for an extended stay—a decision that brings relief to thousands of Indian professionals in America, who are left stranded by the pandemic.

## Guns Of Never End

Lockdown—political and pandemic—brings peace to Kashmir, but a new militancy is rising

**Naseer Ganai in Srinagar**

**P**EACE in Kashmir is often an oxymoron. But the word does provide some context to what is happening in the Valley. The tumultuous political upheaval in Jammu and Kashmir last year—the abrogation of Articles 370 and 35A—gave way to months of relative peace. Counter-insurgency operations continued, though. To put things in perspective, 45 militants have been killed in Kashmir since August last year till March. In contrast, between January-July in 2019, over 154 militants were killed by security forces. The number was over 260 in 2018.


Recent developments, however, hold ominous signs on the militancy front. On April 5, five Indian soldiers were killed while fighting infiltrators close to the Line of Control in north Kashmir's Kupwara district. The soldiers belonged to the elite 4 Para—the unit which undertook the 2016 cross-LoC 'surgical strikes' in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK). Five militants were also killed in the latest operations lasting two days. Kashmir police chief Dilbagh Singh says the encounter and subsequent heavy exchange of fire along the LoC shows that Pakistan and the militant groups it nurtures are making attempts to infiltrate into India and disrupt peace.

A little-known outfit, The Resistance Front (TRF), claimed responsibility for the attack on the security forces. In an



**As many as** 45 militants have been killed in Kashmir over the past seven months

audio message circulated through social media, the outfit said after stripping Kashmir of its special status, India didn't spare anyone, not even the loyal political leaders. The Front first surfaced on March 23 when the police said it had busted the outfit's first-ever module and recovered a consignment of weapons. Analysts say the new outfit is an indication that Pakistan-backed militants are not ready to give up on Kashmir. "The Keran encounter shows there is investment in arms and training of militants because they cheaply lost hundreds in the past couple of years without putting up a fight or inflicting any damage," says a security official who didn't want to be named.

In December last year, a Yashwant Sinha-led committee had said people in Kashmir tend to think that protests and civil disobedience will make no difference to the Centre, and some groups may be preparing the ground for a new phase of militancy. The Concerned Citizens' Group (CCG) report says approval of militancy is going up at a time when Pakistan is not interested in promoting an armed struggle in Kashmir as it is caught up with FATF (Financial Action Task Force) guidelines on preventing money laundering and terrorist financing. With COVID-19 and a looming economic recession staring at the world, the police in Kashmir feel the situation might change in the months ahead. 

→  
Liquor shops are allowed to open in Assam. But 'mind the gap' as you line up.



## SNAPSHOT



rural and semi-urban areas. All questions about the Tablighi Jamaatis who returned from Delhi and dispersed across the state are stonewalled, too. In Calcutta itself, there is no regulation of vegetable, fish and mutton markets in Rajabazar, Narkeldanga, Topsia, Metiaburz, Gardenreach, Ekbalpur and Manicktala, which swarm with people.

**Mamata Banerjee** distributes food to people during the lockdown

The areas specifically mentioned in the MHA letter are mostly Muslim-majority areas.

When asked by the media to comment, Mamata's response was typical: "We are fighting coronavirus, not a communal virus. You know who are at the helm of affairs at the Centre, and their motive behind making these allegations. I won't say anything more on this."

Moreover, there are allegations that Trinamool leaders, including some MLAs, councillors and panchayat members are pressuring ration dealers to hand them food grain for distribution among the people. This forced the All India Fair Price Shop Dealers' Federation to write to the state food minister, requesting him to intervene and protect dealers from being forced to yield to illegal demands. That the allegation has got some merit was indirectly corroborated by the state administration and ruling party leaders. Mamata Banerjee, too, commented that some Trinamool leaders were distributing food grain to the masses after expropriating them from ration shops and asked them to desist from the practice. Partha Chatterjee, a senior minister and the party's official spokesman, also criticised the leaders.

At a meeting in Calcutta on April 12, the 18 BJP MPs from West Bengal and their minder Kailash Vijayvargiya alleged that though the Centre has announced free rations (5 kg rice/wheat and 2 kg dal) for 80 crore Indians and that Bengal has received its share, it was not being distributed in any of their constituencies. So the ungainly wrangle between the BJP and the TMC in Bengal, even in these fraught times, lives another day. □

## Incovidient Questions

Rajat Roy in Calcutta

### W. BENGAL

Even as she exudes confident control in her televised administrative meetings, West Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee has reasons to be worried. They go beyond the matrix of operations involved in fighting the coronavirus pandemic, from feeding the needy and protecting health workers to contact tracing—the Centre and the BJP have sharply attacked the Trinamool government over handling the pandemic. Union minister of state Babul Supriyo's charge that the state government is suppressing facts regarding actual numbers of the afflicted and the dead, with the same being reiterated by a state BJP delegation to the governor, has angered Mamata. A complaint and an appeal for courtesies were promptly lodged with PM Narendra Modi. However, the allegations have some resonance in the letter purportedly written by the Union home ministry on April 10.

In that letter written by deputy secretary, MHA (Internal Security Division) Srinivasan K., the chief secretary and

DGP of West Bengal is reminded of an earlier missive dated April 4, where the MHA drew attention to the rampant violation of lockdown measures in Bengal. The latest letter also alludes to security agency reports on the gradual dilution of the lockdown, with an increase in the number of exemptions being provided by the state government.

The observations have solid basis in reality: for the past several days, flower and tobacco markets have been allowed to open; several tea gardens in North Bengal are functioning. Then, some taxis are allowed to ply on Calcutta's roads and paan and sweet shops open for some time at least. Most glaringly, people across urban areas are breaking social distancing directives with impunity under the eyes of a passive police force. The problem is apparently worse in

*BJP accuses Mamata of lax lockdown; she hits back, saying 'we're fighting corona, not a communal virus'.*

ASSAM


# Bihu By Any Other Name

**A**SK an Assamese how many Bihus he celebrates. The answer would be three—spring, winter and autumn. And of course a fourth, springing from popular artistes gigging at shows held across Assam for a full month and which are coeval with the advent of 24x7 television. Rongali or Bohag Bihu, the happiest and biggest in the troika, is by tradition a week-long affair. Even that timeframe is a stretch, but the dance-and-music continues on the loop on TV and social media until it's time for the next Bihu. That's 'TV Bihu'—much like Pluto the planet, debated whether it's the real deal or a con.

The spring Bihu has always been an outdoorsy affair (And Oh, the lifelong affairs born out of the festival that brings people together, bonds them with music!). Even Assam's cursed floods or those cholera outbreaks of yore haven't been able to stop the spring-break ever. But then, these are unusual times—a virus threatens to infect people more than viral Bihu vid-



eos. Social distancing has taken over an event that brings people closer. Social gatherings are off limits, as are 'Bihu functions'. Yet, the indomitable Bihu spirit continues to thrive. When lockdown restrictions were relaxed for the liquor shops to open, masked people queued up neatly keeping a safe distance for their quota. They went home with a bottle and a song. What that song would be? The current 'chart-buster' is from Assam Police (yes, you heard right!), an original score exhorting people to stay indoors and beat the CoronaV—unlike covers like 'We Will Overcome' by cops elsewhere.

Well, for all its folksy roots, Bihu songs have always held up a mirror, documenting current events. There's a song dedicated to the advent of the first coal-powered train to Assam. This year, Bihu has mutated, taken different forms—livestream COVID Bihu, cohabiting with TikTok Balcony Bihus, YouTube Bihu, WhatsApp Bihu... Phew! Like Pluto, hope they remain on the fringes. 

## JAIL-BREAK

**W**HILE the coronavirus crisis has placed the entire country indoors, the pandemic could become the cause for RJD supremo **Lalu Prasad Yadav's** liberty, albeit only for a few months. A convict in four fodder scam cases, Yadav has not been able to secure bail from any court since his conviction in December 2017. He has been shuttling between Ranchi's Birsa Munda Jail and the Rajendra Institute of Medical Sciences (RIMS) because of his failing health.

Now, because of the coronavirus outbreak, his family has requested Jharkhand chief minister Hemant Soren to grant parole to the former Bihar CM. The family has cited that Yadav is currently admitted to RIMS, which is also the designated hospital in Ranchi for isolating confirmed COVID-19 cases. As he suffers from a host of complications—cardiac and renal are his primary ailments—the comorbidity factor could prove fatal for him if he gets infected.

Sources say Soren has asked the state's advocate general to look at the parole application and give his opinion. A senior RJD functionary says the party is hopeful of Yadav's parole within the next week. The RJD is also a junior partner in the JMM-led coalition government of Soren.

It is speculated that Yadav will be released for a few months, until health risks posed by the pandemic ride out. Parole rules won't allow him to take an active part in Bihar politics—the state is bound for polls later this year—but his party is hopeful that the Yadav Senior's mere presence in Patna will be good enough to rejuvenate the party cadre, galvanise its support base. And also, most importantly, ease the simmering rivalry between his sons, Tej Pratap and Tejashwi. There's some fodder for thought in this.

TEXT BY ANUPAM BORDOLOI AND PUNEET NICHOLAS YADAV

## brevis



American mathematician **John Horton Conway**, who stood out for bringing maths to the masses, has died from COVID-19 complications.



President Donald Trump's developer friend **Stanley Chera** died of coronavirus. Chera was in his late 70s.



Classical vocalist **Shanti Hiranand**—a Padma Shri and disciple of Begum Akhtar—has died in Gurgaon at the age of 87.



**Mort Drucker**, whose caricatures of celebs appeared in Mad Magazine for five decades, has died at the age of 91.




Football club Chelsea's legendary goalie **Peter Bonetti** has died at 78. He had the cleanest sheets until Petr Cech beat him.



Formula 1 legend **Stirling Moss** has died at 90. The greatest driver never to win the WC, he contested 66 Grand Prix from 1951 to 1961.

# MixedShots

## ONE FLU OVER THE BIRYANI BEST

**N**OTHING can keep gluttons away from their beloved biryani. Not even a potentially fatal disease. A 27-year-old COVID-19 patient in ESI hospital, Coimbatore, requested his wife to bring him the delectable dish. She dutifully obeyed, but the hospital staff refused. Bereft of his meaty repast, he hurled a fire extinguisher and broke windowpanes. Alas, to no avail. The hospital registered a complaint and ensured social distancing from his favourite grub. Now if only he had taken ill in Uttar Pradesh and was recuperating in a particular isolation ward there, where the lonely souls threw booze bacchanalias. What better than spirit to lift your spirit? 



## MASKED MUTTON?

**W**HEN K.V. Rao, a farmer in Telangana, heard that a tiger in a New York zoo contracted COVID-19, he did what any coronaphobe would have done—put face masks on his goats, all 20 of them! Lest you think that might be rather inconvenient while grazing, Rao has a solution: "Once we reach the interiors of the forest, I remove their masks and then cover them again before returning home in the evening." While there is no evidence that domestic animals can spread coronavirus to humans, Rao's caution is perhaps warranted. Who would want a serving of coronavirus with their Kakori kebab? 


## BOLLY MISSES KILLER KISSES

**S**OME are counting tiles in their bathroom to kill time during quarantine, some are deriving pleasure in watching celebrities do chores. But only filmmaker Shoojit Sircar is asking the right questions. How will filmmakers shoot intimate scenes, especially those involving hugs, kisses and perhaps more, he pondered in an Instagram post. While there aren't enough takers for masked kisses and gloved caresses, all is not lost. Directors can just revert to that romantic gesture of yore—the rubbing of flowers, the stroking of petals, the patting of pollen...all culminating in an orgasmic cut. What the puritan peddlers of sanskaar and glorious Indian culture couldn't do in generations, a mere virus achieved in just a sneeze. 



## MONEY ROOT OF ALL INFECTION?


**I**T was a sight people dreamt of in other times—two Rs 500 notes adrift on the streets and not a soul to watch you pocketing those. But with the pesky virus waiting to sneak into your nasal cavity, one can never be too sure.

Residents of Lucknow's Paper Mill Colony certainly weren't. When they saw the currency notes, they insisted that it had been left on the streets to spread coronavirus and immediately called the cops, who 'confiscated' the notes. The police consulted doctors, who, for mysterious reasons, advised them to keep the notes in quarantine. It's only a matter of time before some enterprising fellow calculates how long the virus lasts on banknotes and makes a dash for the neat sum languishing in social isolation. 



## ANGEL ON WHEELS

**T**HE railways recently displayed such unprecedented generosity that one is tempted to forgive all its grimy toilets, cardboard-textured food and inordinate delays. After a woman in Mumbai tweeted about the requirement of camel milk for her three-and-a-half-year-old autistic child allergic to goat, cow and buffalo dairy, senior IPS officer Arun Bothra contacted Advik Foods, the pioneering brand of camel milk products in the country.

The Rajasthan-based company agreed to provide it, but transportation to Mumbai remained an issue. That's when Tarun Jain, a railway officer, manoeuvred an unscheduled halt in a Ludhiana-Mumbai goods train to deliver 20 litres of the milk to Bandra from Falna. 





# MATA AMRITANANDAMAYI DEVI DONATES ₹13 CRORES FOR COMBATING CORONA

*The Mata Amritanandamayi Math, Kollam, Kerala, always in the forefront of social upliftment through education, health and its several other initiatives, has liberally donated from Rs 10 crore to the PM CARES and Rs 3 crores to the Kerala Chief Minister's Distress Relief Fund (CMDR Fund) to combat the virulent Covid-19, even as the world is at its wits' end to contain its devastating rampage across continents.*

India has exhibited commendable resilience where the medical fraternity, essential services sector and its people are throwing their might behind the government in tackling the scourge on a war-footing, cutting across region, political affiliations, social standing and religion. India has risen as one voice, as one people.

"Seeing the entire world hurting and crying in pain, my heart is aching deeply. Let us all pray for the souls who have succumbed to this pandemic, for the mental peace of their families and friends, for the peace of the world, and for God's grace," Amma said. For decades, Amma has been insisting on mankind changing its lifestyle to be more harmonious with Nature, warning that failing to do so would result in increased natural disasters and diseases. "The selfish things man has done to Nature are now coming back in the form of such epidemics," Amma said.

The Math, besides donating ₹13 crores to help fight the Covid-19, is also providing relief to those physically, mentally and economically affected by the virus. Moreover, it has come forward to provide free care to corona-affected patients at the Amrita Institute of Medical Sciences (Amrita Hospital) in Kochi.

Since 2005, under Amma's direction, the Math had provided more than ₹500 crore in disaster relief, including the provision of financial support, household items, free healthcare and even construction of new homes.

At Amma's request Amrita University and Amrita Hospital have set up a mental-health hotline (0476 280 5050) for people



**Mata Amritanandamayi**  
Kollam, Kerala,

under stress, anxiety or depression due to the pandemic and its ramifications. Anyone can call to get free support. This was started after Amma requested doctors, psychiatrists and psychologists to set aside time to provide counselling, stating, "Counselling is a service needed at this time," Amma said. "Please consider this as an appeal from Amma to doctors, psychiatrists and psychologists. Whether you are believers or not, set aside one or two hours every day to provide free counselling for those who need it."

Through its deemed university, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham (Amrita University), the Math has also has constituted an interdisciplinary team consisting of more than 60 faculty from the fields of medicine, nanoscience, AI, big data, sensor-manufacturing and material sciences, working in tandem to produce low-cost scalable medical masks, gowns and face-protection visors, as well as ventilators, rapid-setup isolation wards, units for sterilizing medical waste, and IoT means for the remote monitoring of quarantined patients.

Through online classes and interactions, Amrita students are also being engaged in Coronavirus-related curriculum and

service opportunities. The Math is also in regular communication with the leaders of its 101 adopted Amrita SeRve villages, promoting Coronavirus awareness, ensuring that the villagers are aware of all the latest government-assistance programs available for them, as well as preventing fake news and erroneous information regarding the pandemic spreading within their communities. Some Amrita SeRve villagers have been trained by the Math to tailor medical masks and are fulfilling government contracts to meet the demand and need of the hour.

"We need to develop the attitude that we are nothing but Nature's servants. We should practise humility, servitude and respect. At least now let us stop throwing our arrogance in Nature's face. The time has come to bow down before the forces of Nature. The time has come to beg Nature to forgive all our trespasses. The time has come to abandon the lackadaisical attitude that Nature will just forbear, suffer and forgive all the indignities we keep heaping on her. Nature is commanding us to wake up and look around. To awaken humankind, Nature is sounding a loud alarm in the form of COVID-19," Amma warned.

## MATH'S CORONA COMBAT SUPPORT:

- ₹10 crores will go to the PM CARES Fund and ₹3 crores to Kerala's CMDR Fund.
- Amrita Hospital is offering free treatment for COVID-19 patients
- A 24-hour mental-health hotline is being manned by trained professionals.



CM Shivraj Singh Chouhan during an inspection in Bhopal

PTI

# A Test Case In Testing Times

Holes in MP's hazmat suit are showing—a CM without a health minister fights a pandemic; private hospitals are getting to treat more coronavirus patients than AIIMS, Bhopal

**Puneet Nicholas Yadav**

**I**NDIA may still not have a clear answer on the best model for combating the coronavirus pandemic but Madhya Pradesh has offered some critical tips on practices governments must avoid. On March 23, when the BJP returned to power in the state by orchestrating the fall of the Congress-led Kamal Nath government, MP had already registered its first few COVID-19 cases. The political drama that unfolded in the state in the preceding days doesn't need to be recounted in detail. However, decisions taken by Shivraj Singh Chouhan

after he returned as the state's chief minister for a record fourth term, need to be analysed.

Chouhan returned to power after a long-drawn political circus in the state that saw Jyotiraditya Scindia and his 22 loyalist legislators ditch the Congress and Nath to switch to the BJP. Perhaps as a natural consequence of the circumstances that pitchforked him to the CM's chair after a 15-month hiatus, Chouhan wasn't sworn-in along with his council of ministers. The cabinet, it was indicated by BJP leaders then, would be formed after a compromise was reached between old BJP warhorses and Scindia's brigade of party-hoppers over ministerial berths.

Chouhan could not even choose a limited cabinet with ministers for portfolios like home, finance, health and public distribution. Since the Nath government was toppled before it could present the state budget, there is currently no specific allocation of financial resources across departments while the absence of ministers for the other three portfolios—all critical to proper management of the COVID-19 crisis—cannot be overemphasised.

Chouhan's administration now appears like a do-it-yourself (DIY) hack where the chief minister must oversee every aspect of the state's preparedness against the pandemic him-

# When The Masks Came Off

How the MP political story unfolded along with the coronavirus cases



Hundreds of BJP workers take to the streets in Indore to 'observe' Janata Curfew.

BJP leaders and hundreds of workers gather in Bhopal, Shivraj Singh Chouhan set to return as CM.

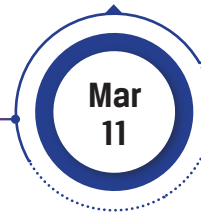


Jyotiraditya Scindia resigns from Congress, 22 party MLAs in MP leave for Bangalore in chartered flights.



Scindia joins BJP, 22 Congress rebels resign as MLAs. Kamal Nath government set to collapse.

Governor Lalji Tandon asks Nath to prove majority in assembly the following day.



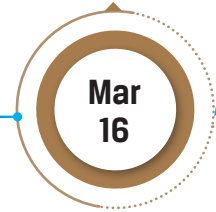
Nath resigns. Same day, first four COVID-19 cases reported from Jabalpur district.



PM Narendra Modi announces Janata Curfew for March 22.



Assembly speaker N.P. Prajapati adjourns House till March 26, citing coronavirus pandemic.



Chouhan sworn in as CM for fourth term. Bhopal reports first confirmed coronavirus case, Indore too witnesses fresh cases.

Journalist who attended Nath's resignation press briefing on March 20 tests positive. His daughter was the first confirmed COVID-19 patient in state capital.

Coronavirus cases rise steadily in state, particularly in Indore, Bhopal, Ujjain and Morena. Chouhan says Tablighi Jamaat responsible.

Several officials of state public health department—principal secretary Pallavi Jain Govil and Health Corporation MD, J. Vijay Kumar, test positive. A dozen cops infected too. Asked to self-quarantine.

MP gov't directs 15 public health officials admitted to AIIMS, Bhopal, to be transferred to the private Chirayu hospital. Indore reports death of two doctors in two days; first cases of medics dying of coronavirus infection.



self and with bureaucratic chieftains left to do the firefighting. In the midst of this acutely centralised governance model has come, arguably, the most fatal blow to the state's efforts in battling the health crisis. Practically the entire public health department, responsible for overseeing measures for controlling the pandemic, is now

either in isolation wards at hospitals or under self-quarantine.

From Health Corporation chief J. Vijay Kumar, principal secretary Pallavi Jain Govil and several more senior officials of the National Health Mission to low-ranking staff, over 50 members of the public health department have, so far, tested positive for

the virus. Before the virus indisposed these officials, Chouhan inexplicably decided to shunt-out health commissioner Prateek Hajela—the 1995-batch IAS officer who oversaw the NRC exercise in Assam—and appointed Faiz Ahmed Kidwai to the post on April 1.

A day before being dismissed, Hajela issued a medical bulletin detailing the

GRAPHICS: SAJI C.S.



**First responders**  
Health workers in Jabalpur on a drive to screen people for infection, with just masks and gloves for protection

PTI

state's preparedness to deal with the pandemic. According to the statement, six government medical colleges in Bhopal, Indore, Jabalpur, Gwalior, Rewa and Sagar with a combined ICU capacity of 394 beds and 319 ventilators and eight private medical colleges with a combined capacity of 418 ICU beds and 132 ventilators had been identified for treating coronavirus patients. The number of COVID-19 cases across MP when Hajela released this bulletin, on March 31, was 66. Evidently, the government-run medical facilities were well-equipped to not just accommodate the existing COVID-19 patients in the state at the time but also had sufficient capacity for treating new cases.

For reasons best known to Chouhan, his government decided to not just draft in select private hospitals in Indore and Bhopal to treat COVID-19 patients but also ordered that all infected public health officials who were admitted to AIIMS, Bhopal, be transferred to Chirayu Hospital, a private facility founded by Vyapam scam accused Dr Ajay Goenka. Similarly, in Indore, Sri Aurobindo Hospital—founded by another Vyapam scam accused, Dr Vinod Bhandari, was identified as a COVID-19 treatment centre.

Doctors in government-run hospitals

in Bhopal and Indore are taken aback by "the preferential treatment being given to select private hospitals". A doctor at AIIMS, Bhopal, says: "We have no problem with the government deciding to shift our patients to Chirayu but what is the point of getting three government hospitals (AIIMS, Hamidia Hospital and Bhopal Memorial Hospital and Research Centre) in Bhopal vacated if first preference for admitting patients will be given to private hospitals? No other state is doing this. Is the government suggesting that it doesn't have confidence in AIIMS or its own hospitals?"

A doctor at the government-run Hamidia hospital makes a similar point. "We were asked to make arrangements for COVID-19 patients but in over two weeks now, all we have done is screened patients for the virus. The hospital is empty because all patients are being sent to Chirayu.

*"The government will end up spending twice the money on private hospitals for the same treatment."*

What is the rationale behind such a decision...the government will end up spending twice the money on private hospitals for the same treatment because it will not just have to pay the owners for treating patients but also for the period that the hospital will be a COVID-19 centre."

For his part, Goenka of Chirayu praises the state government for its help and support. "I have 140 patients at Chirayu now," he says, adding that the hospital's total capacity is an impressive 800 beds. "I can accommodate 100 patients in the ICU and 32 in private rooms. We have 50 ventilators and can offer oxygen support to 400 more patients. The government has also promised us that we will have no shortage of medicines needed for the treatment, personal protective equipment (PPE) for all our staff and other necessary requirements," he explains. The government has ordered that all COVID-19 patients receiving treatment in any hospital—private or government—will be covered under the Ayushman Bharat scheme, irrespective of their financial status. The agreement with Chirayu for treating COVID-19 patients, Goenka says, "is for a period of three months... the government will pay Chirayu for the treatment of all COVID-19 patients and

compensate the hospital for the loss of its revenues during this period”.

Besides officials of the public health department, another major chunk of confirmed COVID-19 cases in Bhopal is of MP police personnel. Officially, the police have maintained that their personnel got infected “while tracking members of the Tablighi Jamaat who had come to the state after attending the event in Delhi’s Nizamuddin Markaz, where several cases of infection were later reported”. This explanation for widespread coronavirus infection within the police force may not be an exaggeration but it does raise another equally important question that betrays the state’s preparedness against the pandemic. “We knew that we were sending our men to track people who may have contracted the virus but we didn’t equip them with the protective gear needed for handling COVID-19 suspects. If we say that our men got the infection from the Jamaatis, we should also admit that we did not provide them with the necessary precautionary tools they desperately needed,” says a senior police officer who doesn’t wish to be named.

The outrage that the state administration’s mishandling of the crisis has generated, arguably, led Chouhan to issue an order, on April 10, which said that anyone sharing information related to the pandemic with the media for publication “without prior approval” of designated authorities will be “guilty of offences under the MP Epidemic Diseases Regulations, 2020”, and liable to legal action. The order was silent on whether media would be held liable for similar action if it publicised information that hadn’t been vetted by designated officials. Besides, it raised questions over whether, in the garb of curtailing spread of misinformation, the Chouhan administration wanted to force media to only share the government’s version. With new cases of coronavirus infection being reported from across the state every day and the threat of community transmission looming large after cases were reported in the interiors such as Sheopur, Morena, Sagar, Barwani, Chhindwara and Nagda, the challenge ahead for Chouhan’s administration

won’t be limited to containing the pandemic in hotspots like Indore, Bhopal and Ujjain.

There’s another tough battle that’s round the corner for the administration running sans a council of ministers. The harvesting season has just begun and the state’s economy is not just predominantly agriculture-based but also rife with crop failure and resultant farmer distress. A major reason for the BJP losing power in the state 15 months ago was the Congress’s promise of farm loan waiver—the first two installments of which had been given, according to Kamal Nath, when the BJP toppled his government. With the 21-day lockdown extending for



*“Centre’s engagement in toppling the MP government delayed steps for tackling the COVID-19 crisis.”*

**KAMAL NATH**  
Former CM, Congress


another fortnight (till May 3), Chouhan will have to find quick solutions to ensure that harvesting is not interrupted and farmers are able to sell their crop without the risk of amplifying the spread of the virus. Sources say Chouhan, like chief ministers of several agrarian states, has urged Prime Minister Narendra Modi to ease lockdown restrictions to ensure that harvesting crops, procurement and distribution are not hindered. While relaxation for farmers and the food distribution network are expected, the successful execution of

this exercise would depend on the efficiency of respective state governments. The experience of the 21-day stay-at-home order in MP on this front has, so far, been disappointing.

“Besides disruption in the supply chain which all states have complained of, in various parts of MP, the district administration’s measures for transportation and distribution of vegetables were shoddy,” says Ram Bharose Kushwaha, a farmer who trades at the Karond Sabzi Mandi in Bhopal. “Since several localities in Bhopal were sealed, the municipal corporation said it would procure vegetables and then ensure proper delivery through its staff. Later, several corporation workers tested positive for the virus and for three-four days there was no supply of vegetables throughout Bhopal,” he says. If coronavirus cases continue to rise in the weeks ahead, such complications over procurement and supply of vegetables and food grain could become a recurring problem.

Chouhan’s administration hasn’t yet offered any feasible alternative to the existing system, which has already been scarred by poor implementation.

The pandemic and the lockdown have also triggered massive reverse migration of the poor who had left their homes for work in big cities and are now compelled to journey back after losing jobs and whatever money they earned. In several MP districts—most prominently those that fall under the drought-prone Bundelkhand region—distress migration of debt-ridden farmers, who move to the cities to work as construction labour and daily wage earners, has been common for years. Now, hundreds of thousands of them are either back in their villages in MP or are marooned in camps across the country; detained by police while marching on foot from the states where they had found work. Chouhan is yet to announce any real financial relief package for these poor people. In the absence of a state budget there is also no specific allocation for relief measures arising.

In his hurry to return as chief minister, Chouhan may have created the biggest challenge of his political career for himself. And so far, the virus seems to be getting the better of him. 

# Altered State of Governance

How the fight against COVID-19 is changing the way the government works

**Bhavna Vij-Aurora**

**A**FTER initiating the discussion with chief ministers on handling the nationwide lockdown and making his opening remarks on April 11, PM Narendra Modi handed over the proceedings to home minister Amit Shah to moderate. Though Centre-state relations come under the purview of Shah's ministry, the CMs were taken by surprise when he took charge of the video conference. He had been present in their earlier meetings with the PM too—on March 20 and April 2—but except urging the states to implement the lockdown strictly at the second meeting, Shah had mostly been silent. Much like the other two ministers participating in the meeting—defence minister Rajnath Singh and health minister Dr Harsh Vardhan, along with the principal secretary to the PM, the cabinet secretary, the home secretary, the health secretary and the DG of Indian Council of Medical Research.

Asking Shah to moderate the meeting would not have been seen as signifi-

cant in the normal course as his ministry is at the forefront of enforcing the lockdown and coordinating with the states. However, it raised some eyebrows because Shah, known for his hardline image, had somewhat receded into the shadows after the back-to-back decisions to abrogate Article 370, pushing the Citizenship (Amendment) Act and to amend the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act. His uncharacteristic reticence since riots broke out in Delhi in February was being talked about within the BJP and also among Opposition leaders. Congress leader Kapil Sibal had questioned his silence, tweeting on March 28 that while people were locked down and lakhs of migrants were walking home, the home minister was neither seen nor heard.

*The PMO is firmly in the saddle, but the bureaucracy is the mainstay of the fight.*

“Not much should be read into Shah moderating the conference,” says a senior government functionary. “Had somebody else been the home minister, it would have been the same as the ministry of home affairs is central to the lockdown. Whether it is issuing instructions about ensuring essential goods and services or issuing advisories regarding welfare of migrant labourers, it is all done by the MHA. Shah's presence was crucial at the PM's meeting with the CMs.”

Pointing out that it's the work done by ministers, not their visibility, that is important, the functionary adds: “Shah is visible in the Centre-states conference. You see Rajnath Singh, as No. 2 in the government, chairing a meeting of Group of Ministers; (external affairs minister) S. Jaishankar coordinating efforts to get Indian students back from Wuhan; (finance minister) Nirmala Sitharaman announcing an economic distress relief package; (I&B minister) Prakash



**PM Modi** at a video conference with chief ministers over the coronavirus outbreak



Javadekar briefing the media about important cabinet decisions; Dr Harsh Vardhan coordinating COVID-19 mitigation efforts; (food and public distribution minister) Ram Vilas Paswan ensuring availability of essential food items; (road transport and highways minister) Nitin Gadkari looking at ways of getting labour back to restart highway projects; and (agriculture and rural development minister) Narendra Tomar trying to figure out a way to harvest the rabi crops.”

But the general perception remains, especially with political rivals, that Shah is no more the first among equals, next only to the PM? A senior BJP leader, not wanting to be named, says it was only a perception due to his old association with the PM, and that needs to change. Apparently, the BJP’s ideological parent, the RSS, had also expressed reservations about this. “The perception was harming the party,” says a senior RSS functionary. “The BJP is a disciplined party and does not function like other parties. The hierarchy in the council of ministers needs to be maintained. If Rajnath Singh is No. 2, he has to be seen as such. And the other ministers too need to get their due. Whenever Modi goes to the BJP headquarters, he goes like a karyakarta (party worker), giving the party president due respect and taking a backseat himself. Ministers cannot forget this discipline as they are karyakartas first.”

An MHA official claims the home minister is closely monitoring all pandemic-related information from his Krishna Menon Marg residence. “Shah continues to be as important as ever. Some niggling health issues are keeping him away from the warfront. He has been to his office in North Block a few times and attended a few GoM meetings, but generally works from home,” the official adds.

**Bureaucracy to the Forefront**

Subtly but definitively, the COVID-19 crisis has changed the way government works. While it has highlighted the role of respective ministers, it is the bureaucrats who have become the face of the government’s fight against the pandemic. “While the Prime Minister’s Office remains firmly in the saddle, it is

the colonial-era public administration system that has become the mainstay of the fight against the novel coronavirus, while the PM is strengthening his image as a benign ruler by reaching out to doctors, nurses, health and sanitation workers through his *Mann ki Baat*,” says a secretary to the government of India. Leading the charge on the ground are officers at the district level—district magistrates, superintendents of police and chief medical officers. As the PMO has assigned individual states to all Union ministers, they get daily reports bypassing the lengthy state-to-Centre channel. The



*Amit Shah is monitoring all information related to the coronavirus from his home.*

respective ministers coordinate with all the DMs, SPs and CMOs of the state on a daily basis regarding measures taken to contain the spread of COVID-19, quarantine facilities and lockdown-related problems, and report back to the PMO. There is a dedicated email address, accessed by the ministers concerned, where they get constant updates to be passed on to the PMO.

“The PMO is depending on multiple layers of information sources to keep tabs on how things are unfolding on the ground in terms of outbreak, hotspots, containment and problems like supply of essentials goods,” says the secretary. “The mechanism has cut down on reaction time and slip-ups. We are also get-

ting success stories from districts like Bhilwara and Agra, which are being used as case studies for others to emulate. The credit for these small victories goes to the local administration.”

The PM’s team is led by his principal secretary P.K. Mishra, a 1972-batch Gujarat-cadre officer, in close coordination with principal advisor P.K. Sinha. “Between the two PKs, it is clearly Mishra who is boss. Associated with the National Disaster Management Authority in its initial days, he has vast experience in disaster management. He was also conferred with an award by the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction last year. He is definitely the right man for the job,” claims a senior official.

The backbone of the core team is cabinet secretary Rajiv Gauba, a 1982-batch Jharkhand-cadre officer. He is believed to be the operations man, coordinating with various ministries, states, bureaucrats and other agencies, and taking key decisions in the fight against COVID-19. Then there is the ring formed by secretaries in key ministries, including health, finance, external affairs, defence and home. Though all of them are working around the clock, health secretary Preeti Sudan and home secretary Ajay Bhalla have perhaps the toughest jobs at hand. A 1983-batch officer of the Andhra Pradesh cadre, Sudan is usually the first point of contact for any queries coming from the PMO or her ministry. She is also involved in regular review of the preparedness of states and Union territories in terms of requirements like testing kits, PPEs, masks, ventilators and even hand sanitisers.

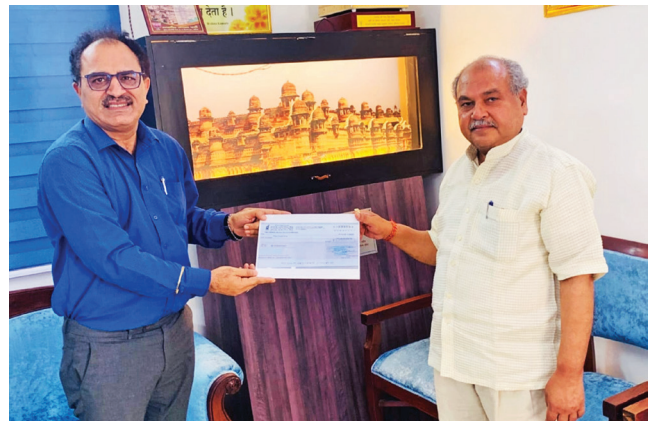
Bhalla, a 1984-batch Assam-Meghalaya-cadre officer, is coordinating all lockdown-related issues with the states from a ‘control room’ set up in the North Block. He monitors the work of two key teams working under him—one collates all pandemic-related data from the health ministry and various states and compares it to the global figures, and the other tackles issues raised by the states and the problems faced by them. All lockdown-related advisories, notifications and guidelines to states and other ministries are sent out by Bhalla. □

# NAFED And Farmers Fight COVID-19

The pandemic COVID-19 has brought the global life to a screeching halt threatening to disrupt the “lives and livelihoods” of 7.8 billion world population which we never witnessed before since World War II. Needless to emphasise all sections of the society are equally affected by Coronavirus, but the marginalised society, as always, will be the most affected. In the fight against COVID-19, the country is coming together in this hour of major disruptions and the human spirit and hope shall see us through. The example set by one of the most trusted organisations of Government of India, a crucial cog in the wheel of Indian Economy “Agriculture”.

National Agricultural Cooperative Marketing Federation of India (NAFED), the central Nodal agency of Government of India, has risen to the occasion in order to take care of the basic necessity of common people life in this hour of need. NAFED has taken the initiative to supply pulses under Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojna (PMGKY) and has commenced dispatches to a number of States like Haryana, Punjab, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Assam, Chandigarh, Telangana, Tamil Nadu, Goa, Karnataka, Delhi, Himachal Pradesh and Andaman & Nicobar Islands.

NAFED targets to supply 195,510 MT of processed/upgraded pulses covering around 19,55,51,000 households across 36 States and Union Territories. NAFED will supply the required quantity by end of the month. Despite the lockdown, the federation is making an effort to complete the distribution in the least time possible to



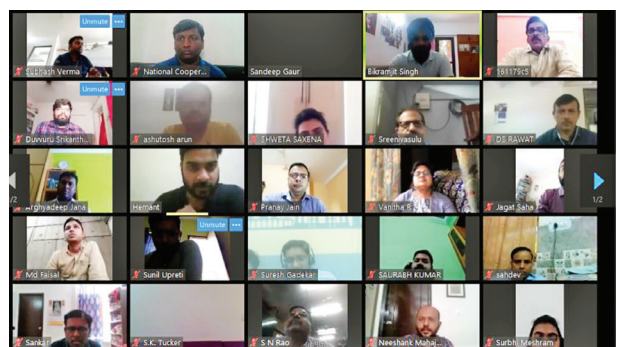
alleviate the sufferings of the poor and marginalised sections of the society. It has stiff targets set for May and June and will complete the distribution well within schedules.

In addition, NAFED is continuing to procure pulses and oilseeds at MSP from the farmers in the states of Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh. It is likely to undertake procurement in Rajasthan, Haryana and Madhya Pradesh soon. The Federation is also gearing up to purchase vegetables and fruits from Cooperative and FPOs to minimise the losses to the farmers to the extent possible. It is seen that the presence of NAFED in the Mandis provides support to the market.

They are not only taking care of common man at this juncture but also helping the citizens in overcoming threats the pandemic is posing. This will allow the farmers and the common man to stay safe, stronger and spirited who shall play a vital role on the other side of COVID-19.

## NCDC: Adopt and Enrich Approach

In the time of Coronavirus crisis stepping out of home is as dangerous as stepping into fire. Encouraged by Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi’s clarion call to beat Covid-19 pandemic, Laxman Rao Inamdar National Academy (LINAC) of NCDC has taken the initiative to run an online training program for government officials so that the work is not compromised under all circumstances. This excellent step taken by NCDC in order to make people adopt and enrich with the help of advanced technologies available at their disposal, implementation of which on such vast scale might have been a challenge but the willingness and honest approach would make it possible. Kudos to LINAC, MIS division and the participants who are attending the Professional Online Training program with full fortitude.



DATE	Session I	Session II
15.04.2020	Communication Skills (PO-I) – SKT	MS Office – Advanced Excel (PO-II) – BS/SG
16.04.2020	MS Office – Advanced Excel (PO- II) – BS/SG	Communication Skills – (PO – II) - SKT
17.04.2020	Data Collection (PO – I) – AK	MS Office –Advanced Excel (PO – I) – BS/SG
20.04.2020	MS Office – Advanced Excel (PO – I) – BS/SG	Data Collection (PO – II) -AK
21.04.2020	Project Appraisal (PO-I) -AK	Project Appraisal (PO-I) -AK
22.04.2020	Project Appraisal (PO-I) -AK	Time Management (PO-I) – SKT
23.04.2020	Working Capital & its Assessment (PO-I)- AK	Working Capital & its Assessment (PO-I)- AK
24.04.2020	Project Appraisal (PO-II) -AK	Project Appraisal (PO-II) -AK
27.04.2020	Project Appraisal (PO-II) -AK	Time Management (PO-II) - SKT
28.04.2020	Working Capital & its Assessment (PO-II) -AK	Working Capital & its Assessment (PO-II) -AK
	<b>BS – Lt. Col. Bikramjit Singh, Chief Director, LINAC</b>	<b>AK – Shri Ashwani Kumar, Consultant, LINAC</b>
	<b>SKT – Shri S.K Tucker, Advisor, LINAC</b>	<b>SG – Shri Sandeep Gaur, PO, LINAC</b>



GETTY IMAGES



Even as peace talks collapsed in Kabul, Taliban leaders arrive for a meeting with US officials in Doha, Qatar, on April 15



# Peace by Piece

The Taliban angrily withdraws from talks with Kabul. The United States, the initiator, is preoccupied with fighting COVID-19.

**Pranay Sharma**

**C**COVID has a finger in every conceivable pie crafted by human hands. After disrupting the global economy, driving people into sickness, hunger and unemployment and freezing social intercourse, it has begun to infect the stalled peace talks in Afghanistan.

The painstakingly calibrated peace talks agreed between the Taliban and the US broke down last week after the militia walked away from the table in protest against the Afghan government's reluctance to release all "big commanders" of the group who are in its custody. Since then, the respective positions of the con-

tending parties only seem to have hardened further. Of course, this could be a tactical retreat, as both sides try to create pressure on the other to force it to blink first, in the way of some compromise, before they resume negotiations. It is an old diplomatic ploy.

However, in this case, the COVID-19

*Indian experts foresaw collapse of the US-Afghan talks. Taliban was playing a high stakes game.*

pandemic has given a new twist to the situation. All parties in the negotiations are frantically busy finding urgent measures to halt the virus's spread in their respective zone of influence. None of them are keen at this distracted juncture to return to negotiations in a hurry. Interestingly, the Taliban was due to send a large team to Kabul for talks, but ended up sending only a three-man delegation because of the coronavirus outbreak. A spokesman said the trio would monitor the prisoner release process and take the necessary technical measures.

Many observers feel that even the US, the key player in the peace deal, will focus on dealing with the pandemic in the coming weeks. With mainland US being the new epicentre of the pandemic, the Trump administration has its priorities redrawn, even as the death toll continues to mount with each passing day. Even the irrepressible Donald Trump, who habitually turns to Twitter to comment on any development that involves American interest, has so far refrained from commenting on the Taliban walkout.

Most feel that even if the US president wants to use his influence on the Taliban and the Afghan government to resume talks, he may do so only after

## AFGHANISTAN/TALIBAN DEAL



Some of the 100 Taliban prisoners being released by the Afghan government at the Bagram prison in Kabul on April 12

the pandemic ravaging his country is brought under control. This, most experts estimate, will take several months. Afghanistan, therefore, might have to wait.

The February-end landmark agreement between the Taliban and the US—implacable foes till recently—seeking to end the decades-long violence in Afghanistan had generated a lot of hype. But most observers knew that the passage of the future negotiations that would have to involve Kabul, too, would not be smooth.

The talks stalled over the ‘prisoner swap’ clause that was part of the agreement. But the Ashraf Ghani government in Kabul, which was not party to it, had serious reservations about its efficacy when told about it later. Ghani refused to release 5,000 Taliban prisoners in Kabul’s custody under the terms of the US deal, saying the Afghan government had made no such agreement. Instead, he offered the conditional release of 1,500 prisoners. The differences over the swap—which would have led to 1,000 pro-government forces released by the Taliban in exchange—delayed the talks that were to be held between March 10 and to April 1. Those proposed talks now lie in ruins. The writing, however, was on the wall. Clearly disappointed at the outcome of the first face-to-face discussions with the Afghan government, a Taliban spokesman had earlier described the talks as “fruitless”.

“Things are moving as per the script,” says a former Indian ambassador to Kabul. He and the others in the Indian establishment had remained sceptical about the seriousness with which the Taliban would have stuck to the negotiations. According to them, the Taliban were making the unrealistic demands for two reasons: one, if they were met by the government it would hugely benefit the student-militia. But if they were rejected, it would provide the Taliban with a legitimate excuse to abandon talks.

For the Taliban, the prisoner swap was crucial, as it had made it conditional to the reduction of violence.



What had raised eyebrows was the US’ willingness to accept the Taliban’s condition that there will be an incremental reduction in violence, but not a ceasefire that will end fighting, after the February peace deal.

Matin Bek, a member of the Afghan government’s negotiating team, had told reporters that the Taliban had demanded the release of 15 commanders who Kabul believes were involved in “big attacks”. “We cannot release the killers of our own people,” Bek had said.

While the Taliban accused the Ashraf Ghani government of delaying the release of prisoners on “one pretext or the other”, Kabul officials say they could release 400 “low threat” Taliban fighters as a goodwill gesture. This, naturally, did not satisfy the Taliban who sought all its commanders to be released for talks to progress. Obviously, without a guarantee of complete cessation of violence, it neither the Afghan government nor the US thought this was a reasonable demand.

However, as the stalemate continues, the focus is shifting on how the COVID-19 pandemic might affect Afghanistan. So far, there have been 714 cases of infection resulting in the death of 23 people across the 26 provinces of the country. But most experts feel the extremely low numbers in a country with a population of over 35 million is either because of under-reporting or lack of testing.

*Ghani won't free 5,000 Taliban prisoners agreed under the US deal, saying Kabul wasn't party to it.*

Since March-end, millions of Afghans have fled to the country from Iran, one of the worst affected nations. Nearly 50,000 more Afghans have also come over from Pakistan in past weeks. Most have gone back to their villages and towns without proper health checks. Many migrant Afghan workers in neighbouring countries were also reportedly denied testing, overwhelmed as the doctors were in those countries in dealing with their own citizens. Afghan health ministry official Waheedullah Mayar was quoted as saying that there was a dire need for ventilators, millions of protective kits for health workers and over 50 million litres of disinfectants.

Reportedly, even the Taliban, who typically look askance at modern medicine and health workers operating in their areas of control, have been cooperative and serious in dealing with the pandemic. Taliban websites have been used for highlighting the effort being put up by the militia in dealing with the emerging challenge.

Afghanistan is not only one of the world’s poorest countries, but years of conflict have ravaged most of its infrastructure and healthcare network, leaving it perennially short of medicines and essential medical supplies. In a tradition where not too many people are encouraged to consult a doctor, the lack of infrastructure and adequate tests to determine the extent of the virus’ spread in the country can pose a nearly insurmountable challenge in coming days.

In such an evolving situation, peace negotiations can wait. How a skein of the knotted whole can be untangled for the tenuous peace process to begin after key players overcome the COVID-19 challenge will be an interesting spectacle.



WORLD TOUR



UNITED KINGDOM Australia-born Wikileaks founder Julian Assange secretly fathered two children while in refuge in London's Ecuadorean embassy, Stella Morris, his South African partner, revealed. The 48-year old Assange is seeking bail from Belmarsh Prison where he was lodged last year. Morris, a lawyer, fears he might die if infected by coronavirus in the prison.



JAPAN The coronavirus crisis has posed a peculiar challenge to Japan: how to offload hundreds of tonnes of perfectly marbled Wagyu beef in a hurry. The A5-grade meat sells for \$500 a kg. The sudden absence of gourmet tourists poses sellers a problem they never envisaged. Supermarkets now offer it with a 40 per cent discount.



SWEDEN Table tennis, marble racing, and Swedish trotting are suddenly the focus of world's gamblers as football, horse racing and other top betting sports have disappeared because of coronavirus. An 11 per cent drop, from a \$473 billion overall gambling revenue worldwide, is anticipated, bringing it down to \$421 bn this year.



FOREIGN HAND

THE extent to which Donald Trump is willing to follow his 'America First' maxim has begun to shock his global partners. The US's transatlantic ally Germany accused it of "modern piracy" when one of its consignments was intercepted in Thailand and diverted to America. The American president had earlier threatened India of retaliatory action if it failed to supply hydroxychloroquine to the US. New Delhi supplied the drug, believed to help cure COVID-19, to the US and several countries as a humanitarian gesture. However, there was confusion over the Thailand incident.

Initial press reports said the masks were ordered from the US manufacturer 3M, which came under criticism from the White House for procuring face masks for overseas customers. But the company disputed that, clarifying it had "no record of any order of respirators from China for the Berlin police". Berlin's interior ministry explained the protective masks for its police were ordered through a German company specialising in medical products. Its spokesman Martin Pallgen told German news agency DPA that police were informed by the company about the first half of its order of 200,000 masks being "confiscated" and diverted to the US.

Berlin Mayor Michael Müller informed the police that "the delivery was cancelled due to a US directive and the plane flew to the US rather than Germany". But interior minister Andreas Geisel unsparingly described it as an "act of modern piracy", adding, "You don't treat your transatlantic partners like that". He argued that despite the coronavirus crisis, the "methods of the wild west" should not prevail. In a tweet, mayor Müller accused US president Donald Trump of "lacking solidarity" and behaving "irresponsibly". He added, "It is inhuman and unacceptable."

The incident highlights the extent the US is willing to go to secure essential protective gear from a limited pool of suppliers. Trump has targeted 3M as part of his efforts to safeguard supplies to treat COVID-19 positive citizens. The company earlier ignored demands by the White House officials to send about 10 million N95 respirator masks being produced in Singapore for markets in Asia to the US. Trump has invoked his authority under a Korean War-era law—the Defence Production Act—with regard to the N95 masks made by 3M. It allows the Federal Emergency Management Agency to use "any and all authority" to buy "the number of N95 respirators" it "determines to be appropriate" from 3M and its subsidiaries. Trump justified the action, saying protective equipment was "kept in our country and gets to where it is needed to defeat the virus". The episode again spurs questions about his ability to be a 'world leader'. □

# RESPONSES OF DR AMBEDKAR INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY During the COVID-19 National Lockdown

Corona Virus Disease (COVID), having taken birth in China in November 2019 has impacted the entire world and brought catastrophe to most of the countries. The COVID has challenged the advancements in the health systems of the various countries, including the most advanced ones. The pandemic has already killed over 80 thousand people, with several lakhs caught after the infection and are under various stages of treatment. With this pandemic, people are not only put to all forms of stress like never before but compelled to quarantine themselves at homes. That apart people are also maintain strict social distance. This social emergency being first in the recent time. The worst part of the pandemic is lack of diagnosis based medicines, although attempts are on to invent one in many countries after the virus catastrophe. But given its wide range of spread silently, non-medicinal methods are being imposed to minimise the spread and the related sufferings. Especially, these methods are largely practiced by the people in India like home quarantine, social distance and lockdown. Attempts have also been made to develop immunity among the potential patients group like children, aged ones and others suffering from other ailments and diseases. It should not go without mention that like the Indian Army, the Doctors, Paramedics and others in the hospitals have been working day and nights in treating and caring the affected cases and have exhibited their bravery in doing so. Their services are yeoman without caring for their own life. The national lockdown that is in progress has impacted all walks of life of the country and hit the economy badly and severely, as per many estimates. Educational institutions being the centres of conglomeration are the worst hit, in terms of the annual academic calendars that prompted reschedules. The COVID lockdown has posed a number of challenges to the teachers, students, administration and others. The major challenge is not to lose the academic calendar in any manner and to ensure engagement of the students community. It only means to put measures for continuous academic pursuits, without losing academic interest, time and energy. It is obvious especially in the technical autonomous institutions, which are known for tight academic schedules throughout the year.

There are other challenges as well to address to combat the pandemic. First, adjusting the academic calendar as the closure affects in several ways, including completion of the teaching modules, compliance of the students and the semester based examinations and other followings. Second, ensuring facilitating environment like nutritious food

for the students who stay in the residential hostels coming from far distant places and disadvantaged backgrounds, in addition to ensure their quarantine with safety measures. Third, alleviating burden of the parents and guardians in regard to the new learning environment and to ensure the academic compliance of their wards. Last but not the least is the real challenge of maintaining social distance of the students, especially in the class rooms once the lockdown lifted. It must be noted that under prolonged situation, students miss academic interactions, which is essential for learning.

Dr Ambedkar Institute of Technology (AIT) in Bangalore is a multilingual, multi culture and multi religion institution with over five thousand students in all the major engineering branches. Roughly one third of the students stay in the residential hostels in the campus, having come from far distant places. It is known to be a cost effective institution, rich faculty resources, highly secular and for many such reasons, it has become a sought after one by the students of the middle class and lower middle class strata. Having sensitised about the various implications by itself, AIT geared up to meet all the challenges of the national lockdown commenced from 23 March. This is mainly to engage the students and the teachers academically in all measures, keeping the interest and welfare of the students and the parents. Thanks to the autonomous status, which has facilitated one-to-one interactions rather conspicuously between the students and teachers under this unprecedented period. Interesting to note that majority of the students are interacting with faculty members in regards to the syllabus teaching and mentors are conducting online classes with learning materials. Faculty themselves have registered for ATAL FDP to upgrade their knowledge. Students were encouraged to the learning contents of NPTEL Courses. Besides online classes through zoom, google classroom, TCS Ion Digital Classroom, Skype, Cisco Webex, LinkedIn and many other portals. Students were posted recorded video lectures of VTU and previous years question papers were solved. In turn, students have also responded with all enthusiasm and submitted assignments, seminars, mini and final projects through WhatsApp and were allowed to contact the concerned faculty for seeking clarifications on their submissions. In all, it is a matter of pride that over 75 per cent of the undergraduates and cent percent of the postgraduate students were covered during the period of lockdown. From the administration, all faculty members instructed to connect with their students and are



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expected to submit reports to the respective Head of the Department in completing the syllabus and other activities. They have also successfully used online material available in the different portals with the help of the technology.

Boy-students of the distant places, particularly those of the other states and other countries were safeguarded with close monitoring and many of them are room quarantined. They were provided internet connectivity in their residential premises and in their rooms. Foods of the south and north Indian as well as continental style are being provided round the day, after engaging the specialised chefs and cooks. The management and administrators have been visiting the hostel premises regularly to ensure the cleanliness and the arrangements made.

Given the present situation, online learning and academic compliance assumed paramount significance in the technical institution and this shift compels the knowledge of the ICT among the stake holders, more so with students and teachers. The supervisory authorities like AICTE should popularise online teaching along with regular academic activities. They should ensure that students should not miss the classes, especially when the faculty apply various leaves including, assignments on other duties and special leave period. Mixture of both online and offline classes would be more effective. The technical institutions shall be supported to develop additional capacities to meet the similar situations in days to come. Our experience points to the fact that distance education modalities supported with the technology would become an important option under the situation. Similarly, Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) with teacher-student network contact becomes an added importance. But to ensure sustainable online learning, not only the network based infrastructure is mandatory but also training of the stakeholders, especially in rural areas and students and teachers as well respectively. Based on the present pandemic lockdown experience, government shall invite the industry to develop the needed infrastructure as well as the capacities in the technical institutions.

COVER  
COVID-19  
STORY

# PINK SLIP *OR* PAY CHEQUE?

*Post-lockdown, the world of work won't be what we used to know. For many, the uncertainty of livelihood would likely linger much longer, and be no less painful.*

Lola Nayar, Jyotika Sood,  
Yagnesh Kanzara, and Salik Ahmad

JITENDER GUPTA

Take a deep breath before you read this, and know that these are only *scenarios*—thumbnail sketches of what *may* happen. We cannot yet pluck the future out of the crystal ball, and the future may yet hold surprises. But yes, in one of the better worst-case scenarios out there, *100 million and more* Indian jobs will be at risk during and after

the COVID-19 lockdown stage. CII, a leading industry association, asked industry bosses how they felt things would pan out—of the 200 CEOs surveyed, one-third expected job losses of *15-30 per cent* in their respective sectors. Another 47 per cent felt the figures might be slightly less than 15 per cent. But translated into actual numbers, the scenario still seems scary. Tot up the estimates of those likely to be unemployed in the various sectors, and it's a horror movie coming to a screen—sorry, office—near you.

From end-March, most companies have resorted to one of these three decisions—sacking people, asking employees to go on indefinite leave without pay, and slashing salaries by as much as 85 per cent. Emotional and distressing emails about jobs and wage cuts were dispatched from their corner rooms by CEOs to employees, some of whom had worked in the same companies for decades. The Dubai-based CEO of Triburg, an apparel-sourcing firm, wrote, “In my 48 years of working life, I have never seen such a difficult situation...”

Those mercilessly pink-slipped are often too scared to even tell their families. “I don’t have the courage,” reveals Rohit Verma (name changed), who worked in the marketing division of Makino India, an auto-ancillary firm, and whose family includes his wife (homemaker), old parents and two children. Those who are at home are unsure if they will ever go back to

### 38 million

or 70 per cent of jobs at risk in the tourism industry, as estimated by KPMG, a global think-tank

### 10 million

Jobs at risk in the entire textile chain, if there is no government-driven stimulus package

### A bulk

of the 136 million jobs in segments with casual workers and unwritten contracts, and self-employed areas are at extreme risk

### That risk

is very real in all segments where informal employees make up a huge percentage, such as manufacturing (76 per cent as per Periodic Labour Force Survey, 2017-18), financial services (50 per cent) and public sector (55 per cent)

### In agriculture

one may witness a debt-creating paralysis: farmers being either unable to harvest their crops, or to reach mandis in time, leaving them indebted for the next few seasons

their offices. “My owner gave Rs 7,000 in March, when the lockdown was announced. He assured us of future salaries, but I am not sure. I am not even sure about my job,” says Deepak Kumar, who operates a cloth-weaving machine at a garment firm.

Fortunately, there is also an optimistic scenario—indeed, that will most likely intersect with the more depressing tendencies to produce a complex reality. The usual picture of a shell-shocked economy with zero demand may be too simplistic. Yes, the pain of unemployment will be felt acutely over the next three to six months, but there can also be a quick rebound. In fact, the creation of fresh jobs and a return of old ones may happen sooner than we expect due to two reasons. The first is psychological: consumers, liberated after being cooped up at home for over five weeks, may go berserk once the lockdown is lifted. They may wish to buy more, spend more—certainly, *travel* more. It may be irrational, but very human to go overboard. Of course, this release of pent-up demand will be restricted to those who retain their jobs. Brand expert Harish Bijoor offers a more concrete reason to feel optimistic. He says that although Goldman Sachs and World Bank have predicted the world economy *could* witness a negative growth of up to 3 per cent, and India to grow at a mere 1.5-1.6 per cent, the latter may not be true. India is less dependent on



## Pavan Kumar Vijay,

CS & Founder,  
Corporate Professionals

The courts are closed, companies are not working, and a lot of compliance dates were pushed forward, so we have negligible work. Being a consultancy firm, we have a hand-to-mouth model. We get payments from clients on regular intervals or draw overdraft from our bank. I have paid salaries to my 80 employees, including 60 lawyers, for March, but no new work has come up, and even the big clients have not paid for previous work. I like to remain positive, but, realistically, the impact won't go away for at least a year.

We are not cutting wages of the support staff. The consultancy staff has been asked to go on leave without pay for three months, and opt for a skill upgradation course, which we would support.

exports compared to China and Japan, he points out, and has a huge domestic demand—so growth may “remain static” around 4-5 per cent. In addition, economic crises in countries like India tend to boost labour productivity.

Ultimately, it will be a toss-up between three scenarios—a V-shaped recovery, a U-shaped one or an L-shaped one. US President Donald Trump has categorically talked about the first—saying that the US and other economies will immediately rebound once the lockdowns are lifted, and, hence, there will be minimal unemployment and higher-than-estimated growths. Most experts are nervy and apprehensive: they believe the U-shaped scenario to be more likely, and expect the lower plateau to last for anything from six months to a few years.

Only if the IMF's dire prediction turns out true—which is that the COVID-19 crisis will be the worst after the Great Depression of the 1930s—will we be staring at the dismal L-shape spreading across the globe. That is, once growth plummets across countries, it will hug that low level for several years. In the case of the Great Depression, this trend lasted for over a decade. In such a situation, expect job losses in India to be nearer to 200 million, besides a long-lasting, severe impact on everything and everyone related to farming.

However, there are too many ifs and buts here. No one has seen such a scenario before—and we don't know if the recovery will be V-shaped, U-shaped or L-shaped (those are just shapes in a nervous Lego toy game we are playing right now). We don't even know if we can compare across a century. The Great Depression was caused by huge and deep-rooted systemic problems that were accentuated by entrepreneurs, central bankers, policymakers and investors. This crisis is the result of an external shock; the state of most economies was within the range of normal, if not exactly in the pink of health. Hence, how the economies, consumers and entrepreneurs react is still in the realm of speculation and educated guesswork.

But right now, it's as stark as either/or. Saiful Haq, a property developer

## EMPLOYMENT



**14.5** lakh  
E-commerce



**69.9** lakh  
Food processing



**474** lakh  
Retail



**500** lakh  
Tourism



**662** lakh  
Building construction

**"It is very important to make sure people who are losing jobs can maintain a basic lifestyle."**

**Gita Gopinath**  
IMF chief economist

**"These are extraordinary times and we will do everything we can to protect our people's livelihoods. But we will certainly not want to cut salaries or jobs due to this event."**

**Harsh Goenka**  
Chairman, RPG Enterprises

**"One of the indicators for the prioritisation of sectors to restart is protection of jobs and livelihoods, especially of industrial labour and blue-collared jobs."**

**CII Report**



## Rachel Goenka

Founder & CEO,  
The Chocolate Spoon Company

The restaurant business has been hit in the worst possible way. In the absence of a government package or support, I am afraid we won't be able to pay our staff for long.

We are operating with limited in-house delivery.

Around 30 of the 430 employees are working to sustain this. I don't see anything getting

back to normal. You have the monsoon coming next. That would be another pain.

## Shilpa Harit,

Owner,  
Style Your Way Boutique

We are passing through a very bad phase, with zero sales for a month now and overdue mall rentals. For April, I have no means to pay the eight employees. My karigars (employees) have not gone back home. But I call each one every 3-4 days. I have 1,000-1,500 customers in and around Gurgaon.

I plan to reach out to them with a 'Help us now, collect your dresses later' kind of Facebook campaign.



**Hundreds of migrant workers**—jobless, homeless and almost without cash and food—gathered outside a Bandra railway station in Mumbai following rumours that train services would resume on April 15

in Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh, laments that given the jobs and wage losses, he does not know if property buyers will be in a position to repay their loans. As it is, real estate tends to dip during the monsoon season. But Raju John, director general, Builders Association of India, also points to the eventual, but inevitable, climb-back of activity: "After the lockdown, it will take a few weeks to get the workforce back, and streamline the machinery and raw material. There will also be a rush to complete pending projects."

Similarly, in the extreme scenarios now painted, there seems to be no hope for the travel and hospitality segments. Most experts feel they will be decimated with job losses, bankruptcies and shutdowns. Let's also look at the hopeful side. There are tens of thousands of people stranded across the globe—home or away, at their origins or midway. There will also be untold thousands who would now wish to visit their family—after not having been able to be with them in times of deep uncertainty. People may be afraid of travel, but they may also *want to move*, as if freed from

prison. Post-lockdown, the sales of air tickets may zoom, as may their prices; the related spike in demand may shore up the hospitality sector too.

The situation in agriculture is more complex. The overall amount of work that needs to be done is, roughly speaking, constant within a short time-frame—but this is a dynamic, mobile field of employment that faces unique bottlenecks now. Farmers are sitting on a bumper rabi crop, although there are indications of a 15-20 per cent loss in wheat production due to untimely rain. But there is a shortage of labour, which moves from UP-Bihar to Punjab-Haryana, and also of mechanical harvesters, which move from Punjab-Haryana to UP. The lucky part: a portion of migrant families, who go back to their villages and do odd jobs during this season, are available as farm labourers. "Earlier, these migrant labourers would refuse farm work back home at Rs 300 per day. Now, as they cannot do those odd jobs they do in normal times, they are willing to work for Rs 200," says a farmer, who owns an acre in western UP. "But supply is low. There were





## Nikunj Sanghi,

MD & Founder,  
JS 4Wheel Motor Pvt Ltd

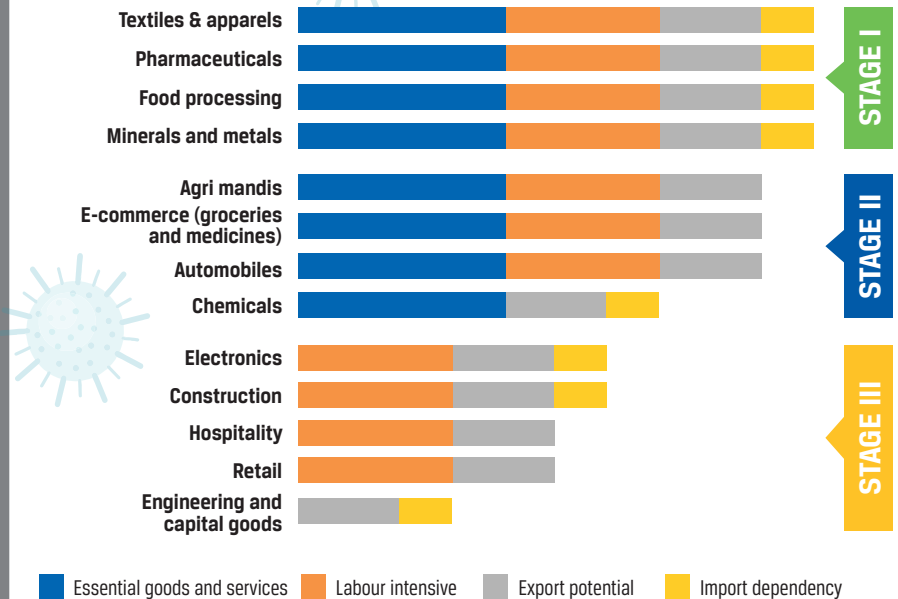
We are almost completely shut. There is absolutely zero cash. Probably 2-3 per cent business is operational. I have paid salaries for April. In fact, 90 per cent of car dealerships have done that. Our business model is based on a low margin—it is almost like earning daily wages. If revenue is zero, how are we going to sustain beyond April?

## Disha Grover

Founder,  
Nutrfit by Disha (New Delhi)

Mine is a self-owned, self-operated, single-branch clinic. I have run it for the past three years. This lockdown has yielded mixed results. The bright side is that people are indoors. They are able to take time out from their schedule. We were running 'online diet plans' and have migrated some of our existing clients to the online platform. Our profits are not huge, but I can protect the jobs. I don't plan to fire anybody.

## PRIORITISATION OF SECTORS FOR RESTART



GRAPHICS BY SAJI

instances of workers being smuggled from Haryana to UP after payment of bribes at the borders.”

The fact is that the wheat crop has to be harvested in the next week or two, or else there may be huge production losses. Although several state governments have announced measures to ensure free flow of farm labour, critics contend that the workers face problems at state borders.

Employment is one facet of a complex farm scenario where the economic impact on individuals will be across levels. It's a chain effect. Take one of the acute problems right now: farmers' access to mandis. “They have few options: transportation is hit. There are added costs as they will first take their crops to (the nearest) storage facilities, and only later to the markets,” explains Yoginder K. Alagh, agri economist and vice-chairman, Sardar Patel Institute of Economic and Social Research, Ahmedabad. Also, allied segments like dairy and poultry have also taken a severe hit. The result: shrinking incomes. For farmers, warehouse receipts of their crops are not bankable or cashable. Until and unless they sell their crops, they cannot earn money to repay the loans taken earlier to buy seeds and fertilisers, and run their households. The crisis is accentuated because of the hit on all the modes of additional income.

**"The Indian tourism and hospitality industry is staring at a potential job loss of around 38 million, which is 70 per cent of the total workforce due to COVID-19."**

**KPMG Report (April 1)**

**"We have estimated that if no assistance comes from the government, there could be loss of almost a crore (10 million) of jobs in the entire textile chain."**

**Rahul Mehta, CMAI Chief Mentor**

**Of 200 CEOs surveyed, 52% foresee job losses in their sectors; 47% expect job cuts to be less than 15%, but a worryingly high 32% expect a loss of 15-30% of jobs.**

**CII Survey**



## Riyaz Ismail,

Director,  
Madras Bakers Pvt Ltd

We were really surprised when after the Janata Curfew on March 22, 25 out-of-state workers in our centralised baking station sensed that a longer lockdown was coming any time and took the last train out of Chennai to their native places in Bihar and UP.

After the Chennai Corporation permitted bakeries to operate from April 12, we have been managing with just five local workers, who are able to bake only 600 loaves of bread. Earlier, we used to bake 2,000 every day. The other workers have called and said they will return after the lockdown is over, which is some solace as we would otherwise have to hire fresh hands and train them from scratch.

## Letter from Triburg's Dubai-based CEO Tarun Bakshi to his employees; Triburg is among the leading Indian apparel sourcing company

Dear All.

In my 48 years of working life never I have been in such a difficult situation and am sure the same thought is going thru all of you....

- A) Most retail stores in the US will stay closed till July-Aug.
- B) Most retailers and our customers have furloughed 95 pct (%) of their employees without salary
- C) Unemployment in US has reached close to 10 million jobs
- D) Most customers have deferred payment terms to 150 days.... Many would file Ch11 bankruptcies and some Ch 7 shutdown
- E) Triburg is not going to receive any revenue in the next 9 months....
- F) We have some painful options ahead - winnow the organisation down to a level where we request several associates to go on leave without salary.... Balance associates will be requested to take cuts

It's a painful test that takes away precious jobs and leaves the rest with curtailed incomes.

While we must be patient, take care of each other in the hope "this shall also pass"

You all are the glue that holds Triburg together and I am thinking only of you.

Stay safe and healthy

My best wishes to all

Tarun

To finance the next crop, the farmers may have to take fresh loans, even if they have been unable to repay the earlier ones. This will result in a classic debt trap that can last several seasons.

Given these uncertainties about how things will pan out in terms of jobs and economic recovery in the post-lockdown period, a lot will depend on what crisis management measures the various state governments will adopt—what CII calls a “calibrated and safe exit from the lockdown”. To ensure the least harm, and speedier recovery, the government will have to decide which sectors to restart, in what phases—how the economic imperatives are to be matched against workers’ safety, and getting back migrant workers.

The CII feels both the clauses ‘labour-intensive’ and ‘essential’ should apply in choosing sectors: thus textiles, pharmaceuticals and minerals should be opened initially, fol-

lowed immediately by agri-markets, e-commerce, automobiles and chemicals. All the remaining sectors should be opened in Stage 3. The entire economy should be up-and-running within four to five weeks, with adequate attention paid to safety protocols and social distancing between workers.

However, experts disagree with this approach. K.E. Raghunathan, former national president, AIMO, says unlocking a few sectors “without their supply chains and logistics restored” will defeat the objective. “How will it help if my retailer cannot sell the goods?” he asks. Narendar Pani of the National Institute of Advanced Studies feels the government has to initially identify crucial manufacturing hubs, open them, woo workers back and ease their supply chains.

A constant focus in this process has to be on the employees, on how to ease the pain for them. Almost 40 per cent of migrant labour in the informal



## Bijender Singh Dalal

Chairman, Pragatisheel Kisan Club,  
Palwal (Haryana)

Vegetables and flowers seem to be thriving this season due to clear air and better water from the canal. As unexpected rain led to discolouration of the wheat harvest, we were banking on our exotic range of flowers and vegetables. Due to the lockdown, however, floriculturists, who used to sell Rs 1 crore to Rs 1.5 crore worth of flowers daily, have had to face losses—the flowers wilted before they could reach the Gazipur wholesale market in Delhi. Some of us adopted new technologies to improve the quality and quantity of yields, but limited access to export markets has caused distress. Once the market opens, we expect higher prices will help recoup the losses.

economy—seasonal and circular migrants—are facing hardship, even hunger. “Workers are stuck and don’t have cash. They need to work to survive,” says Abha Mishra of Ajeevika Bureau, a workers’ collective that provides legal and health aid and financial literacy. “The contractors employing them are also affected. I am not sure if they’ll be able to absorb all the workers once the lockdown ends.”

**E**NTREPRENEURS in the organised sector are in a tizzy too. It’s only after the lockdown is lifted that they can take stock of their factories—the safety of machines, usability of raw materials, inventory of finished products etc. There is no certainty about being able to execute pending orders straightaway. Into this mix comes the uncertainty about employees. Raghunathan says the entrepreneur is not sure if his workers will even return. It is estimated that between 50–65 per cent may not, at least not immediately, due to the continuing scare about the virus.

Given these fears, among both employers and employees, it isn’t unusual to see the former clamour for government support. For example, the garment sector says it cannot revive for 9–12 months, and needs help in the first 2–3 months to enable it to survive and protect livelihoods. Similar voices are heard from other sectors too. “Industry is under pressure, and the irony is that the government hasn’t announced any

economic package,” says a corporate CEO. “Our stocks can last for another month in the post-lockdown scenario, but demand slowdown will be the killing factor.”

What people tend to forget is that a government stimulus package isn’t enough. Even during the pre-pandemic slowdown, decisions by the finance ministry to help India Inc weren’t exactly producing great results. Some recent research even goes contrary to the popular notion and says huge government spending during the Great Depression actually prolonged it by a few years. Reason: it created employment, but did not add to economic growth. This time, the government has to tackle both, and attack demand and supply at the same time.

The positive lies in the fact that several government measures can boost consumer sentiment locally, and make up for the lack of demand for Indian exports. Given that imports are cheap due to low global demand, Indian industry can become competitive and profitably sell goods in the domestic market. China, whose economy seems to have come out of COVID-19, plans to do the same. Like China became the engine for global growth after the financial crisis of 2008 through exports, India and China can do the same this time through higher sales in their respective local markets.

But the macro picture will always average out and show signs of stabilising—and at the same time hide real human pain at the level of ordinary life. “The important concern is loss of employment and income. It’s a pity the government failed to understand this,” says Ravi Srivastava, labour expert at JNU. It needs to keep this in mind now—for disaggregated human pain is not just a marker of social health, it also becomes an economic and political fact. “Yes, it is true that life is more important than livelihood,” explains Pani. “But we’re fast reaching a point where life itself can be threatened due to lack of incomes and wages.” He is one of those who fears things may get worse after the lockdown is lifted on May 3, before the economy picks up. That, in some ways, the cure may have been worse than the disease. India will know soon. □

—with inputs from  
Himanshu Kakkar and G.C. Shekhar

# Is Corona a Job Virus?

Within catastrophe lies opportunity. If only we can manage to reinvent ourselves.



**THE** greatest ever disaster to hit mankind—the unfathomable virus attack—is turning the world upside down! And the worst thought it triggers in our mind is: will I get my earnings this month-end? And what about next month? Many of us are seriously worried about our survival. Read any article, watch any channel, see any WhatsApp message—it's despair all around.

Numerous sectors are likely to get terribly affected—from apparel to handicraft, from automobiles to mobile phones, from hotels to airlines. Mayhem looks imminent.

Yet we need to survive. Complaining will get us nowhere. The good news is many will prosper post-COVID, as some of us would have reinvented ourselves, pushing procrastination aside.

The most important task is to shield our current job. Whether employers will continue to pay our full salary while we sit at home is a big question. In case we are not doing much, we should ask for additional or new work that can be done from home. Suggest probable new customers, carry out technology search or do data-mining for international opportunities. The possibilities are endless. Based on our inclination and training, we may become more valuable assets and continue getting our salary.

Irrespective of the status of our current job or profession, most of us would need to reinvent ourselves. The world may undergo a metamorphosis. Travel habits, eating out, group entertainment will all undergo modification. We will need to adopt and adapt. Each one of us is unique. We will need to figure out what we can change, where we need to accept, how we can acclimatise and when we can shift.

The world will continue to have seven billion plus people. They would need food, clothing, shelter and other

essentials. The demand pattern would, however, vary in many ways; jobs will undergo change and so will skill requirements. Hence, we will need to gain fresh or improved competence.

Here are a few ideas on transforming yourself. Given the lack of current trust in Chinese medicines and food products, some new dimensions of business are likely to flourish. Healthcare, pharmaceuticals, food processing and pisciculture will get a fresh fillip. Getting trained and gaining expertise could open a new vista of opportunities for jobs and entrepreneurship.

Artificial Intelligence and Big Data can be more profoundly used to

track customer preferences and consumption patterns. Block chain is another new-age development, with profitable applications in hospitality, logistics and banking. Cryptocurrencies like bitcoin are likely to gain prominence with possible government supervision. Why lose out on these new avenues? Gaining skills in these areas do not demand major qualifications or experience profile.

Many of you would have had several years of work experience. Can you use your knowledge and expertise in technology, procurement, sales, marketing, finance, leadership, human resource management or law to advise start-ups, ongoing ventures or SMEs? Based on your learnings, could you think of consulting and mentoring in some of these areas? Once the pandemic is under control, numerous businesses will require support to beat the downturn.

Some of you would call these higher-level skills. Can all of us imbibe them? What about some lower-level expertise? Skill

gaps are everywhere. Think of nursing, which has huge latent demand—local and global. Farming is another area. Go beyond the traditional variety, and look at exotic fruits and veggies. Proper selection of seeds and appropriate cropping pattern with scientific irrigation can provide a world of opportunities.

Given our specific likes, expertise, training and abilities, we will need to figure out what can now be done quickly to reinvent ourselves. God has decided to transform the world all of a sudden. This will bring us new vistas of opportunities. As even a child knows what China's contribution to the virus-catastrophe is, Chinese businesses are unlikely to be trusted the way as before. If so, where will the world source its medicines and other necessities from? India will be the rational choice.

Change is painful, but it is more painful to get stuck in not changing. Corona is a job virus no doubt, but it is also an opportunity for us to gain in this altering world. Please note the darkest hours are always just before dawn. **□**

*(Views expressed are personal)*



**Many will prosper post-COVID by reinventing themselves.**

# Save Business to Save People

Instead of forcing businesses to pay employees, there are better ways for the government to do good by helping business stay afloat during and after the crisis



**THE** country is currently dealing with not only the COVID-19 pandemic, but also a lot of collateral damage caused by the virus that is now threatening to go out of control. The worldwide economic slowdown is now threatening the livelihood of millions across the globe, including people in India.

For most companies, the second quarter of this year has been wiped out. They are not only dealing with loss of revenue due to the lockdown, but also the impact of all the major economies slowing down. This is impacting bottomlines, translating into lower production, workforce layoffs, lower profits and thereby lower taxes. With production down to zero, employees locked down in their homes and no sales, most micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) are looking with concern at the biggest fixed cost in such an environment—the workforce.

The government's relief package of Rs 1.70 lakh crore was an urgent response for the survival of millions, but not a solution to sustain the economy or ensure a quick bounce back after the COVID-19 crisis is over. The ministry of home affairs has made it mandatory for employers to pay salaries during the lockdown period, regardless of whether an employee is required to stay in quarantine or comply with a stay-at-home notice. The MHA has also directed that all employers—in industry, shops and commercial establishments—shall pay wages on due date, without any deduction, for the period their establishments are under closure during the lockdown. This prohibits any deduction or delay in payment of salaries to any employee on account of working from home or leave due to lockdown. The government has invoked the Disaster



As production is down to zero and employees are staying home, many companies are looking with concern at the biggest fixed cost in such an environment—the workforce

## If governments can slash pay of employees, why cannot businesses do so without contravening the law?

Management Act, under which this is now a binding law, irrespective of what other laws may say. Any violation of the order would invite punishment, including imprisonment and/or a fine.

The reason for widespread panic and discontent among businesses, especially MSMEs, is that the government is being insensitive to their business exigencies, having failed to understand the basic nature of how they work—on low margins and short-term circulation of money, without the massive reserves some large-scale industries may have. On a scenario-

based business model, the government needs to consider the following. **Scenario 1:** Imagine a business owner has Rs 1 crore in the bank and the monthly overhead, including salaries, is Rs 30 lakh. The owner expects no revenue stream for three months and cannot be sure the business will pick up post-lockdown, given the global recession. Should he be saving this Rs 1 crore to tide him over the next 12-18 months of recession or pay his employees for three months and wonder how he would feed



his family should the business not pick up?

**Scenario 2:** In the previous scenario, suppose the owner needs Rs 50 lakh to buy raw material and restart the business after the lockdown, should he save this money to ensure business continuity or pay his employees now and ensure the business does not start again?

**Scenario 3:** A company has been struggling for three months with losses and COVID-19 was the last straw that broke the proverbial camel's back. The business now needs to be shut down. How does the government expect the owner to generate cash to pay the employees for three months in an already loss-making business?

**Scenario 4:** There is global recession, business intelligence says demand for a particular product will be low for the next 6-12 months, the owner realises he has to cut down on production, and hence the workforce,

**A business that isn't doing well would rather save on its wage bill, than hold back EMIs to pay extra interest later.**

for the business to continue making sense. Can he not fire his employees in view of the unfortunate developments?

Can the government pass blanket diktats to business owners contrary to jurisprudence? Can the government take on the responsibility of unskilled labour, but not skilled labour? Can the government insist a business owner dig into his personal savings and sell private property to ensure the employees are paid?

Various state governments have announced measures like slashing salaries of government employees. Andhra Pradesh

and Telangana have announced pay cuts, Maharashtra is paying salaries in instalments, Odisha has deferred salaries. If public sector and government organisations can take decisions in contravention of the law, why shouldn't private companies be allowed to do so? Why should companies not be allowed to temporarily change or suspend some of the terms of their employment contracts, given the crisis?

While paying employees is every employer's moral duty and the government's advisories are examples of a noble idea, but enforcing them legally means it is a crime to be a business owner, pay taxes and contribute to the country's development. Hopefully, that is not the message meant to be sent. The government should also bear in mind that, with a vaccine still 12-18 months away from mass production, people will reimagine their lifestyles after the COVID-19 crisis. It cannot be guaranteed that they will feel comfortable enough to go back to the life they knew. Markets, malls, restaurants, cinema halls etc

may not see the same footfall that used to be. Some businesses may be doomed permanently.

As this situation is not unique to India and is faced by every country, it is fairly educational to see the different models. The United States has not prohibited its businesses from laying off people, but have offered a two-pronged approach—businesses can apply for a loan to meet their overheads (including rents, salaries, utilities) and the loan will be written off if the business continues to employ the workforce after six months. While it sounds good, not many businesses in the US are opting for this due to red tape and a general sense of pessimism regarding bouncing back fully. India has also allowed a three-month moratorium on EMIs relating to business loans, but it's not certain how many businesses will be positively impacted. They are only saying that you don't have to pay now, but you have to at some point—and if the business is not doing well, businesses would rather save on salaries of their employees rather than save money now only to pay an extra interest three months later.

The second thing that the US has done is increase the amount of unemployment benefit given by the federal government. For example, in the state of Michigan, the maximum unemployment benefit was around US\$ 360 per week. The federal government has added US\$600 (under the CARES Act) to the deal and now the benefit received is US\$960 a week per person, which is actually more than what some people would make if they were working full-time. This has now disincentivised people to look for a job, causing a shortage of manpower for businesses like Amazon that are still hiring in this environment. Transposing that into the Indian scenario, an unskilled labourer who works on daily wages would typically earn Rs 500-700 per day and may be work for 20-23 days in a month and has to pay for housing, food and generally the high cost of living in a city like Delhi. By paying him Rs 5,000 every month automatically, are we disincentivising him too? The only difference is that

unemployment benefit is not a right in India and the current sop is being given only for a limited period, so they will likely come back into the workforce.

On the other hand, countries like Germany, the UK and Denmark in Europe have agreed to give unlimited loans to small and large businesses alike, defer tax payments, take over social security contributions, lower interest rates on loans, announce subsidies and provide businesses with 'wage payment' assistance—every business files taxes and the government broadly knows what their overheads are. The governments have now said they would transfer 75-80 per cent of a business's payroll into their account every month. Now the businesses can stay afloat, while their employees know they will get 75-80 per cent of their salaries and are not filing for unemployment benefits. The employers benefit to the extent that they can ensure business continuity and retain the team they so painstakingly trained, resting assured that it would be business as usual.

This sounds like a great model that India could also follow. This will also weed out businesses that are more cash-based and have been underfiling taxes. Needless to add, it is not a one-size-fits-all kind of scenario. For example, some service-oriented businesses are still functional and may be able to generate some revenue at least, hence an 80 per cent benefit may not be required for them. This model has the benefit of making businesses accountable—the government pays one business, which may then be responsible for keeping hundreds of

families off the streets and/or from lining up for government benefits.

The other idea that the government could consider is giving out tax breaks, including in GST and income tax. Industry-specific measures could also be considered—for example, government purchasing certain products for use by government employees, decrease in export duties, decrease in licence fees and so on. The underlying idea should be to increase manufacturing and employment opportunities, and ensuring business continuity.

A lot of trade bodies have made representations to the relevant ministries to legally allow them to pay lower rents, slash salaries, pay utilities' bills only on

consumption (and forego fixed charges) and so on, but the government has not announced any break so far. In response to the representations made by the various industry bodies, including export, jewellery, tobacco etc, the government has given extensions for compliance-related issues and some sort of non-monetary relief. The government seems to be giving ideas to businesses to save money, but that is not the real problem. If business owners do save money, how will the government ensure the benefit is going to the employees too? The government's mandate should not only be that of saving money, but to ensure that owners continue to run their business. Monetary support should be provided to help businesses survive this lockdown, and thereafter the government should continue to support various industries in terms of policies, sops and the like in order to help them in what could be starting from scratch for many small and medium-sized businesses.

We are on a wait-and-watch mode as of now. The prime minister, in his address, has promised "Jaan Bhi, Jahaan Bhi" and we remain hopeful. However, time is of essence and clarity will not only help for the reasons above, but can also preempt unnecessary litigation that is bound to increase given the circumstances. ■

*(Views are personal.)*

## The government should give tax breaks, including in GST and income tax, besides reduced export duties and licence fees.

# When Stalin and Mother Teresa Agree

A scientist responds to the human tragedy that is COVID-19, and asks questions of science and society.



**KAJODI** was a powerful image. A lonely figure, the vast emptiness of the Noida-Greater Noida

Expressway and the horizon dotted with high-rise buildings. In the aftermath of the national lockdown announced on March 24, the 90-year-old was trying to walk from Delhi-NCR to her village in Rajasthan, some 400 km away. The image infuriated me. Then it depressed me. Trained as a scientist—a biochemist and virologist to be exact—I was in demand for my views on the coronavirus outbreak. Relying on public health principles, I was advocating social distancing and a lockdown.... But wasn't I being completely blinkered by the science, and not paying attention to the "public" in public health? Indeed, I was...and I was angry with myself.

How dare I sit in the comforts of my South Delhi apartment and pontificate to people living on the edge? How would I explain, let alone justify, "social distancing" to someone who lives in an urban slum in Delhi or a chawl in Mumbai? One room with five or six people? My anger turned to depression. Over the next fortnight and more, as we navigated to the end of one lockdown and the beginning of an extension, a variety of other conflicted emotions too overwhelmed us. What have we scientists learnt, experientially? How must science look upon these scenes that confront it from the world out there, the world beyond the research lab? Here, I put down some of my thoughts and feelings—hopefully we can turn our doubts into the outlines of a collective interrogation of science in society.

First, can scientists remain unaffected by the sight of humans being stripped bare of their dignity? We watched the images of tens of thousands of migrant workers jostling to get on crowded buses to reach their village homes.



**THE LONG MARCH**  
90-year-old Kajodi  
on her 400-km trek.

## Can scientists remain unaffected by the sight of humans being stripped bare of their dignity?

Those unable to get transport started walking on highways and along railway tracks to get to places where they might starve, but at least do it with dignity. One poor man remarked, "If we die here in this situation no one will even touch our body. In our village, our people will at least cremate us." Officialdom, never to be outdone, framed their misery in emphatic ways—beating them, spraying them with chemicals, locking them in confined spaces. Both dignity and social distancing were ideas that blew away in the pleasant breeze on those days in late March.

In a social media post, Rajiv Sarin, a cancer physician at Tata Memorial Centre in Mumbai, wrote, "These sights and thoughts will leave a deep scar on the Indian psyche. I think these have been the worst scenes in mainland India after the 1947 Partition. A very sad reflection on our self-serving society of which government is just a part." He wrote of the "lack of faith of poor people"—rather, their conviction that "in really desperate times, they will be alone". And then, signs of that old fatalism. "Without exception, they explained their helpless situation without any bitterness for anyone—they knew the fault is theirs of being poor."

This pandemic has taught me a few lessons. My training in science has



been unipolar. This is despite having studied at two of India's premier institutions—the Aligarh Muslim University and IIT Kanpur, both enlightened places in my time. At AMU, a chemistry undergraduate like me could still be taught George Orwell's *Animal Farm* by a leftist, Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* by a feminist, and French by a lecturer of Arabic. At IIT Kanpur, you could still recite Faiz's *Hum Dekhenge* without being investigated. Growing up in a family of scholars in subjects as diverse as Arabic, biochemistry and sociology, there were always interesting things to read at home. While doing my PhD in the US, I was part of a group that met every weekend to read and discuss India-specific issues. Each one of us from that group came back to work in India—anthropologist, engineer(s), journalist, nutrition scientist...down to me, the virologist. With this background, I was even more upset with my clouded vision.

Most scientists spend a major part of their life in the laboratory with little time left for social or humanistic pursuits. Physicians also spend long hours in hospitals, but they come in touch with patients and the better ones develop empathy. Still, the lack of early grounding in humanities leaves a void—nothing in their education equips science, engineering or medicine students when it comes to the application of their work to dynamic, flux-ridden domains like 'people' and 'societies'. (A reverse gap is true for humanities students, who are often awed or suspicious of technology, and can be prone to fake news about technology, disease and health. The pandemic has seen plenty of that.)

When this world-view is translated into governance, it can cause real problems. Technocrats govern as if they deal with not humans but 'things'—static objects that can be fixed like machines. A severe deficiency in understanding humanity is often visible in their operations. And the other side often does not pay sufficient attention to credible data and authenticated evidence when making policy, with decisions relying more on politics and perception. A good balance comes from teams with diversity and individuals with more wholesome training.

"Confusing science with pseudoscience is inevitable as long as science is taught as a collection of facts and laws, divorced from the scientific method," says my long-time friend N. Sukumar, Professor of Chemistry at Shiv Nadar University. This inevitably leads to evidence playing just a minor role or no role at all in decision-making and governance. The results can be devastating in crises such as the current pandemic.

As a biomedical researcher, I am aware of the inclusivity of pathogens. They strike royals and commoners, rich and poor, people of different religions and nationalities alike. Social status, faith, the colour of your skin and other differences mean little to a virus. COVID-19 has affected communist China, Christian Italy, Islamic Iran and the secular West with equal ferocity. It has led to the closure of places of worship just as it has closed down bars, nightclubs and casinos. When heaven and hell agree on something, one must take it seriously?

I was wrong again. In India, the pandemic painfully laid bare our societal faultlines. When unable to deal with a situation, it is easiest to blame others. Hate-spewing Indian media continues its communal agenda even when staring at a pandemic—fake news is going viral faster than a virus! Those with an education are often no better. Today these "Covigots" are using the virus to mask their bigotry; tomorrow they will use another crisis.

The virus may be inclusive, but the pandemic is not. A lockdown anywhere protects the rich and exposes the poor to human and economic challenges. The poor suffer in lost wages, unemployment and lack of access

to welfare. Almost 90 per cent of India's workforce is in the informal sector, which is hurting the most. An International Labour Organisation report suggests that COVID-19 may take about 400 million workers in India deeper into poverty. Online access being a luxury available only to some, children of the poor are lagging behind in learning as well. With anxiety-driven domestic violence on the rise, women are suffering more than men. But biologically, the virus is causing higher mortality in men compared to women.

All animals are (not) equal. Some are more equal than others.

## The quantum of sympathy goes down, so does the willingness to help, when the number of victims goes up.

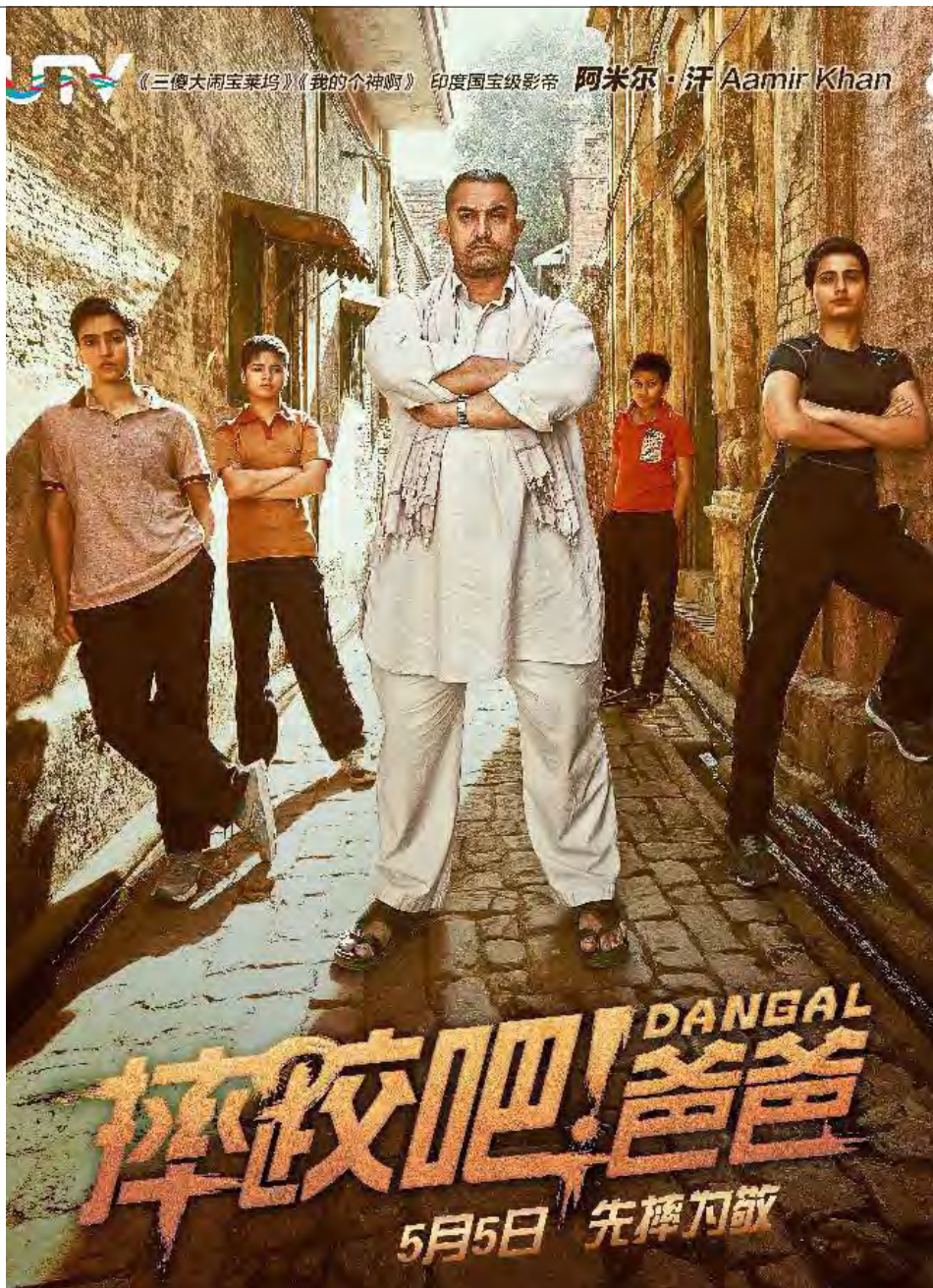
I saw an online video of a poor fruit seller letting migrants pick bananas from his cart. Men, women and children only picked up what they needed—just one or two bananas each. The poor still have dignity. It is we the middle class that has lost it by way of our materialism. This haunts me every time I open my wardrobe and see all those shirts and trousers, all those pairs of shoes, all made redundant by a virus 20 million times smaller than me, which carries a genome 1,00,000 times smaller than mine.

The death of one person is a tragedy; the death of one million is a statistic. This is a remark attributed to Joseph Stalin. And Mother Teresa once said, "If I look at the mass, I will never act." When Stalin and the Mother agree on something, you wonder. There is a tendency to turn away from mass suffering—it's documented as the 'collapse of compassion'. When the number of victims increases, the quantum of sympathy actually decreases, so does the willingness to help. People tune down their empathy. This appears to be a survival trait programmed in our brains to protect us from being overwhelmed.

But 'trust' and 'compassion' are essential to compliance—the Kerala model of COVID management exemplifies it. Pandemics are both biological and social in their nature and consequences. If we ignore one at the expense of the other, we do so at our peril.

I do hope that Kajodi is safe. I also hope that neither my country nor I will have a collapse of compassion. ■

*(Views are personal)*



# El Dorado Loses Its Zingaat

As the world stays indoors, Indian films' revenues are dwindling at home and abroad

➔  
**Resonant** *Dangal* earned Rs 1,357 crore in China; Shah Rukh Khan (below) has fans all over the world

## Giridhar Jha in Mumbai

**H**RITHIK Roshan, often eulogised as the Greek God of Hindi cinema, should have been in People's Republic of China by now. The 46-year-old behind last year's biggest hit, *War*, was all set to fly there late last month to promote *Super 30*, the 2019 biopic of mathematician Anand Kumar, ahead of its release in April. But the great disruption triggered by coronavirus has put paid to all his hopes. His Chinese fans will now have to wait indefinitely for their long-awaited date with Da Shuai ('extremely handsome' in Mandarin),



their nickname for one of their favourite stars from India.

As COVID-19 continues to wreak havoc across the globe, nobody knows when *Super 30* will finally hit the screens in China. Wuhan, where the virus first surfaced last year, has recently come out of a 76-day lockdown, but the situation appears to be far from normal. Under the present circumstances, it is difficult to even hazard a guess as to how long will it take for the Chinese movie market to bounce back.

Does the uncertainty signal the end of the road for Bollywood in a territory that trade analysts hail as the proverbial gold mine for Indian actors and filmmakers? Hrithik, for one, has a lot at stake in *Super 30's* release across mainland China. His performance in the movie, where he plays the character of a poor teacher who dedicates his life to groom underprivileged students for admission into the coveted Indian Institutes of Technology, had earned him critical and commercial success in India last year. But box-office pundits believe that *Super 30* is destined for greater glory in China, thanks to the universal appeal of its plot and the underlying message of education for all. Many think it has the potential to turn into a big money-spinner in China as it may touch a chord with Mandarin audiences the way Aamir Khan-starrer *Dangal* (2016) did earlier.

“The movie was scheduled to release in China this month (April),” *Super 30's* founder

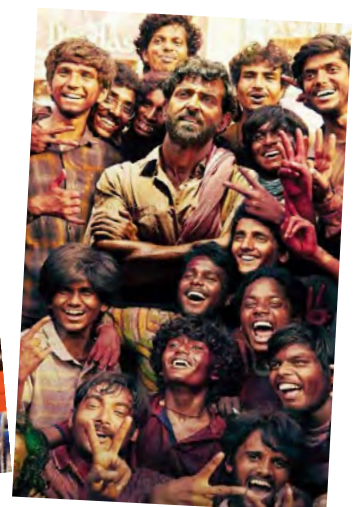
**Top Ten Indian Grossers In Overseas Territories\***

- Dangal** 2016  
\$228 million
- Secret Superstar** 2017  
\$140 million
- Bajrangi Bhaijaan** 2015  
\$80.4 million
- Disco Dancer** 1982  
\$75.85 million
- Baahubali 2** 2017  
\$58.51 million
- PK** 2014  
\$53.4 million
- Andhadhun** 2018  
\$48.78 million
- Hindi Medium** 2017  
\$36.52 million
- Dhoom 3** 2013  
\$35.6 million
- 3 Idiots** 2009  
\$30.5 million

\*Source: Trade magazines

Anand Kumar tells *Outlook*. “Hrithik and I were supposed to leave for China to promote the film towards March-end, but everything has been stalled because of coronavirus.” The 47-year-old mathematician admits that given the global situation, nobody is thinking of *Super 30's* release in China at the moment. “This pandemic has affected every individual and industry, and also put human lives in jeopardy. The need of the hour is to stay home and safe,” he says. Anand, however, hopes that the tide will turn for the better in the months ahead. “Life is gradually limping back to normal in China, but it might take at least five to six months for its entertainment industry to spring back on its feet,” he adds.

The pandemic has, doubtless, come as a big blow not only to the Hrithik-starrer but also to Bollywood, which was already reeling from the failure of several big-budget movies when COVID-19 struck. How big a market China has been for Indian cinema, especially in the past four-five years, can be gauged from the fact that *Dangal* alone did business of a staggering Rs 1,357 crore in the country in 2017. It was followed by another Aamir Khan-starrer, *Secret Superstar*, which grossed over Rs 800 crore—nine times the amount it did in India. These successes are remarkable since China is not part of the traditional overseas territories as it allows only a handful of Indian films to be released due to



**What Viewers Want** A good story is more important than star power in international markets





**Shifting Sands** While USSR was earlier the biggest overseas market, now US, UK and West Asia dominate

its stringent censorship norms. In fact, it is the US with 30 per cent share, the UK (20 per cent) and the West Asia (25 per cent) that account for three-fourths of the total business abroad. Australia, the rest of Europe and Southeast Asia are the other key markets where the large Indian diaspora waits for the release of Indian films every week.

According to a recent report by FICCI and Ernst & Young, Indian domestic film revenues in 2019 crossed Rs 115 billion, with gross box-office collections for Hindi films at Rs 49.5 billion—the highest ever for Hindi theatricals. In this period, the report states, overseas theatrical revenues fell 10 per cent to Rs 27 billion despite more films being released abroad.

The slump was primarily attributed to the failure of some big films starring superstars in the lead last year, but it hardly indicated any perceptible drop in overseas audiences' interest in Indian cinema. Far from it, an earlier report by the same agencies had stated that India's film segment was poised to grow at a compounded annual growth rate of 11.6 per cent by 2021. The sector was worth \$23.9 billion in 2018, growing 13.4 per cent from 2017. Through these years, theatrical revenues from overseas territories contributed handsomely towards its growth.

However, with coronavirus casting a huge shadow on territories abroad, all estimates might now go for a toss. With all theatres keeping shutters down, both domestic and international business prospects of Indian cinema look quite bleak this year.

Atul Mohan, editor of movie trade journal *Complete Cinema*, says that the situation may not look up before August-September this year. "As of now, there is a fear



factor, which will keep a majority of the audiences out of theatres in the initial weeks once the lockdown is lifted. Theatres will reopen with reruns of already released movies in order to gauge the mood of the public. The big movies will certainly remain on hold for a few months more."

"It will cause a huge loss to filmmakers everywhere, especially those of Bollywood movies, which seek a return of 30 to 50 per cent of their total business from overseas territories these

days," he adds. "It was primarily Shah Rukh Khan's popularity in the overseas market that made him the king of Bollywood and also prompted filmmakers realise its true potential."

It's not as though the industry suddenly discovered overseas territories to be its elusive El Dorado in the new millennium. Way back in 1949, K.A. Abbas's *Dharti Ke Lal* (1946) was released in the USSR. Three years later, Mehboob Khan's Dilip Kumar-starrer *Aan* (1952) was dubbed in 17 languages before being released in as many as 28 countries. Raj Kapoor's iconic *Awara* (1951) became a cult hit in countries like USSR and China after its release in 1954 and went on to be the first Indian film to sell 100 million tickets abroad. Barring a *Caravan* (1971) here or a *Bobby* (1973) there, the number of Hindi films releasing abroad reduced considerably in the next couple of decades. In 1982, however, Mithun Chakravorty's *Disco Dancer* gained a cult following in the USSR and China. However, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 led to the end of what was the biggest international market of Bollywood until then.

Interestingly, the disintegration of the Russian market paved the way for a big jump in Bollywood's overseas collections in countries like the US and UK, mainland Europe and even in West Asia during the post-liberalisation period. With a large

South Asian workforce, especially Indians in the IT sector moving abroad around the turn of the new millennium, overseas mar-



*In 1982, Disco Dancer gained a cult following in USSR and China.*

kets suddenly turned extremely lucrative for not only Bollywood, but also for Tamil, Telugu and Punjabi film industries.

In fact, such was the lure of foreign territories that films revolving around NRI protagonists primarily catering to the Indian diaspora began to be made in large numbers. Shah Rukh Khan's *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995) wooed NRI audiences settled in Western countries like no earlier film did, while his *Dil Se* (1998) became the first movie to make it to the top ten list of the UK box office. Later, Shah Rukh's *My Name is Khan* (2010) earned the distinction of being the first Indian production to gross Rs 1 billion in the overseas market. No wonder, distributors began to hail him as the god of overseas markets.

Like Shah Rukh, two other Khans, Aamir and Salman, began to enjoy phenomenal international popularity during this period. The success of *Dangal* and *Secret Superstar* made Aamir a darling of the Chinese audience, while Salman enjoyed a massive fan-following in West Asian countries. His *Bajrangi Bhaijaan* (2015) had a great run in China as well. But these stars never had a monopoly in the foreign market. If a movie, however small, was good, star power did not matter. It was proven once and for all by the extraordinary success of the Irrfan Khan-starrer *The Lunchbox* in 2013.

Interestingly, while Bollywood was doing great business in the US and elsewhere, Hindi filmmakers had the least idea about the emerging Chinese market in the new millennium. The renewed interest of Chinese viewers in Bollywood movies actually began about a decade ago, when pirated prints of *3 Idiots* (2009) made their way to the Chinese market and captured the imagination of local audiences. It subsequently led to the official release of the Aamir Khan-starrer, but it was his next, *PK* (2014), which did business of more than Rs 100 crore there and made Bollywood sit up and take note of China's huge potential. By the time *Dangal* and *Secret Superstar* were released, Aamir had become such a huge star that both his films smashed records, doing better business than many big-budget



**No Constraints** In recent years, movies with relatively small budgets, such as *The Lunchbox* (top) and *Secret Superstar* (bottom) have done good business

Hollywood ventures that were released around the same time. In recent years, movies with relatively small budgets, such as Irrfan Khan's *Hindi Medium* (2017), Rani Mukerji's *Hichki* (2018) and Ayushmann Khurrana's *Andhadhun* (2018), did good business.

All eyes are now on big upcoming movies such as Akshay Kumar's *Sooryavanshi* or Ranveer Singh's *83*, which were all set to be released, but


had to be deferred due to the lockdown. Film critic Murtaza Ali Khan says that movie business is among the worst-hit in the world today. "Social distancing guidelines have resulted in shutting of cinema halls and multiplexes, and shooting schedules have also been indefinitely postponed," he says.

"Many new releases have been pushed back by several months, but Bollywood is likely to suffer worse in the international arena."

Murtaza points out that Europe, China, West Asia, US and Australia have traditionally been profitable markets for Bollywood, but with the devastating effect COVID-19 is expected to have on the global economy in the long run, it seems unlikely that normalcy will return anytime soon. "Depending on how quickly the pandemic is checked globally, it might take anywhere between six months to a couple of years for Bollywood to regain its lost overseas territories," he says.

Movie trade analyst Girish Johar concurs. He says that it is a massive blow for Bollywood in terms of overall losses. "Fear and entertainment do not go hand in hand," explains Johar. "When people are afraid of coronavirus, how can they think of going to a theatre? Films will be the last thing on their mind."

Let alone Bollywood, says Johar, even big Hollywood studios such as Sony, Paramount and Marvel have been forced to defer the release of their upcoming extravaganzas by a few months or a year. "They might all get released at around the same time when the situation improves, but it will only aggravate the problems of Indian filmmakers because it will put their movies in direct clash with Hollywood in overseas territories," he says.

According to Johar, producers of big-budget movies ready for release are the worst hit in Bollywood. "If they choose to release their films soon after the lockdown, they will have to forego revenues from overseas territories because the situation will not return to normal immediately," he says. "And if they wait for months for the situation to improve, they will have to incur more financial losses because of the steep interest rates they will have to pay against their borrowings. It is a double-edged sword for them." 

*Chinese viewers became interested in Bollywood again after watching pirated prints of 3 Idiots.*



# “An initiative of VIT Bhopal University against COVID-19-themed Cyber Threats”

The Division of Cyber Security & Digital Forensics of VIT Bhopal University has released an Advisory to take precautions to be digitally safe.

The spread of deadly novel coronavirus COVID -19 is on a steep rise. Capitalizing this scenario, cyber criminals are gearing up with uniquely designed activities and attacks in the name of COVID -19 for their own malicious interest. Setting up warrantable looking websites to impersonate official sites and spreading false information online, scamming common public for money or resources is their main motto. It becomes mandatory for all the netizens (internet users) to have an eagle eye on all the suspicious mails they receive.

To safeguard the netizens from the risk of being impacted by these malwares, the Cyber Security & Digital Forensics Division of VIT Bhopal University - a premier institute of Central India closely working with the Police Academy Bhopal in the area of cyber security, has released an advisory which consists of major cyber-attack cases based on the theme of this pandemic along with the precautionary measures to avoid them. Shri. Sankar Viswanathan, Vice President, VIT Bhopal and Dr. P. Gunasekaran, Vice Chancellor, VIT Bhopal has appreciated the scientists and researchers for their effort to bringing out this timely advisory recommendation from the joint venture between these two institutions.

This content is an initiative and issued in the public interest by IPS Dr. Maithili Sharan Gupta (DGP, Police Reforms, M.P) and Dr. Shishir Kumar Shandilya, Division Head of Cyber Security & Digital Forensic at VIT Bhopal University, along with a team of B.Tech Cyber Security 2nd year students of VIT Bhopal University. The team is continuously working on the identification of COVID-19 related malwares and malicious websites as the hackers are also trying to find out new ways to target the innocent people who are already facing difficult times due to this pandemic. Dr. Shandilya informed that VIT Bhopal University will soon release its next version also, as these types of attacks are becoming much more organized than ever. The recent version is available at [www.vitbhopal.ac.in/cyber-advisory-v1.0.pdf](http://www.vitbhopal.ac.in/cyber-advisory-v1.0.pdf)

Ms. Kadhambari S. Viswanathan, Assistant Vice President VIT Bhopal, congratulated the team and added that it is good to see this awareness in B.Tech second year students of Cyber Security, towards the cyber threats during the current pandemic. Ms. Kadhambari Viswanathan has also pioneered a new drive - Safe Digital India to sensitize people on digital awareness through stopcybercrime.in

**SAFE WORK-FROM-HOME PRACTICES**

- Do not use mobile phones for work-related tasks.**
- Do not click on suspicious links (incoming emails or text).**
- In case of doubt, verify the link and do a Google search, make a comparison with the same website to ensure you have not been redirected to a malicious site.**
- Do not download/install software/apps/programs on your smartphone.**
- Do not trust or spread any news, rumor, unverified or un-verified stories.**
- Update video conferencing software to their latest version.**
- Keep your PC updated with the latest software.**
- Use strong passwords, must be at least 12 characters long with a combination of uppercase, lowercase, letters, numeric, characters and special characters.**
- Update Wi-Fi, social or professional account passwords regularly.**
- Do not share your Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Skype or other meeting IDs in social media posts.**

## COVID-19 Lockdown Lessons: How Academia Plans To Keep Students On Track Amidst Challenges



**Mr. Sanotsh Rungta**  
Chairman, Rungta Group of Institutions in Chhattisgarh

COVID-19 could change how we educate future generations

**24 March 2020**, nation-wide lockdown was imposed by the Government of India under the leadership of PM Narendra Modi. The Pandemic COVID-19 is unfolding inside homes throughout India, as students, parents, and teachers learn to deal with a new norm of social distancing and remote learning.

Delay in examinations, entrance exams and impact on the admission process is just the tip of the iceberg for Academic institutes. This crisis could change our global outlook; it may also teach us about how education needs to reform to be able to better prepare our young learners for what the future might hold.

### A testing time for academia

Schools and colleges are Lockdown, teachers across the state scramble to learn how to provide instruction remotely via technology. Students are coping with fear of missing major milestones like final year examinations and campus placements while colleges are preparing to postpone plans for the future. The motivation amongst students is bleak as they're not challenged enough. It's undefined whether the placement season would even begin in December 2020. Another challenge as depicted by Shri Ramesh Pokhriyal, HRD Minister's public appeal, to all campus recruiters asking them not to withdraw jobs offered to graduate students of technical education institutions, hints at ensuing backlash of COVID-19 pandemic.

### Students must learn to adapt to the new norms

Educators as well as the students we educate, have to acquire new skills, and one word that defines it all is "Adaptability", the ability to respond to the new playing turf will determine the winner in the COVID-19 Era, says Mr. Santosh Rungta, Chairman of Rungta Group of Institutions in Chhattisgarh. Tech tools like Zoom and Toodle- a digital initiative by the Institution, are the common e-learning tools used to cope with the academic schedule. Mock interview sessions, counselling sessions and mock tests are regularly conducted for UG & PG students to support learning. Students must also adapt to being flexible, develop creative thinking, be resilient, leverage entrepreneurial skills along with emotional intelligence.

### E-learning anxiety among students

While e-learning is the next chapter in technical education, we're currently just seeing one side of the coin. Theoretical training can be scheduled via online learning, but how would the practical/project training take place? Government University affiliated institutes will have a bottleneck in terms of flexibility to respond quickly to changed environment. For students, Existing skills may not suffice; job scenario would change drastically so the ability to remain ahead of the skill requirements of industry would be the need of the hour.

### Post lockdown plan for academia

"It is difficult to make a decision at the moment. We will review the situation on April 14." says Pokhriyal when asked about his Ministry's post-lockdown plan. In the era of uncertainty, we're forecasting a gloom for college placements.

However, the government is monitoring the scenario closely and its expected that a proper intervention would be made, in time, by government to ease out the disruptions, Covid-19 pandemic would create for forthcoming academic cycles. Academic institutes including Rungta, are ensuring robust online access to faculty and students with the live streaming facility, collaborating with apps and tapping into in-house technologies to facilitate online learning. Looking at the present lockdown scenario, all may not be gloomy, there is hope and that makes us believe that education is not locked down, if only we unlock our potentials.

# PGDM/MBA – A PERTINENT PROGRAM TO DEVELOP SKILLSETS TO strategize Post COVID resurrection



**Prof IM Pandey, DG, Delhi School of Business-VIPS TC AND Former Professor, IIM Ahmedabad.**

would be economic revival and especially for the MSME sector as it holds maximum contribution to national economy. Government has already made cash available in the hands of farmers, unemployed and rural folks. After the lockdown is relaxed or lifted, more resources are expected to be made available in the hands of the people to enable them to spend on goods and services. This will help to boost demand – an essential condition for revival of economy.

Large companies will be able to revive much comfortably compared to MSME firms, because of their sheer size, reserve resources and volume of operations. White goods companies may face temporary problems, but to begin with, they will depend on their reserve liquidity, take less profit and will retain workers. This will help them to gain the loyalty of their employees. They will adopt innovative approaches to do business. They will deploy their resources skillfully and strategically and adopt cost reducing techniques. As demand starts picking up, the loyalty of employees will pay off and they will work for more hours in a week. This sector will be slow for about a year or so. But it will revive and pick up speed.

Food and pharmaceutical companies are already in operation. There will be further surge in their businesses as lockdown is lifted. They will use more IT related automation. E-commerce is expected to pick up further as people would like to shop online more. Telemedicine may be introduced in India and may pick up as people would like to consult doctors online.

IT is a sector that has seen increase in demand even during lockdown and will see further growth in their businesses as more and more companies and educational institutes will introduce IT-related automation.

Real estate and manufacturing will be given immediate momentum by government's investment in construction and infrastructure to bring the economy into immediate and accelerated revival. Fresh capital would be infused in these sectors to boost their revival. By the time these benefits nurture these sectors and resuscitate them, there would a need for more blue-collar and white-collar employees.

This implies that all sectors would be given the necessary impetus by the government to give full throttle to the economy which has long been strained because of a very fragile financial sector. With this impetus and stimulus package from the government, there would be surge in the need of professionals who would need to think innovatively to lead businesses out of the grey and shadowed period of COVID-19.

Generally, all sectors will demand more qualified- MBAs and Engineers - to cope with increased demand within a period of one or two years. I expect great opportunities opening for India because of the successful handling of the dreaded CORONA-19. It may not be wrong to predict that many multi-national companies may shift their businesses from Europe and China to India, given its resilience in handling a pandemic which hit the developed countries much harder compared to India.

Given this scenario, it is predicted that there would be incremental demand for MBAs and Engineers over the next two-three years and hence it is an ideal situation to be exploited by students wherein they can prepare themselves to grab the opportunities that will strike them in a year or two. Hence this proves the already existing significance of an MBA Program more so in the post COVID-19 resurrection era.

**P**ost-Graduation in Management is a program which trains corporate professionals on the nuances of doing business, not for short term profits alone, but for sustained returns and long-term growth of firms. Irrespective of economic recession or growth, future of any business or economy depends on strategies planned today. Skills for effective strategic planning for a sustainable profit and growth is a key take away from an MBA program. Thus, an MBA program is always the need of business professionals irrespective of the economic conditions.

However, given the extreme and rare stress that global economy is in due to COVID-19 pandemic, it is worth pondering on whether MBA is the right choice for a student who is aspiring for a corporate career. The economic consequences of COVID-19 induced lockdown in India are estimated to be a loss of about 25-30 lakh crore and growth is estimated at 1-2%. What will happen to businesses in India? Will they survive? Will people retain their jobs? The related question is should students invest in MBA programs? What will be their job prospects?

After the crisis of COVID19, the topmost agenda of the government

## How Engineering Education is going to change in post COVID scenario?



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

The world will not be same after COVID crisis. So how can the engineering education remain quarantined from the effects of the crisis.

The crisis of such unprecedented and unpredicted nature has clearly brought out that the response has to be rational, innovative, swift, impactful and technology led. Accordingly the curriculum of engineering education and the pedagogy has to be revamped to ensure that it is able to prepare the future engineers to handle such situations.

The engineering education has been moving from imparting theoretical knowledge to practical applications of theories in real life situations. The engineering education needs to incorporate inter-disciplinary appreciation of these theories and cajole the students to explore innovative thinking to address real problems being faced by the society. Further the students should be encouraged to work further to take these innovative thoughts to logical conclusion in form of actual workable and implementable solution. During this entire journey from capturing a problem statement; understanding the problem statement; developing a solution to address the problem statement; implementing the solution and; monitoring the outcome, it is also necessary also to introduce the elements of resource constraints whether it is time or finance or any other applicable resources.

Appreciation of latest technology available will be a key to development of solution. As it is, Technology is associated with both good and evil. Engineering education needs to ensure that it brings about appreciation amongst the students of both aspects of technology and guides the students to take path towards development of technology for the betterment of humankind.

The delivery aspect of the pedagogy for engineering education will also see a drastic shift from a forced, monitored and controlled environment to a free, limitless and un-proctored environment. The barriers restricting the place, time, mode and instrument for delivery of engineering education content will go away. A student will have freedom to capture the content from any mode, any faculty at any time and any place, provided the students knows what he or she intends to capture. There will be plenty of data available in form of content, but the student will have to develop skillsets to identify relevant information for application. This will require engineering students to further develop on their logical, analytical and communication skillsets.

An engineering student will have to imbibe the fact that learning will not stop with completion of formal technical education but would continue during the entire work life and even post work life.

## Impact of COVID-19 on Education Sector

Undeterred by the COVID-19 pandemic which led to massive educational disruption, New Delhi Institute of Management, widely known and acknowledged for its innovative leadership, kept all its deadlines intact by shifting its students to 'digital classrooms' the same very day when the capital city of India, Delhi saw its first Corona patient. While the nationwide lockdown challenged every sector to transform and reinvent to sustain, NDIM innovated the new path very early.

Taking immediate cognizance of the unprecedented nature of the impending crisis, NDIM shifted all its hostellers to their families and overnight moved final leg of its entire teaching to online mode in the second week of March rather than ending the session with unfinished curriculum. Even the final examinations of 2nd and 4th semesters of MBA were redesigned in a short time of 3 days and moved to online mode with students taking final exams from the cosy comforts of their homes in different cities and towns of the country, banking upon NDIM's rich digital experience of conducting Smart India Hackathons 2017, 2018 and 2019. Prime Minister Modi himself had led Smart India Hackathons and proudly mentioned this at his Howdy Modi address in USA.

Being one of the only 2 colleges in the country chosen 3 times to host Government of India's biggest digital revolution Smart India Hackathon, the faculty and NDIM's infrastructure were already geared to smoothly move to the Online revolution in management education without any outside help or support. Hackathon experience

helped 100% digital transformation of all educational activities at NDIM, and it's online migration has been highly appreciated by the government and the parents across India as NDIM students would have incredible advantage of graduating on time unaffected by the biggest educational disruption across the world.

Another silver lining besides students adopting remote learning tools is that NDIM professors innovated new systems & online examination platforms and have created content tailored to suit the new digital regime. This is coming handy in providing online & virtual training and internships if physical internships get restricted due to continuing lockdowns under AICTE directions. Industry response for summer internships through virtual & digital means has so far been very satisfying as contingency plans at NDIM aim at practical learning through research projects even while all students have received internship offers from sought after recruiters, NDIM having been rated Best in India 3 years in a row by the AICTE and CII for Industry Linkages.

Going by the futuristic requirements and uncertainties created by COVID-19, the institute has decided at providing essential digital learnings to students of all MBA Specialisations rather than restricting to only those who opt for Digital Specialisation. NDIM believes that Digital learning is here to stay. That's NDIM's unwavering roadmap to building next generation leaders of the world.



**Vishwa Mohan Bansal**  
Chairman of New Delhi Institute of Management, Senior Civil Servant and Served Govt. of India



Our houses are like our consciousness, a brick-and-mortar expression of our interior selves. And in this strange spring of hibernation, we have all retreated inside our caves—the adobe huts and Antillas of our mind. But like us, our houses have eyes. They look out and see—beyond empty streets—other rectangular, back-lit eyes looking back at them. The silent dialogue of cities. In that meeting of eyes, in looking upon a world in coma and being caught in the act of looking, we somehow keep our community alive. Here we bring you a most odd and wistful spring collection, from Kashmir to Bombay, from condo to chawl...call it

## Windows 2020.

Apoorva Salkade, Jitender Gupta,  
Sandipan Chatterjee, Tribhuvan Tiwari,  
Suresh Pandey and Umer Asif



MUMBAI

PHOTO  
COVID-19  
PEEK



CALCUTTA



## CALCUTTA

PHOTO  
**COVID-19**  
PEEK



**NORTHEAST DELHI**



DELHI



PHOTO  
COVID-19  
PEEK



SRINAGAR



PHOTO  
COVID-19  
PEEK



DELHI

MUMBAI



MUMBAI

PHOTO  
COVID-19  
PEEK



DELHI



PHOTO  
COVID-19  
PEEK



PTI IMAGES OF A MEDIC TAKING SWAB SAMPLES FROM A MAN IN VIJAYAWADA; AND A QUARANTINE CENTRE IN CALCUTTA





## The Freedom To Stay And Flee

Girish Kasaravalli casts a macroscopic lens on how urban India recreates the feudal structures of the rural. The only difference? There is no way out of the city.

*"Place is security, space is freedom... What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value. From the security and stability of place we are aware of the openness, freedom and threat of space, and vice versa.*

—Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*

### C.S. Venkiteswaran

**T**HE freedom to stay somewhere and be someone is as important to life as the freedom to leave where and what one is. It is these liberties that determine one's relation to a space or mode of life that one has chosen or is bound to. Caste, class and gender are some such states of being where one's freedom to leave is curtailed. Such lack of liberty is considered all the more dire in a village, whereas the city, run by money, supposedly offers the freedom to move places and choose vocations, irrespective of one's caste, class, religion or gender.

Girish Kasaravalli's new film *Illiralaare Allige Hogalaare* (Can Neither Stay Here, Nor Journey Beyond) consists of two stories—one set in a village and the other in a city at two different points of time, with two sets of characters. These stories mirror each other to tell the story of the Indian middle class and the tectonic shift in



Girish Kasaravalli,  
film maker

their ethos and mindset.

The title suggests an ironic state of being, where one yearns to leave, but can't. In the first story, there are two sets of people—those who desperately want to leave and those who are destined to stay back. The second story is more about what happened to those who left, their 'boundedness' to their station and place in life. All the characters are emigrants to the city and have no other place to go. At one point, when Naga's wife playfully suggests going back to the village, he replies that in the city, he has some respect as a sales executive, but back home, he will be the same old Naga, an untouchable menial.

In the first part, we see the adolescent Naga helping his mother, who works for a Brahmin family, and at school, where his low-caste status and 'stinking' occupation invite ridicule. He is close to Sita, the differently abled and lonely daughter-in-law of the Brahmin house whose husband is missing. Naga is also the messenger

of love between his schoolmaster, an outsider, and Sita. It is the master who first provokes him to dream, but it is the arrival of Pabbu from Bengaluru that ignites his dream of escape. A few years his senior, Pabbu had run away from the village, but now commands respect; he flaunts a camera and even the village head invites him home.

The second story is set in Bangalore around the beginning of the new millennium. The only character who links both the stories is Naga, now an executive with a software engineer wife and a daughter, Pinki. It centres around Punda, a boy who works at their home and looks after Pinki. While the village at least had the possibility of escape, the city is a trap without any exit. Not only is Punda unable to go back home to help his ailing father, he is all the more stuck after the arrival of his sister Tulsi, who is working as a

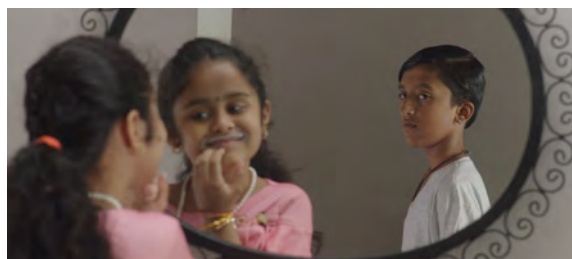
or opt for 'American timings'. The enslavement of children like Punda and Tulsi is an inevitable part of their grand design, which they justify as a charitable act to help rural families.

The visual tone and composition of the two stories follow distinct patterns. The first features the greens and browns of the thick vegetation, the earth and water bodies as well as the dark interiors of huts and traditional Brahmin houses, though most events transpire outdoors. The second has largely interior shots, though the greys, the lights of the city and the blues of the sky also tint its palette.

There are various recurring motifs in the two—similar spaces, objects, photographs, actions and rituals that mirror each other evocatively. While the ferry takes people to and fro in the village, the bus stop in the city is a dead end for

There are also rebels against the stasis in both stories: in the first, Sita's husband had taken up arms against the system, while in the second, there is reference about Punda's father being beaten up for organising fellow workers against the landlord. Significantly, both the rebels are invisible or outside the visible narrative world.

These stories about the lives of two adolescents in different points in time and space, together depict the transformation of the Indian middle class. If Naga is the child of post-Independence India, rural and full of hope, Punda belongs to the globalised and urbanising India of the new millennium. If the adolescent Naga is capable of making sacrifices and could put his 'chance' to escape on hold for the sake of Sita—it is her only and last chance to flee the village—the middle-aged Naga employs wily



maid in another house.

There is discontent and restlessness in the village and city, though of different kinds: the people in the village are fettered financially, emotionally or socially by the place and their station in the social system, and imprisoned by caste, poverty, ignorance, beliefs, sheer inertia, or a sense of contentment, as in the case of upper-caste males. In the city, their discontent is more physical and economic rather than spiritual or social. For instance, the families of Naga and his friend Mr Rao desperately want to better their status. To achieve this, they will go to any extent—do pujas to bring peace in the house

Punda. If the school is open though combative in the village, it is closed like a prison in the city. If Sita's gift of trousers is an act of love and gratitude, the one given by Naga's wife is a mere costume to exhibit family status. If rituals sustain families in the village, in the city, there is a mere puja to propitiate oneself. If Naga carries letters of love and longing, it is letters of despair and cries of help from home that come to Punda in the city. In both stories, there is an undelivered letter—while Naga does it out of concern for Sita in the first, ironically, the same Naga destroys a letter from Punda's home in order to keep him in his house.

ruthlessness to retain Punda as his slave. Though the village was a tiny, isolated place, Naga belonged there, it offered him enough space to dream. In stark contrast, though the city is huge, it offers no place for Punda, nor will he ever belong to it. It will always remain a space that will never become a place for him.

Girish Kasaravalli's film apparently has two straightforward, simple stories, which when read together, turn into a chilling account of the self-deceit and greed that constitute the warps and wefts, the origins and present of the Indian middle class. ❑

*(The author is a critic, curator and documentary filmmaker)*



## Three's Company

First, we owe an apology for not having a photo that shows the adorable (we're sure of it) mien of this Labrador.

His masters, however, have used him as a prop—they're getting to be experts at this, what with enough time on their hands to hone marketing skills—for their snapshot of a moment's prosaic romance. Anushka is totally into her cuddlesome best friend. Virat is so into her. We dig only her shirt.



## Oh, Take It Easy!

That refrain from an old Rahman song came to mind over reports that Urvashi Rautela is an incorrigible plagiarizer of...tweets. From a review of Oscar-winning *Parasite* to appreciation for Mumbai's policemen, our girl thinks nothing of a bit of brazen purloining, so what if that undermines that oopsy-oomphy style of hers. Look here—that bracelet is fine, so is her slick hair and the solemn finger raised to a point, as well as the conservative-radical mix in her swimsuit. But that rubbery, ropey chewed-and-spat-out string of latex she wears around her neck mars the effect. Like those tweets.



## Nowhere Near Victory

That playfully exhibited silver-knobbed walking stick and that carefully flung gamocha over his shoulders are, of course, markers of Victor Banerjee's class. The veteran actor, who has been in near-total 'self-isolation' in Mussoorie for nearly 40 years, spends the days in quiet contemplation, with great poetry and better food. The plight of our stranded migrants reminds him of the plight of people sold into bonded labour in colonial times in the service of early capitalism. Worthy thoughts for Wazid Ali Shah's wazir-e-azam, so imbued with tragic knowledge. Less so for David Lean's strangely deficient Dr Aziz.

## Emily's Game

It was all so fast—the comings and goings, the campy prancing, the frolicsome love to a panting camera, the swagger of those confident minxes—that we couldn't catch our breath. But in that hectically sexy video of Robin Thicke's Blurred Lines, we caught our first glimpse of Emily Ratajowski. The following two years were the best in her life—glossy photoshoots, bit parts and a permanent place in 'hottest' lists. Now that she's confined (with her husband, you dopes), she practices those supermodel moves for our delectation. Here she effortlessly honours a leopard print string bikini, but we only have eyes for those earrings. You don't agree?

# Suva Diary



Tejaswini Apte-Rahm is the author of *These Circuses That Sweep Through the Landscape*

## Islands in the Sun

Fiji's capital, Suva, is the most developed and cosmopolitan of the capitals in the South Pacific. To the Indian eye, used as it is to multitudes, Suva is a small, charming, sparsely populated city of quiet avenues lined with grand colonial buildings, back gardens dotted with papaya and mango trees, and old establishments like Charman's All-Races Gym and Ahmed's Spice Shop. Fiji is made up of 300 islands and over 500 islets; many are uninhabited. Suva is the political capital, while Nadi (pronounced Nandi) is the tourist hub. Most tourists fly in to the international airport there and are whisked away in a catamaran or seaplane to their luxury island resorts. There are few tourists in Suva as it is a three-hour drive (on a coastal road fringed by tropical forests) or a 45-minute flight away (often on a small plane where passengers are weighed along with the luggage) from Nadi. A few cruise ships, however, dock here. Their arrival is announced in local papers so that downtown vendors can be ready for day-trippers.



## Sea Grape And Dinosaur Fruit

I whimsically decide to christen the wi fruit as the dinosaur fruit. This is because I found out that wi, one of the first flowering trees on earth, existed at the time of dinosaurs. It is a great pleasure to sink my teeth into what might (unscientifically) be called a living fossil and experience its soothing taste of not-too-sweet, not-too-sour. It also makes for a superb chutney, delicious with roasted papad. In Fiji, avocados and papayas are of the same size. Which is to say that the avocados are enormous and papayas tiny, strictly one per person. Fijians have a range of roots—taro, cassava and sweet potato—and they call it, quite simply, 'starch'. Breadfruit counts as 'starch' in a meal too. Ora is a delicate mountain fern with curling ten-

drils that, doused in coconut milk, makes for a cooling salad. Then there are the delights from the ocean—seaweed cooked with coconut milk and formed into 'pats'; and sea grapes mixed into a salad of onions, tomatoes and tuna flakes. Suva's markets overflow with tropical fruits, Indian spices, kava root powder (mix with water for an intoxicating drink) and bird-of-paradise flowers.

## Good Girls From India

Indian culture is everywhere. The British brought Indians as indentured labour to work the sugarcane plantations from the 1870s onwards (Sugar is important business here—there is a dedicated ministry of sugar). Their descendants are a prominent part of the Fijian population today, with a culture that has evolved into a unique amalgam of various Indian cultures. It has given rise to a language called Fijian Hindi, spoken by all Indo-Fijians and difficult to understand for an Indian from India. It is a rich dialect in its own right. Indo-Fijian radio, however, is another matter—the Hindi spoken on-air is much like the Hindi one might hear on the radio in India.

Where there are Indians, can Bollywood be far behind? The two main English newspapers, *The Sun* and *The Fiji Times*, have special sections that amply cater to the hunger for all things Bollywood. These remind me of the teen magazines of the '80s, complete with song lyrics and pull-out posters replete with curves and six-packs. Even taxi rides are usually accompanied by Hindi film soundtracks. Indo-Fijian taxi drivers almost always ask where I am from and on finding that I am from Mumbai, display boundless enthusiasm. One even went so far as to ask me whether I knew of "any good girls" in India whom he could marry. Why not a girl from Fiji, I enquired. Apparently the ones here are not traditional enough. Try Shaadi.com, I suggested.

## Does India Have An 11-rupee Note?

Fiji is a rugby-mad nation; it beats Indian cricket-mania hands down. After all, has the Indian government ever issued an 11-rupee note to commemorate our cricket team? No? Well, Fiji is the only country in the world to have a seven-dollar note, in honour of their national rugby sevens team, which won the Olympic gold medal in 2016. It is not just a commemorative note, but one that is in daily circulation.

## Who Let The Rats Out

Pacific island history is a mainstay of newspapers. They almost always have long articles on old clan chiefs and colonial sailing voyages. A wonderful titbit from March 1912 caught my eye the other day: owning tiny dogs was apparently all the rage in Paris in 1912. Where Paris goes, the fashion world doth follow; so a well-known socialite in Suva went to the downtown market and paid an enormous sum for the tiniest dog she had ever seen. But when she brought it home, it promptly ran up the curtains. When the servants retrieved it, it turned out to be a rat sewn into a dog's skin. Not so très chic, but c'est la vie.