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might suffer to the tune of \$1-2 trillion in 2020 due to COVID-19. However, it's not all doom and gloom. Many companies with the ability to provide services and products remotely, such as IT startups, are still hiring. Campus

recruitment fairs and job interviews are now being held over video-communication platforms. Online retailers, pharmaceutical companies and tech companies continue to advertise new positions during the pandemic.



JITENDER GUPTA

The Job Joust

GOA

M.N. Bhartiya: This refers to your cover story *Is My Job Safe?* (April 27). In these times of economic insecurity and despair, Robin Banerjee's advice to reinvent oneself fosters positivity. The World War I and II ruined economies across the globe, but the world economy picked up and galloped at a speed beyond expectations. History shows us that humanity has faced all man-made and natural disasters successfully and resurrected itself. Compared to those upheavals, a few weeks of lockdown is nothing. But things are difficult for daily-wage earners who are starving on the streets thanks to the sudden declaration of the lockdown. It is shameful how the Uttar Pradesh government did nothing for the labourers marching on the streets, but promptly arranged 300 buses to bring back students of coaching classes in Kota living in hostels.

HANAMKONDA

Seetharam B.: While protecting lives is the primary responsibility of the government during a pandemic, there also needs to be a stimulus package. The world economy

FROM THE Daak Room

London, May 1872

Nursing is a thing in which unless we are making progress every year, every month, every week, we are going back. The more experience we gain, the more progress we can make. The progress you make in your year's training with us is as nothing compared to what you must make every year after your training is over. A woman who thinks, "Now I am a 'full' nurse, a 'skilled' nurse, I have learnt all that there is to be learnt," she does not know what a nurse is and she never will know. Conceit and nursing cannot exist in the same person, any more than new patches on an old garment. Every year of her service, a good nurse will say, "I learn something every day." I have had more experience in different countries and hospitals than almost any one ever had before (there were no opportunities for learning in my youth such as you have had), but if I could recover strength so much as to walk about, I would begin all over again. I would come for a year's training to St. Thomas's Hospital under your admirable matron (and I venture to add that she would find me the closest in obedience to all our rules), sure that I should learn every day, learn all the more for my past experience. And then I would try to learn every day to the last hour of my life. When I could no longer learn by nursing others, I would learn by being nursed, by seeing nurses practise upon me. It is all experience.

📌 **Learning For Life** Excerpts of a letter from Florence Nightingale to probationer-nurses of the Nightingale School



The Great Derangement

NAINITAL

Vijay Adhikari: This refers to the cover story *Losing Sanity?* (April 20). Kudos to *Outlook* for sensitising us regarding the spate of atrocities against women and children and the pathetic living conditions of people in the unorganised sector among other issues. The economy is in a shambles and the plight of migrant labourers cannot be overemphasised. We do not know how long the lockdown and social distancing will keep poor daily-wage



earners away from work, bereft of food and shelter. This issue must be addressed urgently. It is a pity that those who built rails, roads and bridges, whose hard labour drove the economy, are now bearing the brunt of the lockdown the most. One must

devote a certain part of one's income to their wellbeing and help them stay afloat in these tough times. With both words and deeds, we can lend them a helping hand.

LUCKNOW

M.C. Joshi: The human race has never been so endangered and helpless in our living memory. Lakhs of victims of the virus are dead and millions are being treated in hospitals across the world. When and how this nightmare will end, nobody knows. Lockdown and confinement have forced changes in the lifestyles and daily routines of people. It can be fun for a while, but is bound to cre-

ate problems—physical and mental—if continued for long. The number of cases in India, though comparatively small in comparison to that of other countries, is going up by the day. The Centre and state governments have converted most government hospitals either into COVID-19 centres or opened a dedicated COVID-19 block in others. Senior doctors leading the battle against the deadly virus have expressed concerns over opening separate COVID-19 blocks to admit and treat the infected patients. They say Italy made the same mistake and paid a heavy price. The Centre must take notice of this.

BANGALORE

H.N. Ramakrishna: This refers to *Home, Not Alone* (April 20). The pandemic is helping us understand both the pleasures and pressures of working from home. Traffic and pollution levels have come down significantly. The IT industry should consider adopting work from home to decongest cities. With increased commuting times and the stress of modern workplaces, employees may welcome being able to work from home. Studies find working from home reduces commuting time, driving fatigue and transport congestion and has environmental benefits too. To avoid the problem of employees feeling socially and professionally isolated, teleconferences or attending office on select days could be an option. If employees and employers can find a balance, the outbreak could prove to be the tipping point for remote work arrangements



to become the norm and make our cities liveable.

CHENNAI

Beulah E. Lazarus: This refers to the piece on the wake-up call set by nature for humans to hit the reset button (*Slow Down. It's Time*, April 13). Disasters are the greatest equalisers. Though, as the author noted, the poor take the first hit and are brutally impacted by sudden mitigation policies. Lockdown is a good mitiga-

tion policy—the idea is to make people stay where they are to contain the spread, so there is no question of giving migrants time to return home. But not everyone has equal access to food, water and shelter. The Centre should have worked with states on a back-up plan for the underprivileged. Mitigation and preparedness are two pillars of managing disasters. While stringent mitigation measures were implemented, preparedness

was missing. So this is not just a wake-up call from nature to humanity, but also for those in power to take disaster planning and mitigation seriously.

VIJAYAWADA

Duggaraju Srinivasa Rao: It is unfortunate that even during a pandemic, some leaders, both political and religious, prioritise personal gain over the health of the nation. The chief culprit is the chief minister of West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee. She chose to ignore the lockdown guidelines and instead governs with an eye on the 2021 elections. Mamata's sectarian outlook may boomerang on her. Lockdown is in national interest, not in Modi's. Many nations have implemented it in the absence of a vaccine/cure for COVID-19 and India is no exception. Bengal can't seek an exemption just because the CM wants to win over certain votebanks.

SANDIPAN CHATTERJEE



Delhi Police charged **Umar Khalid** and two Jamia students under UAPA for allegedly inciting riots in Delhi. In Kashmir, a series of FIRs were registered against journalists, including Gowhar Geelani, accusing them of glorifying terrorism on social media.



Three men driving to a funeral were lynched by a mob at a village in Palghar district, Maharashtra. The attack was fuelled by rumours of organ-harvesting gangs taking advantage of the lockdown.



The High Court of Justice, UK, has dismissed liquor tycoon Vijay Mallya's appeal against a lower court's extradition order to India, where the fugitive faces charges of fraud and money laundering.

Coronation Club Eleven

Are Sonia Gandhi and Congress ready to allow Rahul to run the party on his own terms?

Puneet Nicholas Yadav

INTERIM Congress chief Sonia Gandhi's decision to constitute an 11-member consultative group, with her son Rahul Gandhi as its member, has triggered speculation once again over the Wayanad MP's return as president of the beleaguered party. Such rumours have waxed and waned ever since Sonia took back charge of the party in August last year. What gives a sense of increased credibility to the current round of gossip is the group's composition, with its disproportionately higher representation of Rahul's acolytes against party veterans.

The group held its first meeting—through video conference—on April 20 and will meet every alternate day to discuss various aspects of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic and its impact on India's tanking economy. Though former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh is the group's chairman, "Rahul directed the group to come up with specific sector-wise proposals", a member of the panel tells *Outlook*. A Congress veteran says the immediate concern of the group is "formulating the party's views on the current situation" but "Rahul's consent for involving himself directly in these strategy sessions is a clear indication of his willingness to return to the leadership pedestal".


Party leaders say Sonia and Rahul have finally thrashed out a blueprint for the Nehru-Gandhi scion's return as Congress chief—a post he quit following an 18-month stint that had ended with the party's drubbing in last year's Lok Sabha polls. A key component of this blueprint, says a senior leader, is Sonia's "grudging acceptance" of her son's insistence for a "radical overhaul" of the party by weeding out tired faces of the party's old guard, retaining only those who bring domain expertise or electoral muscle to the party and inducting those he trusts on prominent positions.

A cursory glance at the composition of the consultative group validates this view. Veterans Ahmed Patel, A.K. Antony, Ambika Soni, Ghulam Nabi Azad and Anand Sharma who invariably figured in all important party panels in the past have not been included in this group. On the contrary, members of Rahul's still expanding coterie—K.C. Venugopal, Randeep Surjewala, Praveen Chakravarty, Gourav Vallabh, Rohan Gupta and Supriya Shrinete—has been given a spot. Though Dr Singh, P. Chidambaram and Jairam Ramesh belong to the old guard, "Rahul regu-



↑ **House of Cards** Rahul Gandhi with his mother Sonia Gandhi at a party event

larly defers to them for advice on economic and social issues". Not really identified as a member of either Sonia or Rahul's coterie, Manish Tewari has made an impressive comeback of sorts; riding on the back of his pointed interventions against the Centre on economic, legal and policy matters, both inside Parliament and outside of it.

Rahul may seem to be having his way for now. However, Congress sources admit the way forward will largely depend on the team he chooses and "his own commitment to stay the course". A party leader says the "need is to find a method in the party's madness and not have madness become the method". 



Sweepstakes! West Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee hands a broom to a municipal worker



SNAPSHOT



Paradox in Paradise

Jeevan Prakash Sharma

ANDAMAN

Eden is a tropical island. Palm-fronded beaches, mangroves, clear blue sea, magical sunsets. Paradise also throws up paradoxes. Like, the irony in Coleridge's devil-and-the-deep-sea line from the *Ancient Mariner* could not be more stark for the 500,000 people living in the Andaman atoll—"Water, water, every where, / Nor any drop to drink."

The island of Andaman—yes, the one that has Port Blair and Cellular 'Kalapani' Jail at its centerpiece, depends on rainwater, harvested and stored mainly in Dhanikhari reservoir, to feed its burgeoning population. The islanders say freshwater has been a luxury for them of late. Water rationing is commonplace and conservation is priority. But it has been unusually painful this year as the northeast monsoon betrayed the region, again. The seasonal rain-bearer replenishes Dhanikhari and smaller water bodies between November and March. Rainfall has been poor and all reservoirs are running low, so much so that the Union territory's residents

are getting only half-an-hour of water supply once in four days.

It hasn't rained since last December, says V. Candavelou, commissioner-cum-secretary (PWD) for the islands. "The water crisis has reached a breaking point." In fact, precipitation from December to mid-April ranged a lowly 399 mm to 646 mm in the past three



years (2016-to 2019). Effectively, it's raining a drought. And it couldn't have come at a more inopportune time. Much like the rest of the world, the islanders are battling the coronavirus pandemic—the count on April 21 for Andaman and Nicobar Islands was 16 positive cases. But with limited water, people are forced to wash their hands off the most important chore to keep the infection on a leash. "Who will keep washing their hands with soap frequently when there's barely enough water to drink and for the cooking?" asks a woman in Port Blair, speaking almost for everybody. The sea is off-limits too because of the national stay-at-home order.

Parliamentarian Kuldeep Rai Sharma of Andaman sounds alarmist when he calls the water crisis a "ticking time bomb", but he has a point. Population has grown manifold since the 1970s, and old Dhanikhari remained the sole source of freshwater. "The current problem is due to the fickle monsoon. But tomorrow, if something happens to the dam, the people will not get a drop to drink. Remember, the islands sit on a highly seismic zone," Sharma says as he requests the Centre to fast-track plans for alternative water sources, rather than letting the people wing it with an old dam that also turns the island's hydroelectric turbines.

Hope sits southward—on Rutland, an island 23km from Port Blair. Experts say there's a freshwater source on that island. Sharma wrote on April 4 to lieutenant governor Admiral D.K. Joshi about the water crisis and made a pitch for transporting water from Rutland. His letter included an alert on the impact water shortage will have on hydro-power generation, the primary source of electricity. "We must build more dams and tap rainwater. Our weakness will become our strength," he stressed.

Joshi acknowledged the double whammy—COVID-19 and water scarcity—and suggested that "judicious use of water is the only solution" since new projects will take time. Until then, the islanders can turn to Coleridge's *Mariner* again: "And when I awoke, it rained."

ANDHRA PRADESH



The CM Won't Wait

M S Shanker in Hyderabad

ANDHRA Pradesh chief minister Y.S. Jaganmohan Reddy is determined to hold local panchayat polls in the state in the time of COVID-19. State election commissioner Nimmagadda Ramesh Kumar was against the idea, but Jaganmohan hurriedly convened a cabinet meeting and came up with an ordinance to remove him from the post. In a swift move, Kumar was replaced by Justice V. Kanagaraj, a

former judge of the Madras High Court who agrees with the CM on the timing of the polls. Kumar responded by moving the high court against his sacking. The case came up for hearing on April 20 and the final hearing is slotted for April 28.

Political observers in the state were surprised by the CM's move to sack Kumar for going ahead with the polls. Jaganmohan's rival and TDP supremo Nara Chandrababu Naidu dashed off a letter to the governor saying such an ordinance was unconstitutional. The Opposition alleges the ruling party is bent upon holding elections at any cost as it wants the new administrative capital to be shifted to Visakhapatnam from Amaravati as soon as possible and the local bodies have the final say on the matter. Jaganmohan is confident of a sweep if the polls are held now.

Legal experts like Madabhushi Sridhar Acharyulu, former central information commissioner and faculty member of NALSAR University, feel the ordinance to remove the state election commissioner doesn't stand judicial scrutiny. Acharyulu says the past two judgments the government has referred to in its defence do not apply in this case. This is exactly what the two parties will be arguing about in court. □

INTERVIEW

'We're Prepared'

Punjab farmers expect another bumper rabi crop of wheat this year. Due to the coronavirus pandemic and lockdown, however, harvesting, storing and selling the wheat are daunting tasks. CM Amarinder Singh tells Harish Manav that he and his team are ready with a detailed plan.

How will the rabi harvest take place in the time of lockdown?

→ There is no shortage of labour as we have taken several steps to keep all the 7.5 lakh migrant labourers in the state. We have provided food and shelter, and even wages in some cases. We are also drawing on NREGA to handle the operations. To prevent overcrowding at the mandis, we are planning staggered district- and village-wise procurement, doubled the number of purchase centres to 3,800 and authorised the district commissioners to add more if needed. The 30-member control room for coordination and logistical support will continue functioning till June 15. We have also asked the Centre for incentives to farmers so they can delay bringing in their produce.



What is the plan to tackle the post-lockdown situation?

→ We will set up a multi-disciplinary task force of about 15 members representing trade, business, industry, agriculture, civil society and health care professionals. It will formulate a strategy for gradual relaxation of curfew. We will also establish a high-powered committee to suggest a road map for economic revival. □

brevis



Chilean writer **Luis Sepúlveda**, 70, author of the novel *The Old Man Who Read Love Stories*, has died battling with COVID-19.



Bass guitarist **Matthew Seligman**, who played with David Bowie at Live Aid in 1985, has died of COVID-19. He was 64.



Actor **Ranjit Chowdhry**, 75—who played Vikram in NBC TV series *The Office*—has died. He was actress Pearl Padamsee's son.



Allen Daviau, the five-time Oscar-nominated cinematographer of *ET*, *Bugsy*, has died of COVID-19. He was 77.



English footballer and Leeds United legend **Norman Hunter**, 76, has died after testing positive for coronavirus. He was known as Bites Yer Legs.



Veteran writer and translator **Chan-drakanth Kusnoor** of Karnataka has died of age-related complications. He was 90.


Mixed Shots




CURRENCY COPTER, MONEY MONSOON

THE news is incessant gloom and doom, so a Kannada TV channel decided to brighten up things a bit. Modi would rain money from helicopters, they announced. This inspired many villagers in the state to sit and wait outside, but the angel in the skies never materialised, nor did the cash cascade. The channel has now got


CHIKU OF THEIR EYE

IF Virat Kohli sounds too stiff a name to refer to the gregarious cricketer, worry not. He is also known as Chiku, which M.S. Dhoni often called him from behind the stumps, where mics picked up his secret and revealed it to the world. But why Chiku? Is it because Kohli is as seedy as his namesake fruit? Turns out in 2007, Kohli thought he was losing hair, so he got his hair cropped. His cheeks and ears stood out and immediately, a coach picked up on his resemblance to Chiku the rabbit from children's magazine *Champak*. He might not look like a hare anymore, but considering Kohli's recent vegan evangelism, what could be a more apt nickname than a fruit? 



a notice from the ministry of information and broadcasting demanding explanation for its bizarre reportage. Perhaps, it's not malice, but plain stupidity to blame. After all, in economics, 'helicopter money' is a legit term, just like 'yield curve control' and 'quantitative easing'. Too bad it doesn't mean what it sounds like. 


TYPO TO HELL

WHILE the world wallows in lockdown-induced negativity, a man in Amroha was subjected to some unneeded positivity after his test results declared him 'corona positive'. The 66-year-old was admitted to a hospital in Moradabad after he got a sore throat and fever, and his blood sample was sent to Aligarh. The test result was positive for coronavirus, sparking a scare that led to the quarantine of eight members of his family. But after the chief medical officer sought to confirm the report, the result was negative! So, the man and his family members were allowed to go home and exult in some much-needed negativity. 



BANKING ON EMBERS


ASTHI Kalash Bank in Kanpur does not deal in cash or credit. Its many lockers contain something even more precious—the ashes of the cremated, about 60 urns of

them. "Many people want to immerse the remains of their loved ones in Allahabad, Varanasi or Haridwar, but are unable to go there due to the lockdown," says Manoj Sengar. He established the bank in 2014 to preserve the remains of the dead until their relatives could conduct the final rituals. Tradition dictates that ashes of the dead cannot be kept at home and hence, the need for a bank. 

THE UNSTOPPABLES

A shot of the US flag in all its glory, followed by visuals of empty streets and doctors. And behind, croons Anuradha Palakurthi in a production reminiscent of yesteryear Bollywood numbers. The Indian-American singer released the song *Rukta Hi Nahin* (You never stop) as a

tribute to the doctors fighting against COVID-19. Of the million doctors in the US, over eight per cent are of Indian origin even though they comprise one per cent of the country's population.

The track is inspired by the song *Ruk Jaana Nahin* from *Imtihaan* (1974). 





→ Aggressive testing is No. 1 in the Delhi government's strategy to contain COVID-19

Take-No-Chances Op In Delhi Shield

Lockdown relaxation unlikely as infections rise and AAP government ramps up tests and containment measures

Bhavna Vij-Aurora

DELHI chief minister Arvind Kejriwal painted a grim picture as he announced that lockdown-related restrictions could not be eased in the Capital. The number of COVID-19 cases, especially asymptomatic ones, has been rising rapidly in Delhi and any relaxation in the lockdown for economic activities could see a further surge, overwhelming the healthcare system. "I want to offer relaxations, but what if the situation worsens and we fall short of ICUs, oxygen and ventilators, and people die in large numbers? We won't be able to forgive ourselves," he said, addressing mediapersons on April 19. He wants to wait another week before reviewing the decision.

"The Delhi government is doing a day-to-day assessment of the situation. Even we want people to get on with their lives, but seeing the situation in countries like Italy, Spain and the US, it is better to err on the side of caution," says Jasmine Shah, vice chairman of Dialogue and Development Commission, Delhi government's top advisory body.

It is definitely not an easy fight for Delhi, now standing at No. 3 on the

Cases in Delhi also showed a spike due to increased testing following the South Korean model.

country's COVID-19 table with 2,156 cases, behind only Maharashtra (5,218 cases) and Gujarat (2,178). Mumbai (2,455 as on April 21) accounts for nearly half of the cases in Maharashtra and more than half (1,298) the cases in Gujarat were reported from Ahmedabad. In the other most-affected states too, it is the urban centres that are bearing the brunt of the virus. With 585 positive cases, Jaipur tops the list in Rajasthan (1,659 cases). And of the 1,520 cases in Tamil Nadu, 308 are from Chennai.

Mohan Rao, former professor of public health at the Centre for Social Medicine and Community Health in Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, attributes the rise of COVID-19 cases in urban centres to "overcrowding and pockets of high-density population". Delhi and cities in Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Gujarat have the maximum migrant population from the heartland states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh. "It is the case even in tier-two and tier-three cities, where lockdowns and social distancing began much later," says Rao.

Social distancing continues to be a problem in places like Dharavi (168 cases as on April 21) that has emerged as a coronavirus hotspot in Mumbai. It is the country's largest slum spread over 2.1 sq km, but with 700,000 people living cheek-by-jowl, it is one of the most densely populated areas in the

world with a density of 270,000 per square km.

In Delhi too, a large number of containment zones, from among the total 84, are in overcrowded resettlement colonies with a substantial migrant population. These include Jahangirpuri, Trilokpuri, Tughlakabad Extension and Pandav Nagar. As Delhi is part of the larger National Capital Region, which includes parts of Haryana and Uttar Pradesh, there is more pressure with cross-border traffic being difficult to restrict.

According to Jasmine Shah, Delhi prevented a Dharavi-like situation as the government acted early. "We restricted gathering of people before other states did and planned well in advance. From the day the first positive case was reported in Delhi, we started preparing for a scenario where the number of cases would rise. We knew the rise would be exponential and wanted to be prepared. And we are," he says. With two per cent of the country's population, Delhi has reported over 12 per cent of all cases.

Shah says over 80 per cent of the cases in Delhi are either of those who returned from abroad or related to the Tablighi Jamaat Markaz congregation. Delhi's Indira Gandhi International Airport, the biggest hub of international flights in the country, handled 1.9 crore passengers last year. Kejriwal also mentioned in his April 19 press briefing that passengers who returned from abroad in the past two-and-a-half months brought the virus with them. "And the maximum number came to Delhi," he added. The mandatory quarantine protocol was started only after the guidelines were issued by the Centre.

Cases in Delhi also showed a spike because of increased testing. Following the South Korean model, the state government had decided to ramp up testing. At 1,342 tests per million population, Delhi has conducted the highest number of tests in the country. Among those tested in the past few days, as many as one-fourth tested positive and were asymptomatic. This has become a major cause of concern, and the government has decided to increase the use of rapid antibody testing kits, which check for the presence of coronavirus antibodies. Delhi health minister Satyendar Jain says the kits



← A sanitation exercise under way in Connaught Place, the city's commercial centre

PTI

are being used in the red zones of the national capital. As part of rapid testing, 74 people were tested in Nabi Karim area on April 20, and all of them tested negative. The Delhi government has a total of 42,000 such kits as of now and more are being procured.

Rapid testing is part of the state government's containment strategy and the kits will be used on the population randomly. "Increased testing is the first step in containing the virus. It is also the first T of Delhi government's five-T policy that also includes tracing, treatment, teamwork and tracking. It will definitely show results," says Jain, who also claims that Operation SHIELD, which was launched by the government in COVID-19 hotspots, has also shown results. The key aspects of Operation SHIELD in a containment are sealing, home quarantine, isolation and tracking, essential supply, local sanitisation and door-to-door health checks. All these aspects are being implemented diligently by the Delhi government. The effort has been

successful in Dilshad Garden, Vasundhara Enclave and Khichripur, which have not had a single positive case in the past two weeks. Dilshad Garden was identified as the first hot-spot by the government and became the first site where Operation SHIELD was applied. It has now been extended to all the containment areas.

To take care of the essential needs of people, the Delhi government has also launched doorstep delivery of ration in all the containment zones. An official says this has also set in motion the chief minister's pet project. Home delivery of ration was among the major promises made by his Aam Aadmi Party in the run-up to the assembly elections earlier this year. For now, the initiative will be rolled out on a limited scale only at the sealed zones. The department of food, supplies and consumer affairs issued an order to this effect on April 20, detailing the roll-out plan involving food supply officers, district magistrates, Delhi Police, civil defence volunteers and teams of "corona foot warriors".

In addition, Kejriwal is believed to be personally monitoring the treatment protocol of patients admitted in various hospitals and watching out for any possible breakthrough that may happen. His government is aggressively pursuing plasma therapy with some ray of hope. The first patient who was administered plasma therapy at the city's Max Hospital has shown positive results and was weaned off ventilator support. Jasmine Shah says the therapy had already been pre-tested at ILBS hospital under Dr S.K. Sarin, who is heading the Delhi government's expert panel. "We are ready to face the challenge head-on, medically and also socially. The poor are being taken care of through various schemes and we are continuously monitoring to plug any gaps," adds Shah. □



"We won't be able to forgive ourselves if people die in large numbers."

ARVIND KEJRIWAL
Delhi CM




No Entry Institutions remain out of bounds

situation, but this time it is even more difficult. We can't prepare for competitive exams at home. Even online classes are tough because of the slow internet speed. We are completely discouraged and demotivated."

On April 10, Asgar Hussain Samoon, principal secretary of the J&K government's education department, said students cannot download textbooks as internet speed is slow. The demand for restoration of high-speed 4G internet has become louder in the backdrop of the coronavirus outbreak. By April 17, there were more than 300 coronavirus cases in Jammu and Kashmir, and the number is rising. The priorities of the government, however, are clear from its order reiterating that only 2G will be allowed. "The restrictions on mobile internet have been taken in view of reports received from the intelligence and law enforcement agencies, which, among other things, bring out the fact of the attempts made

by the anti-national elements to spread propaganda and ideologies through transmission of fake news and targeted messages aimed at disturbing the public order and cause disaffection and discontent as also coordinate acts of terrorism," the order reads.

When the government restored 2G internet, it banned all social media and allowed access only to some selected websites. To get around the restrictions, many people used virtual private networks (VPNs) to access social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Then government outlawed the use of VPN and the police filed an FIR against unnamed accused involved in "abuse and misuse of social media". The ban on social media was withdrawn in March, when the government realised it can't stop people from accessing the platforms. But it is in no mood to restore high-speed internet.

"It makes my blood boil when I see ordinary Kashmiris—students, entrepreneurs, doctors and others—begging the authorities to restore the internet," says educationist Shazia Bakshi. "You are not doing us any favour. It's a right that we've paid for. By denying it, you don't make us beggars. It makes you thieves." 

Rip Van Winkle Is A Long Draw

Kashmiri students face the coronavirus lockdown after staying months indoors since last August

Naseer Ganai in Srinagar

FAKIRAH Ayub, a student of Class 11, had attended classes for just 10 days when educational institutions in Kashmir were closed again on March 12 after the COVID-19 pandemic reached the region. Coming after a brief hiatus, the current lockdown has extended the closure of educational institutions in the Valley, which have been shut since August 5 last year, when the Centre abrogated Articles 370 and 35-A amid a communication blockade and large-scale arrests.

On April 4, the government asked all schools to start online classes, but students say it is "useless" as the lines get frequently disconnected. "The speed is so low that my mother, a teacher, gave up trying to take classes online," says a student.

Online education is easier said than done so long as internet services aren't fully restored. Internet in Kashmir has been restricted to 2G on all mobile networks since the services were restored on January 24. "The moment I start the class, the students say they can't hear me. I keep shouting and the class

remains just a formality. It doesn't help the students learn anything," says a government school teacher from Pulwama.

Fakirah appeared for her Class 10 board exams last October during the lockdown. "When the schools were closed, we had just completed 50 per cent of the syllabus," she says. "The mental pressure was very high when we were told to appear for the exams during the crisis, with all means of communication also unavailable to us most of the time. Yet, I managed to pass and get admission in a government-run higher secondary school for girls. I and my friends thought that finally we will be able to study well, but soon the schools were shut again due to the all-India lockdown."

Tanzeela, 17, who is preparing for the National Entrance Examination Test, says, "Last year, it was very stressful to appear for board exams in the crisis

"Even online classes are tough due to slow internet speed. We are totally demotivated," says a student.

ILLUSTRATION: SAAHIL



Tinker Tailor Sprinklr Why?

Kerala government's tie-up with an IT startup for pandemic management raises privacy concerns

Siddharth Premkumar
in Thiruvananthapuram

OVER the past week, the Kerala government has had to put out fires caused by Sprinklr. The cloud-based app “donated” to the state from March to September to augment its COVID-19 response helps with the collation and analysis of select data pertaining to pandemic management,

including sensitive medical information on those at risk and under surveillance. But its terms of use, opposition parties contend, leaves the state vulnerable to leaks. Even as the LDF government claimed transparency by releasing a tranche of documents related to the Sprinklr collaboration, the Opposition has attempted to corner it by alleging a “huge data scam” to the tune of Rs 700 crore.

M. Sivasankar, the principal secretary

of the IT department and CM Pinarayi Vijayan's private secretary, says, “I exercised my discretionary powers to enter into an agreement after examining it in minutiae. Among the various stakeholders, there was a consensus that a robust technology platform was the need of the hour. It was my decision to choose Sprinklr and I will rectify any error that is a result of my decision.” He adds that the law department's permission was not required for the purchase order. Sivasankar did not disclose whether the CM, who also holds the IT portfolio, was aware of the details of the deal. Opposition parties, however, claim he possessed no such discretionary power. They allege that he is being made a ‘fall guy’ to shield the government, and the CM in particular, from further criticism.

On April 10, leader of Opposition Ramesh Chennithala raised concerns over privacy and ownership of data collected by healthcare workers from about 1.75 lakh people. He has since ramped up the rhetoric, going so far as calling Vijayan the “prime accused” in the case. On April 16, BJP state president K. Surendran met governor Arif Mohammad Khan to seek his intervention in the row. Speaking to reporters later, he termed the deal a “Rs 500-crore scam”. Chennithala's valuation differed slightly. Although he first pegged it at Rs 200 crore, he now claims the firm—which, he alleges, is ‘blacklisted’ in the US due to an ongoing data theft court case—could sell the information stored on its Mumbai servers to pharmaceutical companies for anywhere between Rs 10,000 and Rs 75,000 a person.

A senior IT professor from a reputed tech institution in the state says, “Neither has been especially successful in convincing the public. The layperson is likely to believe that the Opposition, in targeting the Malayalee-led unicorn (Sprinklr, valued at \$1.8 billion in 2016, was founded by Ragy Thomas, a native of Alleppey), is simply making political hay out of something imaginary.”

Vijayan, for his part, has been weathering a barrage of queries at his daily press briefings on the COVID-19 crisis. His decision on April 16 to hold the briefings every other day—ostensibly a result of the improving situation in the state—has the Opposition smelling blood.

Regardless, the government stands by the IT department's initial press note

released on April 13, which states, “The huge amount of data being inputted on COVID-19 cases is unstructured and comes in a variety of formats. It needs to be analysed on the fly to ensure help is dispatched right away to where it is most required. Since Sprinklr offers an excellent SaaS (software as a service) application to handle this, the government had agreed to accept the software service. The government owns all the information collected through the application.”

As to the type of data being fed into the software, the note states that the details of overseas arrivals to Kerala; domestic tourists and arrivals from other states; health workers interacting with patients and suspected cases; and those most susceptible to contracting the disease are being collected. Health workers were also entering updates about those under observation. The statement added that while all this information was initially passed on to the sub-domain, citizencentre.sprinklr.com, this later changed to citizencentre.kerala.gov.in.

In response to the Opposition’s queries as to why the department-run Centre for Development of Imaging Technology (C-DIT) servers were not used, the statement notes, “While C-DIT has an Amazon web server cloud account, it is not equipped to handle such a large volume of data yet. Once it is upgraded, all the data will be transferred from Sprinklr’s Amazon web server cloud in Mumbai. Currently, the SaaS app can work completely only on this server.”

Besides the press release, the Kerala government has made public the order and purchase form, Sprinklr’s master services agreement, a non-disclosure agreement, Sprinklr’s service level agreement, its privacy policy and two versions of a letter of affirmation sent via email from Sprinklr’s general counsel Dan Haley to Sivasankar. The media has picked apart these letters—the “revised” letter (dated April 12) is reportedly less assertive and more accessible in terms of legalese, language and tone than the letter dated April 11.

The revised letter also notes, “Kerala at all times retains all rights to and responsibility for customer data

uploaded to or accessed by the Sprinklr platform. This means that any and all data used for provision of the Sprinklr platform that is obtained by Sprinklr, including all citizen data accessed or obtained by Sprinklr from Kerala or directly from citizens, belongs to the government and/or citizens. Upon termination of Kerala’s use of the platform, or at any time upon Kerala’s request, all customer data will be removed from the platform and retained by Kerala. Nothing in this relationship gives Sprinklr any rights to such data, other than to provide the platform as agreed with and instructed by Kerala.”

A COO of a Kerala firm that works with healthcare tech says, “From a cur-

(business as usual) thi.”

In the absence of dedicated data protection legislation—a joint parliamentary committee is still analysing the Personal Data Protection Bill 2019—it remains to be seen how a PIL filed before the Kerala HC on April 17 seeking a probe and forensic audit by the Union ministry of electronics and information technology (MeITY) into the Sprinklr deal and collected data of COVID-19 patients will pan out.

Among other concerns, the petition echoes the Opposition’s charge that the Kerala government did not seek permission of patients as to who can access their data. Slated to come up for a court hearing, it is expected to

further add to the wider dialogue on individual privacy vis-a-vis public interest—besides the raging global debate on surveillance regimes—rekindled by the Union government’s 50-million-user-strong Aarogya Setu contact tracing app.

Among those closely following the PIL is Prem Kamath, a Kochi-based cyber-law consultant. Speaking to *Outlook* ahead of the PIL filing, Kamath said there existed sufficient grounds for an RTI query and PIL to be brought forward. “This is a transition

period of data protection laws here. We have some checks and balances with the Information Technology Act, 2000, specifically section 43(a) that refers categorically to cases where there is failure to protect data. In addition, there are the MeITY’s Information Technology (Reasonable Security Practices and Procedures and Sensitive Personal Data or Information) Rules, 2011, that classify the types of sensitive personal data to rely on,” explains Kamath. “In any potential court proceedings in this case, the Indian Contract Act (1872) would be in play since there is an agreement between the two parties, but the IT Act and Rules would play crucial parts.”

“Many high-profile lapses in data protection in recent years, such as the UIDAI leak, have dented the average citizen’s confidence in data collection authorities” says Kamath. “Data is volatile. It is the goldmine of the digital age. If citizens’ data isn’t safe with the government, who is it safe with?”

ILLUSTRATION: SAJI C.S.



A PIL on the Sprinklr deal will contribute to the dialogue on individual privacy vis-a-vis public interest.

sory reading, the terms of the agreement appear to be general clauses applicable to any SaaS-related activity requiring a degree of trade-off between user privacy and product viability and operability. How it will be enforced (the non-disclosure agreement states that any dispute would fall under the purview of a Manhattan court) is another matter. The language used is not exactly watertight. This is important because while issues of data ownership and privacy are enshrined in stringent laws overseas, the inside joke in tech circles here is that anything goes ‘kyunki SaaS bhi kabhi BAU

Earth Calling Lab Rats

As the world flails around before COVID-19, the superstructure of human scientific ingenuity girds its loins to beat back the scourge



AS the world continues to grapple with the COVID-19 crisis in what may appear to be an almost helpless manner,

deep undercurrents of human ingenuity have come to the fore. Some of these ideas are expressed through the power of technology coupled with data. On the other hand, some other examples of potentially promising leads have come to us from human endeavours of the decades gone by. Given the volume and intellectual strength that is being brought to bear in our effort to stem the onslaught of the disease, I wager that sooner rather than later there shall be a breakthrough. It is thus worthwhile to take a look at some of these promising ideas and activities.

At every stage and in every nation where the virus has reached, a concerted effort has been made to record and analyse data in real time. This has been very useful since it has helped understand many things. However, what truly stands out and has not been given enough attention is the marvelous insight that was brought to bear on the rapidly expanding geographical contours of the disease in the United States. A very effective means of gauging the ground situation in this context



BenevolentAI is pairing big data with artificial intelligence to help find drugs for diseases in a short period.

Mask Party to Medical Mask In just about a month, the face covers (in New York, above, and Mardi Gras in New Orleans, below, held earlier) changed as the COVID-19 pandemic barrelled down on the US

has happened through an ingenious effort that involves the use of the latest in thermometer technology. It so happens that a very early and vital signal of the onset of the disease in a human is the rise in body temperature. The smart thermometer maker, Kinsa, has used this insight to great advantage. At the time of writing Kinsa has sold over ten lakh smart thermometers across the US and are selling over 10,000 thermometers on a daily basis. These smart thermometers feed a central facility with temperature readings every time any of their thermometers is used. This has allowed Kinsa to build a temperature map for a major part of the US. What truly stands out is that the first and very early signals that indicated the light at the end of the tunnel in the US emerged through this temperature map. This was becoming apparent as early as March 31, when Kinsa observed that there were fairly clear indications that body temperatures were falling in most parts of the US for seven days running. Of course, the data on infec-



tion rates as available now vindicates Kinsa's early inferences. The power of technology is very apparent over here.

There are other telling instances of how technology has been harnessed in an attempt to tackle this crisis. A very impressive illustration comes to us through the use of artificial intelligence by a New York-based startup BenevolentAI. This is a very innovative startup that uses big data coupled with artificial intelligence to help discover drugs to treat specific diseases in very short periods of time. The importance of this approach can be gauged from the fact that the startup has already raised over \$292 million. The power of this ingenious approach lies in the fact that through high-end artificial intelligence coupled with big data the company works towards identifying drugs that could treat various diseases. They can do this in novel ways and in quick time frames.

In the words of Baroness Joanna Shields, CEO of the company, "Rather than focusing solely on drugs that could affect the virus directly, we explored ways to inhibit the cellular processes that the virus uses to infect human cells. We identified baricitinib as a potential drug with both anti-viral and anti-cytokine properties and published our research in early February." The importance of these findings can be assessed from the fact that the findings of BenevolentAI have been published in the highly regarded journals *The Lancet* and *Lancet Infectious Diseases*. At this point in time, under FDA approval, the corporate firm Eli Lilly And Company is in the process of initiating clinical trials for baricitinib. Of course, this is not to take away the importance of vaccines. The point is that vaccines take a great deal of time. On the other hand, a therapeutic formulation can be put to work fairly quickly. The best part is that BenevolentAI took about 24 hours to identify baricitinib as a potential medicine.

Another very promising approach uses insights emanating from our ability to access and assess global data in very short periods of time. Several scientists have been voicing opinions based on educated guesses that those nations that have had vigorous BCG vaccination programmes seem to have been not so adversely affected by the COVID-19 crisis. This has—in all probability—led the

WHO to conduct a web-based search on April 11. The strategy was to use the technical search terms and words COVID-19, coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2 and BCG in the English, French and Chinese languages to search scientific and technical databases. Earlier, such an exercise would have taken weeks, if not months, and it goes to demonstrate the power of IT based technology. In any case, this review did indeed yield three yet-to-be-reviewed research preprints that have indicated the possibility of a correlation between the use of the BCG vaccine and the lower incidence of COVID-19. The review also yielded information that two clinical trials are underway where frontline health workers are being given the BCG vaccine to test its efficacy in warding off coronavirus. Once again, the point that needs to be underscored is that human ingenuity and technology have come together to discover what could be an effective means of tackling the crisis. In fact, there is striking evidence that has just emerged through a study at the University of Texas at Houston that also involves an Irish medical consultant. This study has found that the BCG vaccine does significantly reduce the number of deaths due to COVID-

19. They studied data from more than 178 countries and that is what makes it so compelling. The study includes countries such as Ireland and establishes that the reduction in the death rate due to

COVID-19 is by a factor of 20 in those countries that have had a sound BCG vaccination programme. This is indeed very startling. India seems to have also put some store by these inferences since BCG related trials are already underway in the country. I have reason to believe that the BCG route is likely to be one of the most promising ones in the battle against COVID-19.

There is some evidence that also suggests that countries that have higher exposure to the ultraviolet rays from the sun seem to be better off than those that do not. A study has emerged that contrasts the high incidence of Corona cases in Iceland whose exposure to the sun has been very poor these past few months as opposed to Australia. The situation in Australia is indeed much better, both in terms of the availability—in these past few months—of ultraviolet radiation and the low incidence of Corona cases. Of course, much more research needs to be done before any definitive conclusions can be made. However, if this is indeed true, India shall also benefit.

In a similar vein, Robert Gallo—who is one of the co-discoverers of the Aids virus—is in the process of commencing trials on the efficacy

of the polio vaccine in providing immunity against coronavirus. What helped him to think along these lines was the much earlier work of Russian researchers who had used the polio vaccine to effectively stymie some similar viral infections long ago. Their work was buried in Russian scientific literature, but it seems that they were certainly on to something.

Finally, I wonder if anyone has noticed that the worst affected cities in the US seem to be the ones that have robust public transportation systems, except for New Orleans. It seems natural to infer that heavy dependence of a population on public transportation has played a significant role in the incidence of the disease. The city of New Orleans messed up its situation by allowing its Mardi Gras festival to be celebrated with gay abandon. It is paying the price now. ■

(Views are personal)



A University of Texas study across 178 nations has found the BCG vaccine significantly reduces deaths from COVID-19.



WORLD TOUR



BRUSSELS The European Union announced plans to block foreign takers of European companies struggling with the COVID-19-related downturn. The EU is worried foreign investors like Chinese state-owned firms may try to acquire European companies and take control of key technologies, infrastructure or expertise. It wants foreign investment screening during economic vulnerability.



BRAZIL Health minister **Luiz Henrique Mandetta** has been fired by the country's right-wing President Jair Bolsonaro for his response to the coronavirus pandemic. Bolsonaro had publicly criticised Mandetta for urging people to observe social distancing. He disagreed with these measures, instead downplaying the virus as "a little flu".



KENYA The police, implementing coronavirus restrictions, arrested four people disguised as mourners taking a body for burial. They had travelled 370 km west of Nairobi with an empty coffin before being intercepted. Travel in and out of Nairobi, a coronavirus hotspot, is restricted. Kenya has 262 COVID-19 cases, with 12 deaths.



FOREIGN HAND

Arab doctors in the COVID-19 team of Rambam hospital, Haifa

ISRAEL'S Arab population, often denigrated by PM Benjamin Netanyahu as "terrorist supporters", have turned out to be front-line warriors in the country's battle against the COVID-19 pandemic. Arab-Israelis make up one-fifth of the country's nine million population. Arab doctors, nurses and pharmacists have over the years become a familiar presence at Israeli hospitals and state-sponsored HMO clinics. The pandemic has shown them in a new light, as field commanders and foot soldiers in the fight against the virus. This comes at a fraught moment in Arab-Jewish political relations. Though the group strengthened their participation in parliamentary polls through the Joint List, they have often been targets of hardline politicians. Netanyahu's Likud Party had put up billboards during elections, warning voters about the "terrorism supporters".

Arab healthcare workers sponsored a television campaign to counter that, featuring a montage of portraits of Arab doctors and nurses. "It's about time to acknowledge: Arabs are also partners in the country. Partners in destiny, partners in governance," it said. Increasingly, there are calls in Israel for greater investment in healthcare, as also to recognise the Arab-Israeli contribution. "This is the first time that Israel is conducting a war and the Arab citizens have been recruited," says journalist Eran Singer, in Kan, Israel's public broadcasting company.

Arabs make up 17 per cent of the country's doctors, 24 per cent of its nurses, and 48 per cent of pharmacists. The prominence of Arabs in Israel's health system reflects an effort by many to move into the mainstream, despite decades of marginalisation. As rising numbers of Arab youth pursue higher education and seek to integrate among Israel's middle class, many have chosen to become health professionals. "The system would collapse without the decisive contribution of Arab medical staff," Raphael Walden, deputy director of Israel's largest hospital, Sheba Medical Center, said. The pandemic has broadened recognition of this Arab-Israeli contribution among national security experts. A recent policy brief by the Tel Aviv University thinktank INSS noted the fight to save lives would be "fatally compromised" without Arab professionals. It urged the government to create a "positive basis" for "full integration" of Arabs in Israeli society and for "an end to exclusionary and racist discourse and statements that call into question Arab loyalty." Meir Elran, a former general, said, "This is an opportunity that's not to be missed. It's very difficult to find a light in this tunnel. But...this can make a difference." □



Outlook



Anju Bobby George
Athlete



Mary Kom
Boxer



Jeje Lalpekhlua
Footballer



Mehrajuddin Wadoo
Footballer



Sanjay Manjrekar
Cricketer



Harbhajan Singh
Cricketer



Bhaichung Bhutia
Footballer



Virender Sehwag
Cricketer



Rani Rampal
Hockey Player



Mithali Raj
Cricketer



Pullela Gopichand
Badminton Player



Arun Lal
Cricketer

TOGETHER IN SOCIAL DISTANCING

COVER
COVID-19
STORY

THE SISTERS WE FORGOT



Salik Ahmad and Preetha Nair in Delhi
and Ajay Sukumaran in Bangalore

It's like an unspoken caste system. Signs of it can be seen littered casually across our everyday landscape—a clue was there just this week, in a Delhi government communique. News so routine that it disturbs nothing, angers no one, only confirms the order of things. But Urmila Bhadoria had encountered it back in the summer of 1978

itself, when she was still only at the cusp of it all. It came to her like a faint stigma, almost. Like an odour, it had arrived even before the real thing.

Just 17 then, she was on a train from Kanpur to Lucknow, chaperoned by her father. There was an interview waiting at the other end, for a diploma course in general nursing and midwifery (GNM). She remembers bits of the idle chatter in that compartment, rather vividly, to this day. Especially the disapproving words of a stray 'uncleji' in that motley group—rattling off almost like a high priest's catechism.

"It's not a very good job, you know. The girl will be working in a public place... she'll be required to do night shifts. Why would you allow her do it?" went the unsolicited advice to her father. He could well have been speaking for all society, issuing a statutory warning considered normal within its order. The pyramid of values where one layer of human activity actually holds up the whole structure, but is perennially damned by that very fact—for being too 'low'.

After 40 years into a career that's been the central pillar of her life, Urmila can look back at it and laugh. There's both a gritty pragmatism to her words, and a heroism worn lightly. "It was because I had this job that I was able to raise my two children and send them to a convent," says the single mother. "We did night shifts. We dealt with HIV patients and Hepatitis B cases, knowing anything

Front-line Fighter A nurse at a coronavirus sample collection centre in Delhi

TRIBHUVAN TIWARI



JITENDER GUPTA



A JOURNEY FROM ANCIENT TO MODERN
 Egyptian pharaoh Tutankhamun's
 wet-nurse Maia.



Florence Nightingale, the founder
 of modern nursing—the world will
 celebrate her 200th birth anniversary
 this May. The British-Jamaican Mary
 Jane Seacole, another pioneering nurse
 like Nightingale and a contemporary
 during the Crimean War.

could happen to us. When we see COVID-19 patients, it feels we are inches away from death. Whether society recognised our role or not, we kept working silently all through.”

Suddenly, though, recognition has been instant. Nurses are no longer seen as that invisible human robot blending into white hospital walls—almost part of the apparatus. They *are* the vanguard...short only on protective gear. We know they are inhaling, as we speak, the acrid gunsmoke right on the front-line. In videos, we see them battling doubt and gloom like anyone else—the isolation ward is their trench. The words of an American nurse, a Black like the legendary Mary Seacole—speaking out her shattered soul, spiritually crushed by the ubiquity of death—have been all over. Everyone now sees them as an infantry marching right up front, without shields...

But even that recognition is accompanied by a touch of that older version of... shall we say, ‘social distancing’? At 11.30 pm on April 18, a five-star hotel in east Delhi told 15 nurses and technicians who had just begun their quaran-

Nourish 'em Back To Life

Nurses at a ward

tine that they had to vacate their rooms—and those were meant “only for doctors”. They had been put up at Leela Ambience Convention Hotel in accordance with a Delhi government order—offering the COVID-19 warriors a 28-day stay at a premium hotel, while they spent half of that time on active duty, and half in quarantine. These nurses had finished their duty part, beginning April 2, when their lesser status was underlined. On April 20, Delhi duly amended its rules: “premium accommodation” would be offered only to doctors. It would be “hotels” for nurses, and dharamshalas for other service staff.

Put a face to them? At 8 am on a recent weekday, an Intensive Care Unit (ICU) nurse, emerged from her 12-hour COVID-19 shift at a government hospital in Delhi—one not notified as a COVID-19 hospital, which makes its staff ineligible for the government’s accommodation offer. We’ll call her Blessy Chacko, because her hospital

has just put a ban on nurses speaking to media or on social media. “It was a tough night,” says Blessy, who saw six patients breathing their last, including a 13-year-old, at the isolation ICU. It’s a half-hour walk from the hospital to her rented one-room accommodation; she barely gets four hours to sleep before her next shift starts. The gruelling schedule will last through the week, after which she will be in a 14-day quarantine. For once, she’s relieved that her three-year-old daughter is far away, with her grandmother, though she misses her. Scores of nurses, she says, have stories to tell about being shunted out of flats by nervous landlords and not being given proper facilities in quarantine, including food. “We are being hailed as angels now, but will be



Actress **Shikha Malhotra** of *Kaanchli Life in a Slough* is working as a volunteer at a hospital in Mumbai to fight against coronavirus. Shikha has a degree in nursing from Delhi’s Vardhaman Mahavir Medical College and Safdarjung Hospital.

forgotten soon. Nothing is going to change the situation,” says the 35-year-old who’s been a contractual staff nurse for the past 12 years. She prefers her one-room pad because the hostel option is much worse—one washroom for 25 nurses.

Premium stay? They can dream of at least not being reminded of their ‘status’ by government order in the middle of a pandemic. Or like when a top hotel started sending them their “stale” airline meals, which led to a huge uproar. It’s not pure class hierarchy either; there’s a shadow of caste here. In a traditional society, the bodily domain defines it—“girls who have to do night shift, who have to touch others”. Hence that early stigma. But wasn’t it, para-

doxically, also the most vital of human activities always? One so sacred that all ancient cultures, from Greece to China to Egypt, embodied nurses as goddesses? Look at it frame by frame. From a delivery to the baby’s first vaccines, blood tests to wound dressings, the hand that checks the IV drip, the zero-error presence in a silent OT, the all-seeing eyes at a buzzing ICU—the nurse is central to all those snapshots. Then, the unseen side of things—the punishing schedules, the double duties, personal sacrifices.

In the mid-19th century, the Crimean War gave the world Florence Nightingale and nursing changed forever—what was once a profession for the working classes became more acceptable. Imbued in colours of Christian caring, a narrative of “service” enabled that shift. In India too, modern nursing as a profession had to create its niche with mental attitudes that were slow to change. And yet, social realities helped. The only three career options open to girls in Urmila’s time were teaching, banking and nursing.

“Nursing had the maximum vacancies,” she says. Now, nursing colleges have mushroomed in India, even if service conditions haven’t kept pace. Not to mention ‘status’. It’s during this incomplete passage that—in 2020, the bicentennial year of the ‘Lady with the Lamp’—we see the burden of a pandemic fall on the nurse’s shoulders.

“There has been change, but real change is yet to come,” says Prof Roy K. George, president of the Trained Nurses Association of India (TNAD).

“It’s happening slowly in isolated corners, not everywhere.” He’s referring to the vast number of bedside nurses who struggle through poor pay and slow career progression. There are exceptions, especially at very senior levels where nurses even rise to become chief operating officers. “That’s a slow change coming in India, which was unthinkable 10 years back.” The sheer numbers are changing. Take Kerala, a state almost synonymous with nurses. Roy says when he enrolled in a nursing course in 1983, he knew of no nurses from his village. “Now every other home has a nurse.” There are other pockets where nursing has caught on, like in the Northeast. But not uniformly across India, he says.



A US military ad for nurses during WW-II. A US Navy sailor hugs and kisses a nurse at Times Square, NYC, after WW-II. The cute coronavirus robot nurse Tommy in Italy.





“It should have happened 30 years ago, parallelly, when the medical community was getting established in India,” says Captain Usha Banerjee of Apollo Group. As nursing director overseeing a chain of 72 hospitals, she still speaks of the problem of attracting talent. “Nursing as a profession has not got a sheen around it,” she says. It doesn’t compare well with other professions of similar entry-level wages.

“Nursing deserves much more attention than what it is getting.”

Some of the shackles go back a long way. First, it’s still seen as a woman’s job. It’s been an equally long, hard journey to shrug off the ‘menial’ job tag. Not to speak of the stereotypical depiction of nurses in popular culture, mostly risqué. Back in 1995, the nursing sorority even took out protests against a Bollywood film that showed them in poor taste; a few years ago, it was (then) AAP’s resident humorist-poet Kumar Vishwas who courted controversy by joking about them. Now, the 2019 Malayalam movie *Virus* has become the season’s must-watch—even for bureaucrats and medical staff—for its tense, superbly edited, blow-by-blow account of the Nipah outbreak in which the heart-rending story of nurse Lini Puthussery, who succumbed while treating the first Nipah patient, drives home the message of what a nurse ac-

tually faces.

And the incentives are next to nil. Promotions, many say, are few and far between in an entire career: someone like Blessy can look forward to endless, dreary hours slung on a bleak, static career graph. Usually, government jobs are sought after because pay in the private sector is comparatively low. Many, of course, are willing to work for lower

Nurses at Cooper Hospital, Mumbai, protest against an attack on colleagues by a patient’s relatives. Such attacks are happening frequently across India.

wages. The TNAI went to the Supreme Court in 2011 over the matter. In 2016, a committee recommended that private hospitals link pay to state government salaries: those with under 50

beds paying a minimum of Rs 20,000, while salaries at hospitals with 200-plus beds were to be on par with government hospitals.

“But implementation is still lagging behind,” says Roy. Even in Kerala, it took months of protests by nurses’ unions in 2018 to get things moving. The reliance on contract staff

allows some establishments a loophole, says TNAI. Even in the public sector, recruitment of nurses through outsourcing and contract basis is a sore point—in some states, like Gujarat and

Tamil Nadu, nurses can get hired for as little as Rs 13,000 a month, says the association. “Nurses working in private hospitals are too scared to raise the salary issue because of the fear of losing their job. It’s difficult to sustain in a city like Delhi with a meagre 18-20k salary,” says Joldin Francis, general secretary and national coordinator of United Nurses Association.

COVID-19 has also brought new



Nurse Aruna Shanbaug (1948-2015) was comatose for 42 years after a 'ward boy' in her Mumbai hospital raped her in 1973.

problems, while heightening old ones, says Francis. Many private hospitals are cutting the salary of nursing staff or giving it in instalments. “The spike in positive cases among healthcare professionals only goes to show the managements weren’t providing adequate protection,” says Francis. Altogether, this crisis has helped frame a mostly neglected part of healthcare, and bring a new focus on it. For, wages relate to one part of quality of outcomes. The other is the sheer workload. In most Indian hospitals, nurses handle far more patients than is optimal—nurse associations like TNAI demand a ratio of 1:1 in ICUs and 1:6 in the ward. But personnel shortages are rampant across India. The low social esteem, endemic to India, does not help at all. What it all adds up to: high attrition and, where possible, that outbound flight.

ASIDE from the Philippines, India is one of the top sources globally for nurses—even if we’ve tried ad-hoc measures to stem that flow, says Prof S. Irudaya Rajan of the Centre for Development Studies in Thiruvananthapuram. Of course, doctors migrate too. But for many nurses, it’s a more desperate bridge to a better life. “Even today, if you go to any nursing college in Kerala, 80 per cent students will say they want to migrate,” says Rajan. Typically, the first stop is the Gulf. From there, after a few years’ experience, some go to the UK, the US or Canada. That beeline to the Gulf has spawned a thriving local industry: an agency can charge a candidate about Rs 19,500. The going rates a few years ago were apparently as high as Rs 25 lakh, prompting the government in 2015 to ban all private agencies from recruiting to the Middle East in 2015. That led to a temporary stalemate, but some 30,000-50,000 nurses still go out of India every year, say experts.

“It’s mostly the policies abroad that drive it,” adds Rajan. Last November, the UK decided to fast-track visas for medical professionals in a bid to plug the shortage in its National Health Service. Looking ahead, he reckons that will be the global scenario. “Because of coronavirus, high-skilled workers and especially experienced nurses will be in high demand in many countries,” he says. “Via-Gulf proba-



bly won’t necessarily be the main route any longer.”

There’s more to it than better pay. At the Royal Brompton and Harefield hospital in London, Sheeba Joseph is in charge of the heart and lung transplant and artificial heart service section. Every life-saving department has a specialised team of nurses, she explains. “Here, nurses are treated as equal with doctors,” says Joseph, who moved to the UK in 2002. “The treatment strategies are done in a coordinated way. In case of an emergency, junior doctors seek medical advice from the nurses on the next course of action.” Back in India, however, the public perception about nurses is still one of those who merely carry out the instruction of doctors, she rues. Cardiac surgeon Devi Shetty once wrote: “Ours is the only country where a nurse who has worked in the ICU for 20 years is legally not allowed to prescribe simple


In India, the public perception about nurses is still one of those who merely carry out instructions of doctors.

Nurse Comes From The Word Nourish

AIIMS nurses bottle-feed an infant whose mother is a COVID-19 patient

painkillers or give an injection without the presence of a doctor. Even in litigation-happy US, 67 per cent of anaesthesia is given by nurses, not doctors.”

That rigid hierarchy—throw in some patriarchy as well—is an oft-heard lament. Roy cites the example of how the MSc Nurse Practitioner course in critical care introduced in 2018—to fill a gap in ICUs—has run into opposition from doctors. Then, the long-standing plan for Directorates of Nursing in each state—again a non-starter. “With such a directorate, nursing will get more autonomy. We are not bargaining for power. More autonomy means a better-developed profession and better services for the public,” says Roy. As for now, even the country’s top representative post for nurses—the Nursing Advisor to the Government—has been lying vacant for the last four years, he points out.

India has around 21 lakh registered nurses and midwives and produces 3 lakh nursing personnel annually, but the actual count of available nurses (minus migration and retirements) isn’t clear. “Now, the Indian Nursing Council is in the process of making a live register. Maybe this year we’ll know how many nurses are actually in India and where they are working,” says Roy. First step, then, will be visibility. 

AND THE MADONNA SMILED

My life as a nurse is a lesson in faith, humility and service

Sarojini Tony in Neil Island (Andamans)

I am a nursing officer. I want to share the 28 years of my journey as a nurse with you. I have always desired to be a nurse. After all these years of service, I have a feeling that I am at the edge of the horizon and that my journey is coming to an end. It's not a big deal to be a nurse but becoming a nurse and working to make ends meet is an invaluable experience. If you ask what is nursing, I should answer that it is the pure submission of oneself in service of others. It humbles you, teaches you patience and self-control. It helps you build relationships and teaches you to cherish it with love and care. My profession has been a very important part of my life and I believe that each day, God holds my hand and leads me through.

Back in the days when I was a young nurse, I worked in a community health centre. Once, a pregnant patient was referred to the district hospital and I was on duty while moving her. The journey was to take about eight hours by boat. The patient was diagnosed as "labour with breach presentation". I was provided with a labour kit. By the time we were on board, the weather took a harsh turn. Buffeted by high winds, the boat shook hard to the right, then towards left. It was impossible to stay still. Other passengers on board were reeling all around, feeling dizzy, being sick. I had to look after myself and save two other lives. After six hours, the patient started having labour pain. The captain gave us a tiny room with very little lighting where I was supposed to conduct the delivery. Fortunately, a lady on board volunteered to help out. An hour before we reached the destination, the delivery had been done. The baby was in my hands. There was no piercing cry. No signs of respiration or movement. The baby was underweight. I immediately injected the drug through the umbilical cord of the baby. I had done seemingly everything I could. Around five minutes later, the baby let out her loudest cry. Mother and baby were safe as we reached port, and were handed over safely to the hospital OPD. It was a life-changing experience for me. I watched the mother as she carried her baby and it meant something to me. I don't exactly know




what, but I have this little memory stowed away in my heart. I've never felt more confident ever since.

There are some days when I look back and feel deeply contented; at the same time there are miserable memories. I remember the days of a cholera outbreak when I was posted in another community health centre in Nicobar district. It had 10 sub-centres on different islands. I was on duty and our job involved going to these islands, providing treatment and transporting patients in dinghies. The days when transit is unavailable we spent the night on the beach under the sky. It was like being in an adventure trip that wouldn't end.

The privilege of holding a dying person's hand and that of a newborn I count as a blessing.

I sometimes think that if I had been in a different profession, I would have had more time to spend with my family. But I have no regrets. When I recall the days of early motherhood, I also remember learning something important. For a married nurse, it is vital to have an understanding spouse. When on night shifts, my husband would take care of my infant children. These are some of the sacrifices I

made for my profession.

Somebody asked me once, when you could have chosen something else, maybe something more, why nursing? I look back at this question and have only one thought. The privilege of holding someone's hands while they're dying and also a hand of a baby being born is something that I count as a blessing. I would skip any job interview to have experienced those moments again and again. During these desperate times of the COVID-19 outbreak, people should understand that the true meaning of love, care and support is eternally linked to that of being a nurse. 

—As told to Salik Ahmad

The Silence Of Bokhee

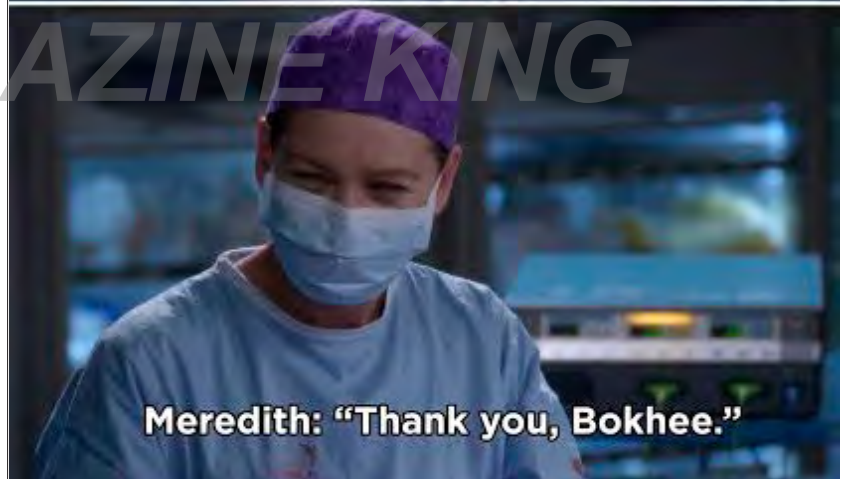
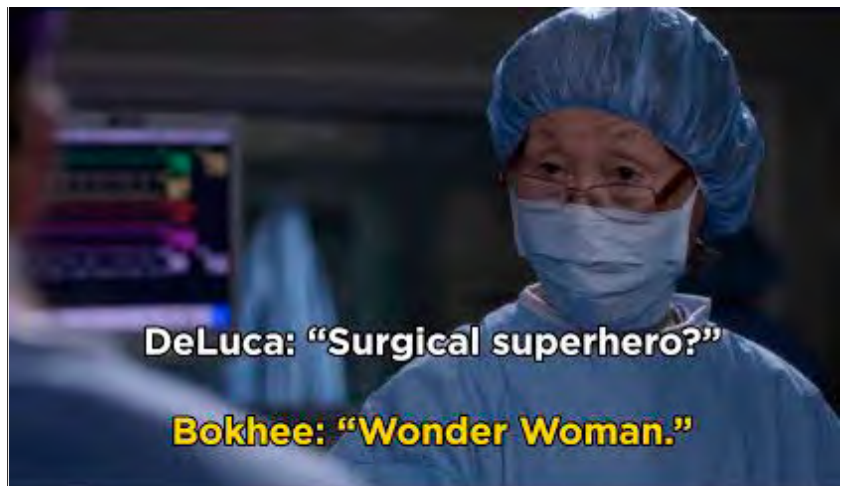
People don't fully understand everything nurses bring to the table, the multi-faceted role they play in health care



IN my favourite American medical drama, *Grey's Anatomy*, doctors are completely dedicated to their patients. Frequently, a surgeon sleeps in a chair in the patient's room awaiting some crucial development. Through the course of a case, surgeons on the show know the romantic/sexual/family history of patients and what motivates them to seek or avoid treatment. Surgeons sometimes work to fulfil final wishes of dying patients—a teenager who wants to go to prom, a competitive ball dancer who wants a final spin.

I love *Grey's Anatomy*. But rarely do I manage to watch an episode without wondering where the nurses are. Sometimes there are seven surgeons squeezed into a patient's room, but not a nurse in sight. In the operation theatre we do see fan favourite, Bokhee An, an elderly scrub nurse (also in real life) who has appeared in every season. Even dedicated viewers will swear that Bokhee (*picture right, above*) has never spoken in the show. The truth is that she has spoken so little that the two words she spoke in an episode of season 15 caused a minor sensation.

Other than Bokhee, by my count, nurses have appeared as characters with storylines, five times in 16 seasons of the show. Three times as surgeons' love interests and twice as dying patients. In four of those storylines, there is a moment when the nurse says something bitter about being treated as a second-class, nameless citizen. And rightfully so. Why do we value doctors more than nurses? I know a Bangalore-based gynaecologist and a paediatrician whose fan



Most women who do well in nursing could probably have become doctors too.

followings would vote to make them prime minister. You probably have a favourite too. We all feel grateful to doctors taking on all the known and unknown dangers of COVID-19.

Mostly though, in life, doctors speak to patients about as many words as Bokhee.

Nurses are the ones who monitor our vitals, manage our pain and keep us comfortable. They know us. Then why do we treat nurses as if they were

interchangeable? Or expendable?

Imagine one of those apps to find doctors. Now imagine a similar app for nurses. One in which you could read about the people who ensure you heal and go home. Why is this app hard to imagine? The



Two nurses on COVID-19 duty comfort each other in New York. Nurses around the globe are working under extreme pressure for long hours without breaks and without days off, and it is taking its toll. The virus has killed more than 100 doctors and nurses around the world.

spluttering answers are likely to be that doctors have studied so much more. One could imagine that most women (and nurses are mostly women all over the world) who do well in nursing could probably have become doctors too. That leaves the detail of money. Doctors come into the workplace having paid so much more for medical college or, at the very least, having their expenses subsidised for the many years while they finished education. As the Berlin-based cultural scientist Jurgen Kuttner said at a conference a couple years ago, “We can imagine the end of the world, but can’t imagine the end of capitalism. That is how limited our imagination is.” And in India, we also have the other imagination-suppressant—caste—which also dictates who becomes a doctor and who becomes a nurse.

To go back to our difficulties with the imaginary nurse app. The truth is that even on the existing doctor-finder apps, very few of us are there to read CVs. We read patient reviews, looking for phrases such

If nurses were paid on a par with doctors, then for sure we would learn their names.

as “very patient”, “explained everything”, “listened to everything”.

As economists Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo wrote in *Poor Economics*, the poor in India prefer to go to not-quite-actual-doctors who charge more than government hospitals for a good reason—time. You have probably heard the phrase ‘attention economy’—it is an approach that treats human attention as a scarce commodity. It’s a new phrase, but

the double-booked 10-minute slots of doctors embodied the attention economy long before the internet took over our eyes. The average doctor spends a couple of minutes on a patient. (To quote Lisa Cuddy on another medical show *Dr House*, “read her file”!) And if you are a woman, a transperson, fat, elderly, unmarried, oh so many things, you are likely to be not heard even in those few minutes. The rise of the sometimes-sketchy global wellness industry has been linked strongly to these biases of ‘respectable’ medical practice.

So there we are on our apps, hoping to read a review that says the orthopaedic surgeon will not tell you that you are imagining the pain, that says he listens. And then these are the people whom we valorise, whose names we learn. Nurses who are trained to care, to remember, to pay close attention and acquire knowledge about how you and your body are responding to illness and medicine—we just call them sister as if they are supposed to look after us. It is what we do for feminised, humane, important jobs. Think schoolteachers, if you are wondering.

If we can’t imagine a world without capitalism and we are stuck in this one, then the solution is to pay nurses on par with doctors. Then for sure we will learn their names. ▣



Nurses walk towards their duty wards at Thiruvananthapuram Medical College

DEPARTING BY LAMPLIGHT

Socio-economic pressure made thousands of Malayalis take up nursing jobs abroad. In the decades since, along with other migrants, they are a force that has changed Kerala's society and economy.

Siddharth Premkumar
in Thiruvananthapuram

FROM the tarmac, Graciemol Thomas spied the modest two-storey airside terminal at the Calgary international airport and knew she was going to be alright. All of 22 years as she stepped off her second trans-continental flight in as many days in 1971, the devout ingénue from Kuttoor, a “small village just beyond” the municipal bounds of Tiruvalla in Kerala's Bible belt, recalls the tears of relief as handmade ‘Welcome to Canada’ placards went up in the public viewing area. Cold, inhospitable London

had left the trained, but unseasoned, paediatric nurse thinking she was in over her head. A day later, still fighting jetlag, Thomas made the four-hour drive to Blairmore, the nondescript Albertan community the “village girl” would call home for nearly four decades.

“It was, as they say, white bread. Most had never seen a person of colour before, let alone one in a sari. But instantly, I knew it was a place I could settle down in. A close-knit god-fearing group of people full of warmth, it reminded me of home,” says Thomas, who arrived in Canada—where prime minister Lester B. Pearson had in 1967 (the US too opened its doors to overseas-trained nurses the same year) brought in a

‘points’ system for skilled migrants—as part of the University of Calgary’s pilot rural health outreach programme. Like her designated frontier town, Thomas (née Punnen) was a pioneer—part of a new wave of émigré nurses from Kerala to look past the Gulf and the UK to ‘settle’ the Commonwealth’s outer reaches. In so doing, they changed the faces of both their new homes (literally) and the old country (figuratively). Kerala finance minister Thomas Isaac calls them the “unsung heroes behind the state’s economic growth...nobody has recognised their contribution”.

Considered the cultural capital of the central Travancore region, Tiruvalla in Pathanamthitta district—one of Kerala’s

largest NRI pockets—has capital assets of over Rs 10,000 crore deposited in the coffers of around 50 banking institutions (across its three sq km municipal radius). Annual NRI deposit mobilisation targets are generally reached in the first fiscal quarter. A top bank executive says, “Although the COVID-19 pandemic has necessitated revisions of some projections, even times of uncertainty, as during demonetisation, do not dent remittance flows for too long.” In a township where, she says, the average NRI patron remits Rs 15-20 lakh, transactions in single-digit crores are part of the norm, as are starry meets and galas. Where nurses fall in this range is anyone’s guess since sector-specific data is hard to come by.

Estimating that Kerala’s nurses accounted for over 30 per cent of Malayalis working in the UK or the US, a November 2017 World Health Organization (WHO) report on the state’s migrant nurses states simply, “Nursing as a profession offers scope for better quality of living for migrants. Increased earnings and consequent remittances (except in the case of permanent migration) also contribute to the economy of the source state.” The bigger takeaway: this nugget about the Malayali nurse contingent in Australia (15 per cent of the sector force) outnumbering their compatriots spread throughout West Asia (12 per cent) by three whole percentage points—suggesting perhaps that the Gulf might no longer be as enticing a springboard to greener pastures as it once was? But, we hit the wall of lack of data again. Praveena Kodoth at the Centre for Development Studies (CDS) in Thiruvananthapuram suggests that “it may be difficult to disaggregate remittances according to occupation”. Broadly though, Kodoth adds, it can be understood that “remittances are likely to be from nurses in the GCC nations who are largely migrants that plan to retire at home if they don’t plan to move to the West. Migrants to OECD nations are largely settlement migrants who are likely to remit much less than they invest in their destination country”.

Thomas concurs. “It was only after marriage and my husband (Thomas Eapen from Tiruvalla) finding work that we could build a family home. Before then, I saved and sent back most of what

The Malayali nurse contingent in Australia now outnumber their compatriots in W. Asia by three percentage points.

I earned save for the odd movie ticket. I had few friends and didn’t care to socialise beyond church. Once we were comfortable, we did send back whatever we could spare,” says the 70-year-old who lives in Calgary during the summer, spring and fall months before—like many NRK pensioners—retreating to their “winter home” in Tiruvalla.

The influx of wealth has given the ‘small town’ Thomas remembers a facelift, with palatial ‘Gulf houses’ and luxury highrises towering over traditional nalukettu tharavadus (ancestral homes). Also ubiquitous are airline offices, jewellery and garment showrooms and overseas recruitment agencies catering mainly to a middle-class that is gradually being priced out. Commodity costs have risen—residents pay close to the dollar equivalent for fish and other food products in the market—almost as quickly as the soaring property values. All of which has reportedly fomented social insecurity, even unrest. In a town where, according to the 2011 Census, Hindus and Christians comprise 46.92 per cent and 48.03 per cent respectively of the 52,883 population, communal amity is no buzzword.

To put this into context, the total remittances to Kerala (through to March 2018) was listed at Rs 85,092 crore—accounting for 35 per cent of the state’s GDP—in the Kerala Migration Survey (KMS) 2018, the latest entry in a long-running series of labour flow studies by CDS. In that time period, the State Level Bankers Committee—a forum of major banks mediating with the government on banking sector issues—and the Kerala Economic Review 2019 noted that NRI remittances account for 39 per cent of all bank deposits. A CDS working paper, released January 2019, titled ‘Emigration and Remittances: New Evidence From The Kerala Migration Survey, 2018’ delved deeper, finding that household remittances—a measure of household income—to Kerala (prior to March 2018) was Rs 30,717 crore. This went towards meeting day-to-day expenses, paying back debts, paying for education and weddings (including dowry), constructing/renovating a house and investing in real estate, purchasing a vehicle or some gold, starting a business, religious donations and gifts. In addition, it contributed to household savings, whether as cash in hand or in the bank.

BY some estimates, the remittance economy has made the average Malayali about 50 per cent wealthier than his fellow citizen. There was a time when Tiruvalla enjoyed the highest per capita income in the country. Migration is a part of the puzzle. At the taluk level, KMS 2018 notes, Tiruvalla is home to the highest percentage for non-resident Keralites (NRK) by total population (28.6 per cent)—doubling the district’s figure (14 per cent). The taluk has about 61,758 NRKs with some 96.9 NRKs per 100 households—the highest in a state where roughly a tenth of the population lives abroad. In a real sense, Tiruvalla is a microcosm of the Kerala migrant nurse phenomenon.

When she can, Thomas mentors young nurses from Kerala. At over \$40 per hour, Alberta offers some of the best wages for registered nurses in Canada—but the expense involved in earning the coveted RN licence verges on the prohibitive. Accredited bridge programs for foreign nurses go on for at least 18 months and can run upwards of

Rs **85,092** crore
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of the state’s GDP

\$30,000. Besides the cost of actually getting to and into Canada, there are living expenses, as also binding non-employment terms. Thomas maintains that migrant nurses have never had it so good. Anuradha Nair, who moved to Toronto in 2018 and is saddled with a Rs 15-lakh debt, thinks otherwise. Unable to work till she clears the NCLEX-RN, a rigorous entry-to-practice exam, Nair worries about the future. “My father took out loans to send me here and to fund my education. If I don’t start earning soon, it will be too much,” says Nair, from Niranam village—just off the Tiruvalla-Kottayam stretch and a hub of migration. Early access to quality education and some of the state’s oldest schools—the Church Missionary Society College Kottayam, set up in 1817, for instance—has driven high literacy rankings, including high female literacy rates, in Pathanamthitta and Kottayam districts.

“Nurses have been drawn from relatively poor, but upwardly mobile families. In the early years, it was an economic strategy for large Syrian Christian families with many surviving children that found it difficult to provide dowries for daughters. Staring at downward mobility, education and employment as nurses offered a way out as it brought in financial resources to educate younger siblings and to pay dowries. Back then, there were no professional nursing courses in Travancore, so Syrian Christian girls travelled elsewhere in the country seeking education,” says Kodoth, adding that a tour by the nursing programme head at Christian Medical College, Vellore, helped kickstart the outward movement trend of women from ‘respectable’ Syrian Christian families. Also, strong alumni networks at the nursing colleges (the Kerala Nurses and Midwives Council recognises over 100 nursing colleges today) allowed graduates to secure channels of migration—a phenomenon “premised on social networks and connections”—better than those who were dependent on potentially exploitative recruitment agents.

Nair credits her alma mater, Pushpagiri College of Nursing, founded in Tiruvalla in 2002, as one of Kerala’s earliest private self-financing nursing colleges with the training and opportunity to go abroad. Connections, though, were harder to come by. Not so for



The Cradle Ida S. Scudder, founder of Christian Medical College, Vellore, with the first batch of Indian nurses

Lubna S., a section nurse at a major hospital chain in Muscat. The 34-year-old from Malappuram—listed in KMS 2018 as the highest migrant-sending district, with 4,06,054 NRKs—arrived in Oman in 2010 after four years at a private hospital in Kochi. Despite a stagnating income due to the oil crisis-hit economy, she pulls in “around 850 Omani Rials” (roughly Rs 1.7 lakh) a month after earning a starting salary of 700 OMR (Rs 1.4 lakh now). “Since my sister put me up, fed and drove me, I could claim these allowances as cash reimbursements. I could send back more than half my take home (about Rs 80,000 at today’s rates) every month. My colleagues too sent back large sums thanks to the tax-free income and other hospital subsidies,” says Lubna, who has built a home in her husband’s village that the couple hopes to retire to.

Even ahead of the COVID-19 pandemic, expatriate nurses across the

GCC were fearful that their jobs would be lost to nationalisation. ‘Omanisation’, a decades-old project to encourage hiring of Oman’s native worker base, has got a fillip in recent years. It is Saudi Arabia’s nitaqat scheme, however, that has caused nurses much heartache. Since the Union government included nurses in the Emigration Check Required (ECR) category—wherein migration to 18 countries needs clearance from Protector of Emigrants (POE)—in April 2015, Kerala’s ECR numbers rose to 4,719 applications (mainly to Saudi Arabia) by November 2018. The closure of lucrative Kuwait to Indian nurses, a pay-off for a recruitment scam unearthed at the POE in Kochi—one of two in Kerala—as well as rumours of tit-for-tat hiring practices (where a GCC country agrees to take a certain number of nurses from a private recruitment agency in exchange for a ‘commiserate’ number of domestic workers) have dented migrant confidence—already in short supply with a bureaucracy straight out of a Max Weber fever dream—in the Emigration Clearance (EC) regime. Though, with an estimated 7,000 nursing graduates entering the state’s workforce yearly to earn a pittance in the private sector, there is no shortage of takers even if the numbers are not as giddy as they once were. The CDS working paper notes that some “33.2 per cent of nurses are at the pre-migration period”, highlighting both the continued demand for Malayali nurses. It also notes that the emigration of women in

The earliest professional nurses were from large Syrian Christian families where dowries for daughters were scarce.

Kerala—pegged at 15.8 per cent of some 21 lakh emigrants—is chiefly concentrated in the nursing profession, which accounts for five per cent of all emigration.

Since 2015, the two authorised government-run agencies: NORKA-Roots and Overseas Development and Employment Promotion Consultants (ODEPC) have together only recruited 2,800 nurses (over 80 per cent of whom were women) even after recruitment charges were standardised at Rs 35,000 in all. Add another zero to that figure to arrive at an approximation of the fees charged by some 50-70 active private agencies in the state and yet, they do brisk business because of their advertised “exclusive contracts” with GCC ministries as well as “tie-ups” with immigration lawyers and recruitment companies elsewhere.

THINGS came to a head in 2017 when the so-called ‘Jasmine Revolution’ bloomed—as lakhs of nurses protested the poor compensation, inordinately long duty hours, predatory recruitment practices and artificial staffing shortages, among other concerns. The nurse diaspora, chock full of disgruntled employees, ‘informally’ supported the work stoppage by remitting to finance transport and rooming costs besides lending moral support on TV channels and social media networks. In 2018, allegedly on “the wings of Malayali nurses”, the revolution spread to New Zealand where more than 30,000 nurses across the country protested against poor pay and work conditions by walking off the job for a day in the first-such labour action in three decades.

“Actually, that’s not quite right. It may have been forgotten but there was a protest in 2012 by around 150 Indian, mostly Malayali, nurses on the steps of the New Zealand parliament after they were cheated and lied to by the New Zealand Nursing Council,” says Subin Chacko, who was part of that agitation and a follow-up hunger strike in the winter held at, symbolically, the foot of a Mahatma Gandhi statue in Wellington railway station. “This was after the earthquakes of 2011 where a critical shortage of nurses was noticed. The council told us that a three-year general nursing diploma and an English lan-

A NURSE TREATS A COVID-19 PATIENT IN ROME. NO RELATION WITH THE NURSE FROM LOMBARDY (BELOW). PTI



“(Italian) government’s secret instruction is to not treat patients over 80, that’s 20 per cent of the patients. When you shift the ventilator from an old person to a younger person, the older person dies within 30 minutes. How can we stand it? We know it’s a grave sin, but there is no other way.”

A Malayali nurse in Lombardy, Italy

guage test was all that would be required to work here. That was not true. Ultimately, even after the protest, only those who had completed the four-year BSc were allowed to work.”

Chacko—who has since found work as an RN at a district health bureau in Auckland—now earns over \$75,000 (roughly Rs 35 lakh) a year and saves about \$10,000 in that period, most of which he sends home for his Kollam-based parents’ upkeep and to pay off interest on debts, besides EMI payments on a 3BHK flat in town. That didn’t stop him from returning to the picket lines in 2018 though. As he says, “It’s about respect.” A common concern raised by nurses *Outlook* spoke to, both across the Malayali diaspora and at home. That a BBC video of former UK MP Anna Soubry acknowledging the efforts of Kerala’s nurses was widely shared (and referred to by two nurses over the course of interviews) by nursing unions across the state on social media is telling. For

Thomas, the recognition she never sought came in 2013 when the Syro-Malabar Church’s laity commission hailed the efforts of emigrant nurses towards helping the state’s Catholic community “ride out” agrarian crises and weather economic hardships.

“Whether you earn Rs 30,000 in a government hospital here or making lakhs overseas, respect is the only real currency,” says Anas S.M., a nurse in the A&E ward at the Government Medical College in Thiruvananthapuram who has just wrapped up a two-week quarantine after a stint in the Corona ward. “The only time the public respects us is when they need us. But what about our needs? Do they care that I haven’t seen my infant child and wife for three months because I have to take care of the patients?” asks Anas, the district president of Kerala Government Nurses Union—a body born from the Jasmine Revolution. His heartfelt angst echoes around the world, taken up by other voices, in these fraught days. □

PARANORMAL TREATMENT

Paramedics bear the brunt of all medical emergencies. Why are they then so undervalued?

By Jeevan Prakash Sharma

THE green-uniformed individuals you see in movie after movie, rushing to meet ambulances, or reaching out to victims of healthcare emergencies or accidents and comforting them en route to the hospital, aren't doctors or nurses. They are paramedical health professionals—the first line of contact with patients. At a time when India's health system cowers before the COVID-19 challenge, paramedics are first responders in the battle—taking samples for tests, bringing patients to quarantine facilities, helping them get critical care in ICUs—risking their own lives. Unfortunately, these dedicated warriors never get due credit; long duty hours, low salaries and no social recognition are their lot.

“Inside the laboratory, they risk their lives when they collect samples of COVID-19 infected patients and open it. When they go out, they are thrashed and insulted by people. What can be more challenging?,” says Deepak Sadwani, founder of Prognosis Lab, which has been approved to conduct COVID-19 tests.

Sadwani says how one of his woman lab technicians was evicted by her landlord while another young employee was beaten up near his lab in Dwarka.

No government has made any effort to create a regulatory body—like the Medical Council of India (MCI) for medical practitioners and the India Nursing Council (INC) for nurses—for paramedics and develop a standard training module. Indeed, many privately set up councils go under the garb of a genuine regulatory body, duping gullible students. How, then, are paramedics trained?

Private universities and institutes have devised courses to train paramedics for specialised medical fields such as ambulance services, first aid, occupational therapy, respiratory therapy, hospital aid, radiology etc. They run certificate, diploma and degree programmes sans government approval. Besides, some government institutes offer short-duration skilling courses. The Healthcare Sector Skill Council, under the National Skill Development Council, has training stand-



SANDIPAN CHATTERJEE

ards for short-term paramedic courses. Yet, these haven't brought standardisation in training. That's a shame, for experts say a good paramedic takes half the burden off a doctor by their timely interventions on critically ill patients. In a country like India where the doctor-patient ratio is far from ideal, well-trained paramedics are crucial to plugging the gap.

Mukesh Sharma, an assistant lab technician, worked for six months as an intern without any salary in a private lab last year. After he finished his course and expected to get a salary, the lab fired him, hiring another intern instead. Likewise, hundreds of paramedics are jobless despite a diploma course and work experience.

Paramedics work long hours, with low pay, no social recognition, no regulatory body.

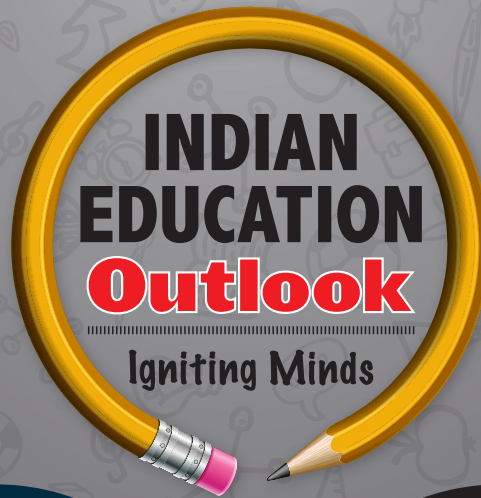
“People equate us with casual labourers, says Rajit Kumar, a paramedic working in a small nursing home in Noida. “When I take patients on a wheelchair to their cars, they often offer me a tip. I feel bad. Perhaps they feel we are poorly paid.... Can they do it with a doctor or a nurse?” asks Kumar, who earns Rs 12,000 a month, pulling 12-hour shifts.

Mohammed Hasnain Raza of Fortis Memorial Research Institute says that in a corporate set-up paramedics get respect and remuneration equivalent to nursing staff but not in the huge unorganised sector. “Paramedics command social respect and good remuneration in south India. It is because they are empowered and skilled to handle critical patients. The courses are excellent; training is up to the mark. That's not the case in the north and east,” Raza adds.

Experts hope paramedics' exemplary service during the COVID-19 crisis should spur the government to remedy the lapses and scale up both their skills and morale. **Q**

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Empathy, Its Penumbra

The good souls who defy a frozen society and reach out to COVID-19's myriad victims



R.V. RAMANAN



R. SEKKAPPAN



DR. MAHESWARAN



K.R. SIDDHESWARAN



RAJAS PARANJPE



IMTIAZ KHALIFA

G.C. Shekhar in Chennai

LIKE the tell-tale signs of the bubonic plague, every pestilence brings out the pustules of society—self-preservation is the overriding concern, siege mentality spawns selfishness that manifests itself in cruel rejections as the grim reaper increases his deadly business. Yet, when rampaging insecurity makes people lock themselves down both in body and spirit, turning away from defenceless sufferers, there are individuals who come forward in love and compassion, with a pledge to serve humanity with gestures tall and tiny. Parallel to the recoiling, unfeeling masses, theirs is a compact that runs through history and is renewed with every generation.

That unchanged rule was manifest in this national crisis of ours too: as prejudice, superstition, neglect, racism and callousness—and, lest we divagate too much, the coronavirus itself too—heaped misery on so many, these men and women exerted themselves and stepped out in the air that smelt clean but was tainted by a lurking threat. Their empathy became a natural extension of the country-wide lockdown.

With food security being the first casualty of a mass loss of livelihood, many made sure that cooked meals or ready-to-cook grains reached the deprived. Bedraggled streams of migrant workers, stranded labourers in building projects, truck drivers stuck on highways and policemen on their feet for hours were all served by this spontaneous, often inchoate, community of do-gooders—school students and housewives dipped into their reserves, factories opened up their canteens, five star hotels sent food from their kitchens for the corona warriors bearing the severest brunt of it all. Then, in a class by itself, were the needs of the aged, the infirm or the ill, bereft of support and left to fend for themselves.

Animals, who survive on the streets have, of course, their friends. “While I stocked up on food for my two dogs, I could not bear it when a dozen others on the street outside my home were going hungry. So I stepped out twice a day with dog food so that they got something to eat,” says Jaishree Chandramouli, who lives in a highrise on Chennai’s IT corridor. Across cities, volunteers fanned out to feed hungry dogs, cats and cattle. India loves its strays.

A former medical representative who used his car to ferry dialysis patients in the absence of cabs and paid ambulances gave the lie to the assumption that only doctors and health workers took care of the sick. A Srinagar resident offered his hotel as a quarantine centre when other hoteliers resisted the idea. The examples are many. In the following pages, we doff our hat to a few—self-effacing shunners of publicity, *Outlook* had to coax them into clicking their own photos—in honour of every kindred soul out there. [a](#)



BHABANI SHANKAR CHAINI



IRSHAD MIRZA



HIMANSHU KHANNA



JOHN PEREIRA



ARNAV RATHORE



ARJUN BHATI



The Dialysis Drive

CHARITY starts with that first compassionate step from the personal to the public. When his 80-year-old uncle called from the suburbs to say that no ambulance was available for his biweekly dialysis visit to Apollo Hospital in Central Chennai on March 24, R.V. Ramanan was up to the task. With 'Dialysis Patient—Emergency' stuck on his car's windshield, he drove for 20 kms, picked up his uncle and aunt and dropped them at the hospital. As the procedure takes four hours, Ramanan returned home. To make sure that he did not transmit any infection, he took a bath and wore a set of fresh clothes. After lunch, he drove back and picked up his uncle and aunt and dropped them at their home. He promised to be back next Saturday morning for his next dialysis. On his drive back, Ramanan, 50, the regional manager of a pharma firm, thought about the predicament of other dialysis patients without their own transport. He posted a message on FB and WhatsApp, offering a dialysis shuttle on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday every week. The other two days were reserved for his uncle.

One of Ramanan's doctor friends saw it and referred a patient of his--a 70-year-old lady also stranded by the lack of cabs or ambulances. Soon, another friend referred a third patient, which made it six shuttles a week as each patient had to make two dialysis visits. "Since April 2, my free dialysis shuttle has been in operation every day of the week except Sunday," quips Ramanan. His cousin Sundaresan has also offered to bring his car and ferry patients.

Ramanan follows a strict protocol of social distancing--he wears gloves and a mask and cleans the rear passenger seat with disinfectant after every trip. A bath and change of dress after every trip is mandatory too. His weekly fuel expense of about Rs1,500 is met by friends. Importantly, the chosen few with serious kidney ailments can live without a nagging disquiet. "During such a crisis the government should get hospitals--private and government--to offer their ambulance service free of cost," suggests Ramanan.

—G.C. Shekhar

Extra-Curricular Activity

ARNAV Rathore is not your ordinary schoolboy—fully immersed in sport, friends, studies, social media and television—amidst this extraordinary lockdown. After reading that senior citizens were the most inconvenienced by the suddenness of the decision, Arnav responded to an inner calling. Through his friends and the police contacts of his ADGP father he compiled a list of needy senior citizens in the Mylapore and RA Puram area of Chennai. He also shot a small video and circulated a Whatsapp message, asking about any senior citizen who needed basic provisions. Drawing inspiration from his mother Shilpam Rathore's Aranya Foundation, which has been feeding the poor in Delhi and Chennai for nearly five years, he put together a food bag with enough rice, dal, spices, cooking oil, salt and milk powder to last for seven days for two people.

"The wholesale dealer who supplies my mother's project was happy to supply me. Each food bag cost Rs 350; initially my friends and I paid for them before crowd funding took over," Arnav recalls. When he started on March 26, Arnav had three friends to help. As word got around, he had a team of 25 volunteers. The class 11 student had on-line classes in the afternoon, so he would finish his run in the morning while his friends took over later in the day. The number of beneficiaries also doubled to 400 as Mylapore MLA R. Nataraj sent a list of senior citizens. "We would take the supplies in our cars for distribution after getting vehicle passes from the local police," Arnav (17) explains. The volunteers are sticklers for precautions—use of sanitizers, gloves and masks are rigorously followed; no more than three would travel in a car. Arnav and his friends also distribute fruit juice packets to policemen on duty in Chennai and Coimbatore. "Their job is very crucial, we wanted to acknowledge the tireless work of men in uniform," Arnav says. "When an elderly couple asked me if they could bless me by touching my head I told them that their very thought would suffice, he recalls. He and his friends would be counting innumerable blessings in the days ahead.

—G.C. Shekhar



Age No Bar

If young Arnav in Chennai is an exemplar for the young, an octogenarian couple in Madurai shows that altruists never retire. When the lockdown was announced R. Sekkappan, who owns a petrol bunk in Madurai, received information from a friend in his native Okkur village in Sivaganga district that villagers, mostly agricultural labourers, had only a few days of rations left. Sekkappan ordered 800 bags of rice of 10 kilos each and with the help of a transporter friend he and his wife Nagammai (80) delivered it to his village, about 90 km from Madurai. "We had to take permission from district collectors of Madurai and Sivaganga to transport the rice, as it is an essential commodity. They granted it once they learnt who the beneficiaries were," says Sekkappan (80).

Then, with the help of local panchayat members over two days, they distributed the rice to the neediest households so that they would have food till they collected their 20 kilos from ration shops from April 1. On finding that many required cooking oil and dal, they arranged to distribute them as well. The couple also had corona aware-



ness slogans in Tamil printed on the bags.

"Our children live in the US and were happy to learn about our gesture. They have offered to support other similar gestures not just in our village but also in Madurai city," says Sekkappan.

—G.C. Shekhar

MAGAZINE KING

Giftng a Hospital

As bequests go, this one beats the others for size: A 60-bed hospital founded 37 years ago by a lady gynaecologist located in Mettupalayam town on the foothills of the Nigiliris with a staff of nearly 120 persons. When Dr. Maheswaran rang up the chief medical officer of the Meettupalayama Government Hospital and offered his entire hospital and its services free of charge for admitting and treating coronavirus patients, there was stunned silence at the other end.

"At first he would not believe it. I told him I was serious and followed it up with an official letter to the CMO and the district collector of Coimbatore. I could keep just a few beds for deliveries and free up the remaining with all necessary support system for Covid-19 treatment," proposed

Maheswaran, a paediatrician.

But government officials replied that treatment of coronavirus was being restricted to government hospitals as per the state health ministry's protocol. So even when 21 Tablighi Jamaat returnees from Mettupalayam tested positive they were housed in the GH and the ESI hospital. The authorities informed Dr. Maheswaran that they would refer their other

emergency patients--like child-birth or poisoning cases--to his hospital if there was a need.

Determined to help in the now-billowing crisis, Maheswaran, 50, came up with another offer--since the 25 doctors and nurses treating coronavirus patients at the Mettupalayam GH, which is near his Supa hospital, may find the commute between their homes and the GH tiring, they could

stay in his hospital. He followed up the offer by freeing up an entire floor of his hospital for use by the medical staff.

"We provide food and other refreshments and take care of their laundry, so they would need to concentrate only on their work. When they want to visit their families we take them in our ambulance," explains the good doctor.

—G.C. Shekhar





Monkey 'Baath'

In this hour of universal need, our primate cousins ape us faithfully as ever.

When tennis player K.R. Siddheswaran saw monkeys lined up with the homeless by the roadside at his home outside Salem town, he was intrigued. "I had never seen them earlier," he remembers wondering.

A local villager then informed him that the monkeys had descended in troupes from Siddharkoil, a pilgrim spot located on a forested hillock nearby. Used to being fed by hundreds of pilgrims to the temple on the hillock, the monkeys were hit hard when the lockdown closed the place. The starving, desperate simians had now come down to the main road to partake of the food distributed to the homeless. In the brewing human crisis, someone had to help the creatures.

Siddheswaran, 29, and two of his friends decided to take fruits and cooked rice along with drinking water up the hill-

lock at noon every day to feed the monkeys and goats. "The moment they saw us with food they came running towards us and started helping themselves to the cut bananas from the basket even before we could spread them evenly. We also filled water in half a dozen drinking bowls," he says.

Thanks to Siddheswaran, the monkeys had variety in food too--water melon one day, oranges the next and cooked rice on the day after. "There are about 1,500 monkeys and a few goats in that hillock and we were happy that they could be fed at least once a day," says Siddheswaran, who has ten rescued dogs at his house. Back on level ground, he teams up with three other friends--Vishnu Priya, Krishnamoorthy and Bharanitharan--in feeding stray dogs in Salem town. Their group is part of a statewide initiative called 'No Food Waste' which collects excess food during functions and distributes them to the needy and orphanages.

—G.C. Shekhar

So the Cows Can Ruminates

DAIRY farmers are not worrying overmuch about the unsold milk their cows produce during the lockdown, used as they are to some produce going waste. It is the fear of their cattle going hungry due to the non-availability of fodder that haunts them. Each cow needs 25 kg of fodder--15 kg green grass, 10 kg dry grass and 200 gms of jaggery. If cows go without the right mix of fodder for a long period their capacity to produce milk could be reduced. Ensuring a regular flow of fodder to dairies is crucial. During this lockdown, it's a challenge too, as small farmers with less than six cows are finding out.

Enter Rajas Paranjpe and his Mumbai-based dairy start-up Bodhishop. "Anyone can help needy farmers by buying fodder online from our website and we will deliver it straight to the needy farmers/ gaushalas," explains Paranjpe. Customers have to select the fodder that they wish to donate, add it to their 'cart' on Bodhishop's website, check the quantity and checkout. They can donate multiple

products by selecting the fodder type from a menu and adding it to the cart.

"Customers are donating from 100 kgs to 1,000 kgs through Bodhishop," adds Paranjpe.

Says Gautami Paranjpe, co-founder, Bodhishop: "To maintain transparency, we decided to purchase the products ourselves from the donations and deliver them to needy and verified farms. We share updates with every donor about the deliveries made to farmers/gaushalas via SMS and email. We personally monitor the purchase of fodder to final delivery."

The initiative, launched in early April, has been able to raise ten tonnes of fodder and supplies are increasing as more people become aware. "We were surprised to see that customers were also calling to enquire about the situation at the farm level. So we spoke to some farmers/ gaushalas, took stock of the heads of cattle, exactly how much fodder they require and made sure supplies reached them. Once the lockdown is lifted the cows will remain healthy so the farmers can resume their supplies to dairies," Paranjpe says.

—Lachmi Debroy





Lord Of Hearts

IMTIAZ Khalifa is surprised and amused at the attention he is receiving of late. "I wondered why total strangers are calling me up and complimenting me. I cannot understand what is so great about what I have done.

Anyone in my place would perhaps have done the same," he tells Outlook. That's the creed of self-effacing people who help; it comes so naturally to them. Imtiaz, a garment shop owner in Rajgangpur, a town in western Odisha, has waived the rent of his five tenants till the lockdown lasts. Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik, who has appealed to landlords to be considerate to their tenants, was so impressed that he tweeted a story on it published in an English daily while complimenting him for his generosity.

Imtiaz, of course, didn't have to wait for the CM's appeal. "I decided to waive the rent as soon as the PM announced a 21-day lockdown. My whole family was fully behind my decision," he tells Outlook. What now, since the Odisha government has extended the lockdown till April 30, or the possibility of it being extended further? "I have announced that I will not take rent till as long as the lockdown lasts, whether it is another month, three months or even six months. My tenants are all poor people who eke out a livelihood. How will they pay rent when they have lost their income?"

Mohammed Nasrullah, one of his tenants, sells balloons for a living while his two young sons supplement his income by painting houses. All three are without work. "Even my landlord's shop is closed and he also has lost his income. But he has not allowed that to come in the way of his humanity. He really has a heart of gold," a grateful Nasrullah says.

Granted, the loss in terms of money for Imtiaz is not a fortune: Rs 7,500 in all at the rate of Rs1,500 per family. But the goodwill he has earned by relinquishing his rightful income is priceless.

—Sandeep Sahu



cult, selfless call, Bhabani was obviously going by what his father himself would have done or advised him to do in a similar situation. CM Naveen Patnaik doffed his hat to his work ethic, describing his decision as 'an act of exemplary public service' in a tweet. Chief state spokesperson on the COVID-19 situation Subroto Bagchi made special mention of this rare act of sacrifice in the larger public interest in his daily 4.30 PM briefing. "The Collector has set a high benchmark of public service at a time of grave crisis," he said.

Bhabani did fulfil his duties as a son--he paid his last respects to his dear father and lit the funeral pyre, but only after completing the day's important business, including a meeting with other officials. After the funeral rites, he promptly returned to work. In a country--and a state--where bureaucrats are known for their apathy, sloth and worse, Bhabani's devotion to service stands out as an example of exceptional commitment to duty at a time of an irreparable personal loss.

— Sandeep Sahu

No Time to Grieve

"INCOMPLETE work is no work!" It is one of the guiding principles Cuttack collector Bhabani Shankar Chaini swears by. He received it as a child from his father Damodar Chaini, himself an administrative officer like his son. Bhabani lived up to the ideal on the day his father died.

Early on April 7, Bhabani received the news of his father's demise. Most people in his place would have taken leave for the day to perform the last rites of his father. Not Chaini junior. As administrative head in an important district like Cuttack, he realised he could ill afford to be on leave even for a day, when he was leading the war on coronavirus in his area. In taking this diffi-

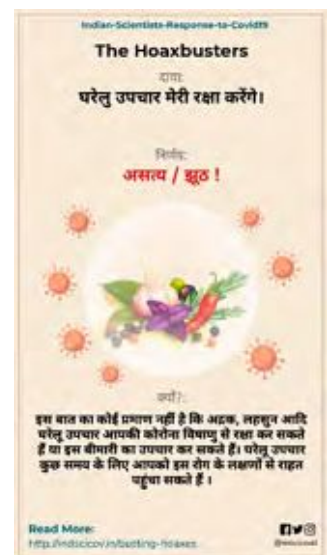
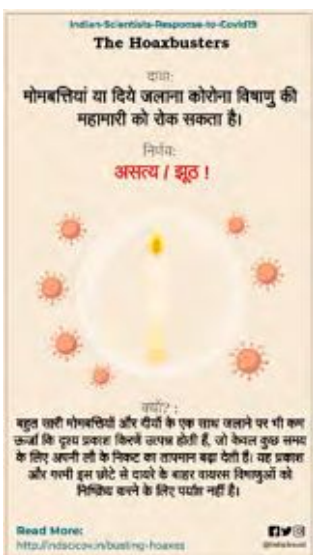
Scourge Of Unscience

A veritable gallimaufry of misinformation impedes the fight against coronavirus. Will clapping kill the virus? Can air conditioning spread it? Can vegetables be carriers? Each query has its roots in rumour bruited around on social media, and these are some that people have posed to a team of hundred-plus scientists that have united to combat hoaxes related to coronavirus. The members discuss every question and then put out a definitive response in the form of a poster on social media, on WhatsApp, and their website. The idea was first mooted by R. Ramanujam of the Institute of Mathematical Sciences, Chennai, in an email marked to several people in the scientific community. The response was encouraging. The group calls itself Indian Scientists' Response to COVID-19, though the term 'hoax busters' have clung to them too. It's a nomenclature they accept with humility.

"We have two objectives. One is to fight misinformation being peddled. For example, somebody says there is cure for corona virus in traditional medicine. It's just not true," says T.V. Venkateswaran, a member who works with Vigyan Prasar, an organisation under the Department of Science and Technology that works to popularise science. The second objective, Venkateswaran adds, is to combat claims with weak evidence. "There were news reports claiming that there is a different strain of virus in India and it's not as dangerous. The scientific paper it was based on did not exactly say that. Now these kinds of things can impact public policy and lead to people lowering their guard."

The team has made sets of posters in 15 different languages and promotes them aggressively on social media. Some graphic designers and science students have volunteered to design and translate the posters. As the group has members from varied science and research institutions, each response has gone through the rigour of debate and discussion by experts of different disciplines. The informal, voluntary group have the simplest of objectives in these complex, uncertain times: to provide the right kind of information. "People are asking questions. That is what we wanted," says Venkateswaran.

—Salik Ahmed





A Hotelier's Credo

In this hour of direst need, all, barring one, shrank when a sacrifice was sought. As Kashmiri students from different countries, mostly Bangladesh, started returning to Srinagar in mid-March following the coronavirus outbreak, the government approached different hotels in Srinagar, asking them to house them for the mandatory 14-day quarantine. As expected, the owners refused, conjuring a deadly cocktail of contamination and future loss of business. The popular Centaur Hotel, for example, cited risk to staff, who lodged a pre-emptive protest. All except one man--45-year-old hotelier Irshad Mirza, who put his hand up and asked the government to use his property.

"I told them my hotel is available," says Mirza, who owns Shah Abbas hotel on Srinagar's Dal Lake. "If the virus can be contained due to quarantine and other isolation measures, it will save Kashmir; if Kashmir is safe, my family is safe," reasons Mirza lucidly. His offer was gratefully accepted.

"After the first batch had com-

pleted quarantine in my hotel, I told the administration they can continue to use the facility for the same purpose," Mirza says. He scoffs at other hoteliers' argument that this would devalue the property, pointing to examples in Italy and Spain where hundreds of hotel rooms were converted into isolation wards.

Mirza's noble gesture was quickly acknowledged and Srinagar deputy commissioner Shahid Choudhary took to twitter thus: "Tiger zinda hai!! Let's clap for Mr Irshad who came all the way to offer keys of his hotel to help us".

Established in 1982, Shah Abbas is one of Srinagar's well-known hotels with 88 well-furnished rooms. "We handed over all our rooms and provided our usual service to the students," Mirza discloses.

That Mirza proved an inspiration became apparent when other hoteliers across Kashmir offered their facilities for quarantine. Even in picturesque Pahalgam, hoteliers followed Mirza's lead. Indeed, a senior official says Mirza showed the way and "helped erase misconceptions about the virus".

— Naseer Ganai

His Time, Gratis

Time, even more than a donation of money, is the greatest gift a top professional can make. On March 31, Himanshu Khanna left a simple message on his social media accounts: "I'm open to consultation indefinitely. I'll charge 5k/30 mins or 8k/hr for #UX/#brand/#design/#strategy consultation. 100% money to be donated to #Coronaindia funds. Please show donation receipts and I will make sure you have a slot." It was an innovative, and indirect, approach to help the victims of the pandemic and the brand designer himself had his fingers crossed.

What happened next was unbelievable. Khanna raised Rs 1.7 lakh in just two days for corona India funds. Moreover, his small step inspired millions who started similar campaigns--raising funds by offering free consultancies. "The response has been fantastic," says Khanna, progenitor of a new model of altruism. What's more, he's fully booked for the next two weeks now, and is keeping to his commitment.

People inspired by Khanna include Jasjit Singh, head of product--Global at OLX Group, who acknowledges that the brilliant idea is a brain-child of Himanshu and thanks him for the initiative.



Khanna, who runs brand and communication designing agency Sparklin in Delhi's Khirki Extension and has clients like ICICI bank and Hindustan Times, feels innovations result from limited resources. He describes himself as a person who breathes design and takes pride in brainstorming on transformative and exceptional ideas. His colleagues describe him as a CEO who is also a coach and mentor, while clients describe how his mantra "simple is good" underlie all communication strategies devised by him.

Khanna, who had run a similar campaign during the Kerala floods, attributes it to his social and moral responsibility. "As a designer, it's a natural instinct to empathise and help. The thought was to figure out a way to help beyond my personal financial contributions. That's when I thought crowd funding could be extremely beneficial. Everyone wants to contribute. Perhaps an added benefit of consultation could accelerate contributions."

—Jyotika Sood



Banker of the Unbanked

THE lockdown that has gravely inconvenienced so many has barely scratched regular banking customers—they have options like branch banking, net banking and digital banking. But imagine the plight of unbanked customers, migrant workers in particular. Earning paltry sums, these often itinerant workers do not have the privilege of banking services and are dependent on business correspondents (BCs) to deposit, withdraw or transfer money. These services have taken a hit due to the lockdown, as most BCs have shut shop.

But John Pereira, 45, who runs SABS Enterprises, a money transfer business in the industrial town of Vasai, 60 km from Mumbai, is staying open for the sake of daily wage earners, all migrants struggling to survive after the closure of their factories. With no income, they have little or no cash.

Pereira requested authorities to allow him to keep his shop open so that workers can withdraw some money from their accounts. These, usually, are at a bank branch back at their hometowns where their families use pass books and ATM cards to withdraw money. Now, thanks to an Aadhaar-enabled system, workers use their Aadhaar number and biometrics to withdraw money, availing unique software that agents like Pereira have in their system. The required amount is credited into Pereira's account and he gives them cash.

Considering Pereira's spotless track record, local authorities acceded to his request to remain open. His now is the only money transfer outfit working still in the large industrial area—a beacon of hope for hundreds. He tries to stick to his regular working hours of 8 am to 10 pm. "What we get as commission (Rs 5 for a withdrawal of Rs 5,000) does not cover even the costs for staff, electricity and rent. However, we are doing this with the sole intention of helping people for whom survival is daily challenge. It is their blessings that motivate us and keeps us going," he says.

— Yagnesh Kansare

His Lowest Handicap

IT was par for the course for golfer Arjun Bhati. The prodigy, who will be 16 on September 7, outthought several professional Indian golfers who earn in millions and crisscross the world's international courses. Bhati's Rs 4.3 lakh contribution to the PM-CARES fund for the fight against COVID-19 speaks of a remarkable generosity in someone so young. Consider this: to raise the money, he sold off all his 102 medals and trophies won over the last eight years of his career. Among these were three trophies won at world-level competitions in Malaysia and the US between 2016 and 2019.

Bhati, who has just taken his Class 10 CBSE examination, says the urge to do something for the country came naturally to him. "I play in some of the toughest tournaments in my age group and to do well for India is something I cherish. India is like a parent and in this difficult situation I thought it was my duty to contribute to the PM's fund. Medals can be won again but let's save lives first," says Bhati, displaying maturity and vision beyond his years.

Since everything was locked down—he lives in an apartment that overlooks the Jaypee Greens golf course in Greater Noida—Bhati spread the word through friends and relatives. "Their immediate reaction lifted my spirits and my three world medals fetched the best prices," says Bhati.

The 2019 FCG Callaway junior world golf championship winner's trophy was bought by Bhati's coach Monish Bindra for Rs 21,000. His uncle Sandeep Badal bought the 2018 world junior medal for Rs 11,000 while his 2016 world medal, picked up by another uncle, fetched him Rs 11,000. "The best surprise, of course, came from my grandmother, who bought some trophies for 21,000," gushes the affable lad. Bhati, whose role model is Tiger Woods, wants to become a professional. "I am still not sure when but it has been nice playing age-group tournaments that exposes me to pressure and challenges depending on weather and design of the courses," he says. "I would like to win an Olympic medal for India. I felt honoured to be standing beside Amitabh Bachchan and Virat Kohli at the India Sports Honours awards to get my sponsorship last year," he adds.

—Soumitra Bose





Pangs Migrant workers and daily-wage earners are subsisting on donated meals and rations

PHOTOGRAPHS BY SURESH K PANDEY

The *MAGAZINE* Helping Hands

Concerned citizens have taken on the mantle of feeding India's poor during the lockdown

Rajat Roy in Calcutta, Salik Ahmad in Delhi and G.C. Shekhar in Chennai

WHEN famines wrought havoc during the colonial period, the British administration often turned a blind eye to the misery of people. The Bengal famine in 1943 is a case in point. The state remained indifferent even after millions perished—whatever little



relief work was carried out was done by the civil society. In the post-colonial era, the state largely shouldered the responsibility of relief work after floods, droughts and epidemics, though civil society also played an important role.

Cut to the present day. The lockdown to contain coronavirus has created a grave crisis for underprivileged sections of society as many of them depended on daily wages and had mea-

gre savings. It has essentially shut all avenues to a livelihood and now, they are staring at hunger. Governments are offering meals to many, but with the size of the population and the semi-organised nature of the economy, gaps remain. And it's during this hour of need that concerned citizens have once again risen to the occasion. Several people have taken it upon themselves to help and feed the hungry, with whatever resources they have

or could raise.

Take, for instance, the Bangla Sanskriti Mancha (BSM), a group that includes IIT graduates, physicists and academics among others. It was formed in 2016 after a communal riot in Dhulagarh, Howrah, to restore amity among different communities. After the lockdown, they channelled all their energy in providing support to Bengali workers stranded in other states.

Samirul Islam, the ever-agile president of the organisation, says that their helplines working 24X7 and they are receiving distress calls from all over India. “We have got calls from Andaman too. In the last 15 days, we got information about more than 75,000 migrant workers. So far, BSM has been able to support around 35,000 people with our limited resources,” he adds.

The organisation has prepared a database of these migrant workers, something that has proved handy for the state government in organising relief for them. It is also arranging dry rations for those stuck in places where relief has not reached.

BSM, however, is just one among many groups carrying out voluntary relief work. Ramkishore Ganguly, a karate teacher in Bolpur, has opened five helplines along with 8-10 of his students. They are attending to senior citizens in the Bolpur-Santiniketan area. It was much needed as the population of seniors living alone in Santiniketan is significant—their children are mostly settled in other states or countries. Besides, the town’s Elmhirst Institute is also arranging foodgrains for villagers who are unable to get the rations being distributed by the government as they do not have ration cards. Penchen Dhendup, a resident of Darjeeling has started delivering essential medicines with the help of his friends to people in his town who are unable to go out.

In Delhi’s Kalkaji neighbourhood, Kamal Kardam, 43, and Afzal Qadri, 30, feed migrant labourers every day. They cook vegetarian pulao for some 100 people, load the packets on their scooters and set out to feed those they can find, mostly around their locality. “We are not very rich, but till the time it’s doable, we shall do it,” says Qadri.

In Karaikudi town of Sivaganga district, Springs, a voluntary group of



↑ **Succour** The government is offering meals, but citizen-led initiatives are bridging gaps

young residents, began relief work by feeding 100 people, mostly the homeless, sanitary workers, differently abled and security guards. Soon, the number of food packets was scaled up to 500 per day as they expanded their work to more localities. The district collector was so impressed by their work that he released one lakh rupees from contingency funds to sustain their efforts. “Since locals knew about our group’s work after the Gaja cyclone, they readily donated funds to help us buy ingredients,” says Ismail, one of the organisers.

In Coimbatore, Seva Bharathi, a voluntary organisation, has been cooking and distributing food to 25,000 people daily since the lockdown. “We operate out of a large wedding hall (given free by the owner) and donors give food grains, vegetables and other ingredients to make one variety of rice every day. There are 1,200 volunteers helping in the preparation and distribution of food to the poor, especially migrant workers from other states, in 35 neighbourhoods of the city,” says Ramanathan, the convener of the

organisation. “We initially started with 250, people, but as we learnt about more people looking for food, we expanded our operations.”

In Chennai, youth associations belonging to Rajasthan, Gujarat, Bihar, Bengal and Odisha are working in close coordination with the Tamil Nadu secretary of labour and employment Mohamed Nasimuddin, who brought them together to take care of migrant workers living in Chennai. Initially, the group provided cooked meals. However, on finding that most of the workers had a place to stay and stoves, they now provide weekly rations so they can cook what they want. “So far, we have covered more than 6,000 guest workers in and around Chennai. Whenever the local tashildar or police identify a group of workers that need assistance, our members immediately reach out to them and bring them under our wing,” says Siddarth Maher, president of the Gujarat Youth Association.

Nasimuddin explains that the idea to rope in these youth associations was to overcome the language barrier and make guest workers feel at home by interacting with people from their respective states. “We formed a WhatsApp group for this specific purpose and coordinate with youth associations that have been involved in social work,” he says. “Over 500 members of these youth associations are involved in relief work.”

As the nation grapples with the lockdown, these generous people and heartwarming stories are perhaps its only redeeming feature. □

Bangla Sanskriti Mancha collected information about 75,000 migrant workers and supported 35,000.



Akshay
Kumar

₹28
crore

Ace Of Hearts

A nation under lockdown. Millions struggling for the bare minimum. And India's film industry has embraced charity like never before.

Giridhar Jha in Mumbai

THIS year, Akshay Kumar stands to lose out the most among his contemporaries in Bollywood in terms of box-office collections—to the tune of Rs 700-800 crore, according to a conservative estimate. The COVID-19 outbreak has cast a big shadow on three of his big-budget films (*Sooryavanshi*, *Laxmi Bomb* and *Prithviraj*) slated for release in 2020. But this has not dissuaded him from loosening his



Salman Khan

₹15
crore

purse strings for a ‘novel’ cause.

‘Khiladi’ Kumar, known for delivering three to four hits on an average every year in recent times, has so far contributed Rs 28 crore—Rs 25 crore to the PM Cares Fund and Rs 3 crore to Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC)—to help fight the pandemic.

“This is that time when all that matters is the lives of our people,” Akshay wrote on his social media accounts, only to be patted quickly by his wife Twinkle Khanna. “The man makes me proud. When I asked him if he was sure as it was such a massive amount and we needed to liquidate funds, he just said, ‘I had nothing when I started and now that I am in this position, how can I hold back from doing whatever I can for those who have nothing?’” the actress-turned-author wrote.

Amid the pandemic, Akshay has raised the bar for good Samaritans in an industry where rich filmmakers and actors have not shied away from parsimony. Over the years, several Indian stars have made it to global lists of highest-earning celebrities, but rarely in the past did they respond so briskly to a calamity as they have done this



Bhushan Kumar



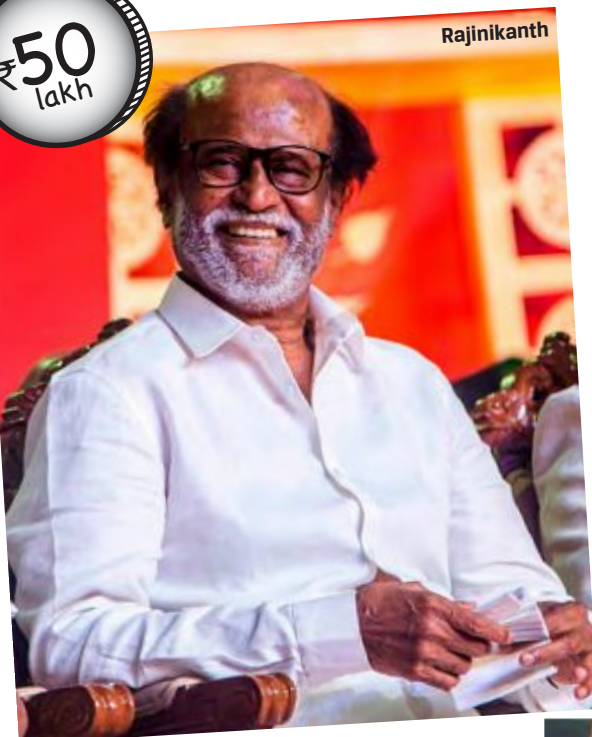
Apart from making cash donations, stars are also helping with relief efforts.

time. Contributing their individual might in the fight against the contagion, a majority of them have lent support in their own way. Apart from making donations in cash, they are also doing plenty in kind—arranging safety kits for corona warriors and food and rations for the underprivileged.

Earlier the film industry used to res-

pond to national calamities like floods or famines differently. Leading artistes and technicians used to take out rallies, play cricket matches or organise musical nites to raise funds, but the scenario is different now. None of them can step out of their homes to organise a joint fundraiser and whatever they want to contribute, they have to do so individually.

It seems charity has begun at home in Bollywood. Salman Khan was among the first to open his coffers for daily-wage workers in the film industry. The *Dabangg* star, who has been at his farmhouse at Panvel near Mumbai since the lockdown began on March 25, has set out to provide financial assistance of a minimum of Rs 15 crore to 25,000-odd workers affiliated to the Federation of Western India Cine Employees (FWICE), an umbrella organisation of about 32 associations of film-industry workers. “Salman asked us for the bank account details of the daily-wage workers facing acute financial problems due to the lockdown. He has since transferred Rs 3,000 each directly into their bank accounts. The second instalment will



Rajinikanth



Prabhas



follow soon,” says B. N. Tiwari, president of FWICE.

There are approximately five lakh workers affiliated to FWICE through their respective associations, many of whom live hand-to-mouth in Mumbai. The lockdown has left a sizeable number of them to fend for themselves as they had little or no savings. “It is a new situation for us to tackle and we were least prepared for it,” Tiwari tells *Outlook*. “Apart from whatever help we are getting from industry people such as Salman Khan, we are now trying to help daily-wage workers from our reserve funds. We are ensuring that no worker sleeps on an empty stomach at this time.”

Thankfully, says Tiwari, industry bigwigs like actor Ajay Devgn, filmmaker Rohit Shetty (who donated Rs 51 lakh each) and producer Boney Kapoor among others have got in touch with the federation after Salman’s initiative. “We are also receiving small contribu-

tions of Rs 1,000 or so from many of our members, which are as valuable for us,” he adds.

Elsewhere, several leading artistes and filmmakers have pledged financial support. T-Series baron Bhushan Kumar has donated Rs 11 crore towards PM Cares Fund while Sajid Nadiadwala, apart from pledging to donate to PM Cares Fund and the Chief Minister’s Relief Fund in Maharashtra, has given bonuses to 400 employees to enable them to contribute generously towards the cause. Producer Manish Mundra of Drishyam Films, who is currently in Nigeria, has been supplying PPE and safety kits to various hospitals.

Ekta Kapoor, the czarina of Indian television, has given up her annual salary of Rs 2.5 crore for the sake of daily-wage workers associated with her production house, Balaji Telefilms. “The impact of corona crisis is huge, unprecedented and multi-pronged. We

Philanthropy Wood

Akshay Kumar
₹28 crore

Bhushan Kumar
₹11 crore

Prabhas
₹4 crore

Pawan Kalyan
₹2 crore

Mahesh Babu
₹1.25 crore

Chiranjeevi
₹1 crore

Nagarjuna
₹1 crore

Vicky Kaushal
1 crore

Kartik Aaryan
₹1 crore

Varun Dhawan
₹55 lakh

Rajinikanth
₹50 lakh

Kapil Sharma
₹50 lakh



Priyanka Chopra

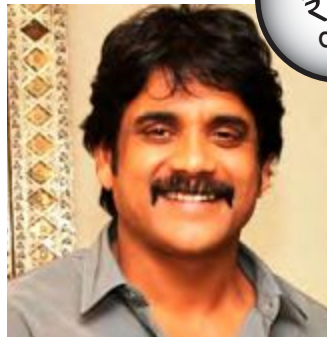


King Khan SRK has opened his four-storey personal office for BMC to use as a quarantine centre

MAGAZINE KING

all need to do things that will ease the hardship of people around us and our country at large," she tweeted. "It is my first and foremost responsibility to take care of the various freelancers and daily-wage workers who work at Balaji and who are going to suffer immense loss due to no shootings in the current scenario and uncertainty over the indefinite period to follow."

Hrithik Roshan has arranged for N95 and FFP3 masks for BMC workers and caretakers. He has also helped facilitate 1.2 lakh nutritious cooked meals for the needy in collaboration with the NGO Akshaya Patra. Jacqueline Fernandez has extended her support to an initiative to help provide supplies to 2,500



Kolkata Knight Riders, Red Chillies

Entertainment, Meer Foundation and Red Chillies VFX has pledged to distribute 50,000 PPE kits apart from taking care of food requirements of 5,500 families in Mumbai. It has also pledged to arrange for three lakh meal kits for 10,000 people and groceries for 2,500



Charity with the Stars Chiranjeevi (left) and Nagarjuna (right)

families in Mumbai who are bearing the brunt of the ongoing crisis. "In times like these, every bit counts," she says.

Shah Rukh Khan came up with a series of initiatives to battle COVID-19. He released an undisclosed amount to PM Cares Fund and Maharashtra Chief Minister's Relief Fund and opened his four-storey personal office equipped with all essentials for BMC to use as a quarantine centre. Besides, his group of companies comprising

daily-wage workers in Delhi. "Given the enormity of the task, my team and I discussed ways to contribute in our own modest way. We have come up with a series of initiatives, which we hope will make a small difference," says Shah Rukh. "As a nation and as a people, it is our duty to give all we have got. I am going to try my best and I know each one of you will do so too. Only together will we be able to fight through these difficult and unimaginable days."

Shah Rukh, however, has refrained from divulging the amount his team is likely to invest in his altruistic mission. There are several other stars such as Amitabh Bachchan, Aamir Khan, Madhuri Dixit, Ranveer Singh, Deepika Padukone, Alia Bhatt, Priyanka Chopra, Saif Ali Khan, Kareena Kapoor, Katrina Kaif, Rajkumar Rao and Anushka Sharma who also believe in keeping their donations for the cause close to their chest.

Down south, stars of regional film industries have also responded with generosity.

Rajinikanth was among the first to contribute Rs 50 lakh for industry workers, while Telugu superstar Prabhas of *Baahubali* fame has donated Rs 4 crore. Others too have contributed such as Pawan Kalyan (Rs 2 crore), Mahesh Babu (Rs 1.25 crore), Ajith Kumar (Rs 1.30 crore), Allu Arjun (1.25 crore), Chiranjeevi (Rs 1 crore) and Nagarjuna (Rs 1 crore)

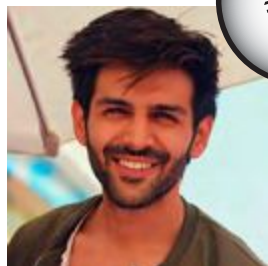
While the novel coronavirus scare has brought dark clouds of despair over film industries, stars and filmmakers lending their support to the battle against the virus comes as a silver lining. And if Shah Rukh has his way, *picture abhi baaki hai mere dost*.



Hrithik Roshan

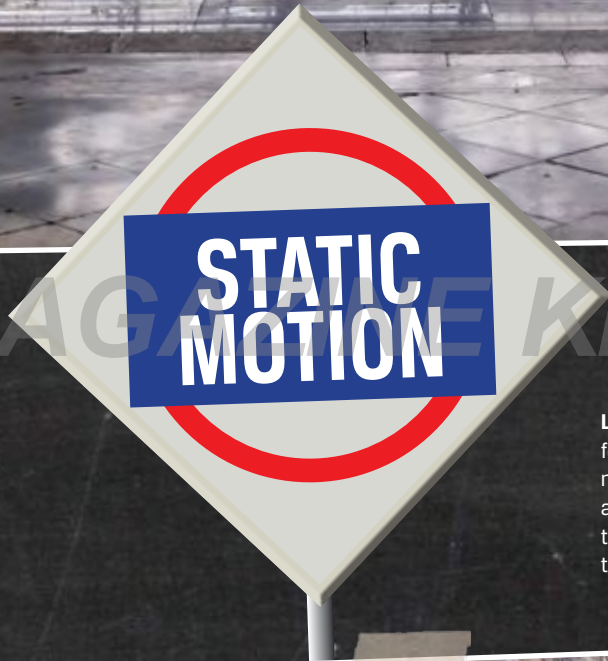


Vicky Kaushal



Kartik Aaryan

Many actors have not divulged the amount they donated.



MAGAZINE KING

LOCKED RHYMES Platforms empty of footfall, beckon those days when people moved in a swirl—about 7 lakh of them at CST. This is the perfect evocation of the Sunday fear, that dead time when thoughts crowd in of Monday's business.

Apoorva Salkade

THE 2.38 from Platform 9 is cancelled. But so are all other trains from the inimitable Victoria Terminus (or, if you will, Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus), the jewel in the crown of railway architecture in India. Never in recent decades does it seem to have been so pristinely preserved as in these weeks of complete stasis: destitute of people and stripped of clangour and bustle, its





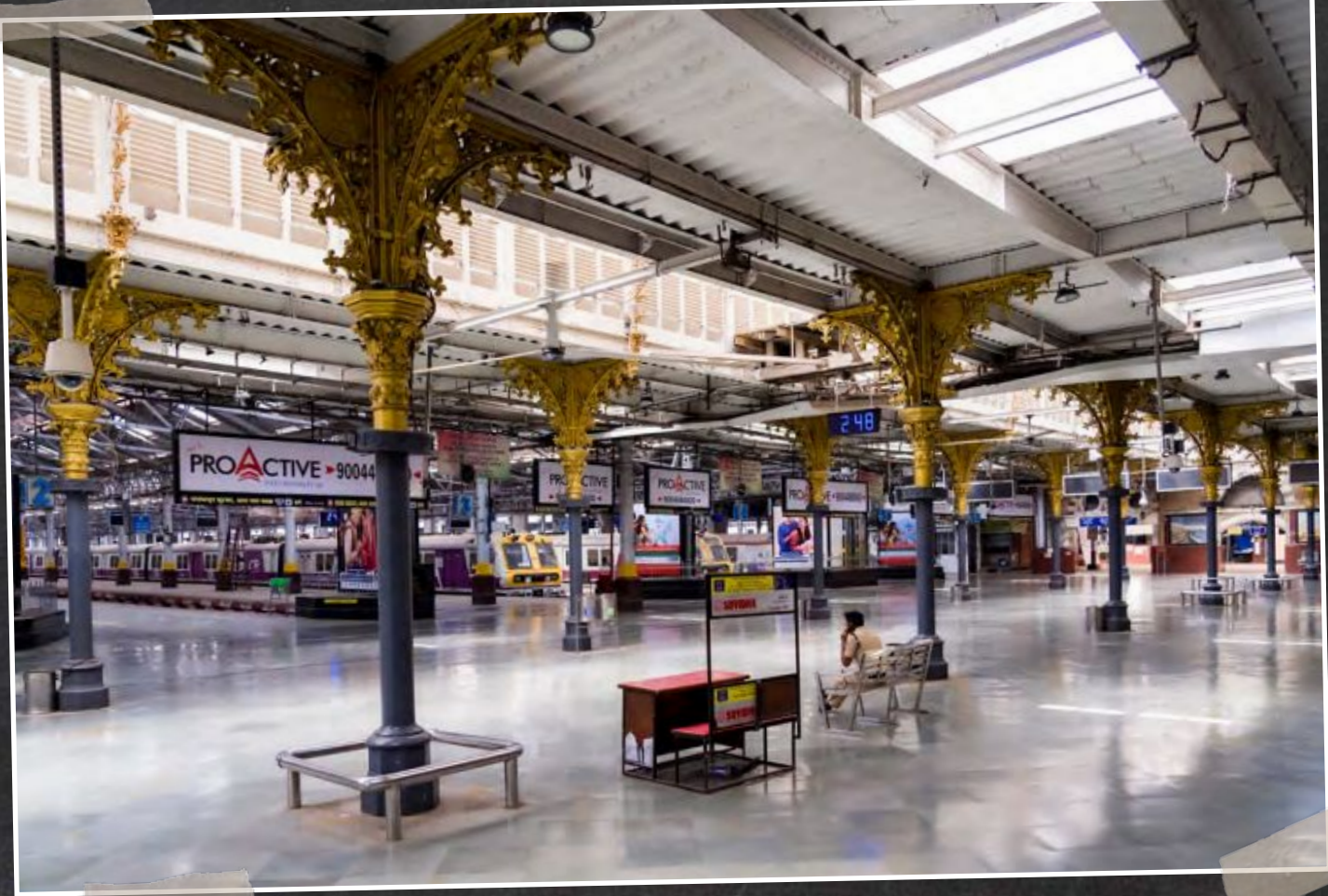


MAGAZINE KING

DID I MISS THAT? Victoria unfurls herself in unexpected ways if you just give her time. The key to discovering her sometimes hidden delights: slow down. This is her heritage wing—storied history next to a mechanical present, the ticket counters.

platforms lie invitingly like giant conveyor belts in recess, the parked trains mere playthings beneath the silvery steel fretworks overhead, as the gilded, ornamental pillars that so fragily hold them up claim their status as things of beauty. But the real spectacle lies beyond the lines of platforms, under the central dome—one of the most impressive of any Neo-Gothic





building anywhere in the world. This secular nave could proudly host any Redeemer in any cathedral. Mounted by Corinthian columns of polished Aberdeen granite, watched over by stained glass windows and ringed by banisters of austere filigree, it reveals itself in all its untarnished brilliance in these sparsely, miraculously populated times. Designed by F.W. Stevens and opened in 1887 to celebrate the golden jubilee of the monarch whose name it bears, VT was

ALL SENSE OF BEING IN A HURRY GONE

And I suddenly saw the empty station... It's all here, the sights, sounds and smells of a terminus trying to ride out a storm





headquarters of the Great Indian Peninsular Railway. Termed "the finest railway station in any country in the world"—this, when the high age of steam conferred immense prestige on prominent railway stations—VT has had its share of tragedy too. Its pre-eminent public stature recommended

WATERMARKED TIMETABLE Across a street, Victoria lies waiting...in sepia of 1925, in psychedelic of 2020. And no, she has not been playing without an opponent. Flinders of Melbourne is an ochre brother born of the same womb, but a rival. Victoria morphed into CST two decades ago—and an author wrote the *Biggest Sex Change* in a quiet hymn...





SWEAT AND BLOOD

A staggering ballet of steerage customers jostling for a toehold, or *Slumdog Millionaire* Patel serenading Pinto to an Oscars *Jai Ho!*...hyperhidrosis is integral to 'local' ribaldry. But for the context, shootings at CST are entertaining and frightening in equal measure. Ask somebody who has caught a gust of Kalashnikov in the belly on 26/11.



itself to terrorists who spilt innocent blood on its busy platforms and handsome glazed tile floors. Those images haunt and hurt still. In conclusion, if a cocky Australian should ever mention to you that the design was originally meant for Melbourne's Flinders Street station, simply lance him with this riposte: more people travel by Mumbai's suburban train system—with VT as its fulcrum—than a fourth of Australia's entire population. 



'I constantly check my bank account and wonder when the next job is coming'

Actor **Namit Das** talks to **Lachmi Deb Roy** about working on Mira Nair's adaptation of *A Suitable Boy* and life after COVID-19.

How is quarantine treating you?

→ Just the way it is treating everybody else. There are times when I feel enlightened doing the sweeping and mopping and there are times when I feel the world is going to come to an end. This is a sort of vipasana we are going through. The times and circumstances are unusual, but they are keeping us grounded. It makes you realise the importance of each moment. A moment passed is a moment gone and thank god it has passed because it means we are moving ahead.

I am reading a lot. By the grace of god, I have a lovely wife for company. I am spending time with her. I don't think I have spent so much time with her ever. My in-laws also live in the same building. That is a huge plus point for both of us—we can take care of them and we go to their house in the evening to have dinner. But then again, while the initial first two weeks were nice, seeing too much of each other can feel claustrophobic.

How are you dealing with the uncertainty?

→ The uncertainty bothers me sometimes. We check our bank account constantly and wonder when the next job will come our way. But this is part of the process which we all are going through. What really

gives me solace is that it is not me or just a few people living in lockdown, but the entire world is in the same situation. When this calamity ends, I hope we will all be wiser. Sometimes, I feel like giving up, but in times like these, what is there to give up?

Do you think this pandemic has been a great equaliser?

→ I believe there is equality at a psychological level. For example, my maid is going through the same uncertainty I am going through. I don't think history has ever brought human beings so close to each other emotionally. It is a strange dichotomy—I am emotionally close to all human beings, yet physically distant.

But otherwise, the differences that existed in society remain. I am in a much more privileged position than my domestic help and driver. I have a nice home and food and I recognise these privileges I have.

How do you keep yourself entertained these days?

→ My wife is watching a show called *Billions*. I do not watch television regularly. I am reading *Tawaifnama* by Saba Dewan and have plans of finishing some of Ramchandra Guha's books in the next few days. I am also listening to a lot of LP records.

How was the experience of working with Mira Nair in *A Suitable Boy*?

→ Playing an important role in the upcom-



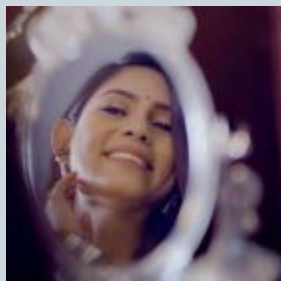
Roi Roi Roti...Abhishruti!

When it comes to Assamese jewellery, the miniature djembe-like Kerumoni Thuriya ear studs are worth their weight in gold—often passed down generations. Mother to daughter, grandmother to grandchild. Much like Bihu, as much an ear candy as the seductive dance we are so familiar with. Lend a mellisotnant voice to that folksy mix, blend those upbeat melodies and catchy tune into a title track, you can't get singer **Abhishruti Bezbaruah's** new Bihu release out of your head. Yes, it's *Kerumoni Thuriya*, the latest from the award-winning sound designer whose previous tracks *Roi Roi Roti*, *Tok Dekhi Mor Gaa* and *Kordoi Sokola* were hits across Assam. **Lachmi Deb Roy** catches up with the rising star...

On A Musical Note

I grew up around music in my family (her great-grandfather was Lakshminath Bezbaruah,

a legend of Assamese literature). I am a trained Hindustani classical musician, and also studied music production and sound designing. My songs like *Roi Roi Roti* have given the audience a new taste of folk fusion. *Kerumoni*



Thuriya has been warmly received, even though I released it in the middle of a countrywide lockdown.

Time Locked In


I'm loving it...spending time with my family, watching movies together, connecting with my well-wishers, composing music. I released *Kerumoni Thuriya* to bring happiness in this anxious

time. That required a lot of work from home. The best part about staying at home is that I am reconnecting with nature. The birds chirping, the wind, the night crickets... recording all these lovely sounds.

The Big Screen

I love Indian cinema, and the process of filmmaking. I have worked with Resul Pookutty, Nakul Kamte, Amrit Pritam in Bollywood/Hollywood films such as *Ra.One*, *Highway*, *English Vinglish*, *The Second Best Exotic Mari-gold Hotel*, *Partition 1947* to name a few. In film school, we watched a whole bunch of world cinema. *Casablanca*, *Bicycle Thieves*, *The Shining*, Theo Angelopoulos's *Landscape in the Mist*...these have stayed with me for their storytelling, scripts and cinematography.

The Watch List

I watched *Parasite*, *Contagion* and a few more based on pandemics. Then I realised these were consuming me, so I switched them off. I loved watching *The Spy* and am catching up on the last season of *Suits*. 



ing show was a privilege. It is an adaptation of Vikram Seth's novel. There are some divergences because it is a 1,500-page book that has been adapted into a six-episode series. Some characters may not be in the show, but the essence of the novel is intact.


It was a great experience working with Mira Nair—it helped me rise to another level as an artiste. She is special and anyone who works with her is also made to feel special. She is so beautiful with humans and relationships, that is the best thing about her. All the art that she has produced is essentially about humans and relationships. Being a part of *A Suitable Boy* has been magical. I wanted to play the role of Hareesh Khanna and that's exactly what I was offered.

Which films and actors do you admire?

→ *Parasite* is an inspirational film. I like Tom Hanks—

his performances are human and real. I thoroughly enjoy Irrfan Khan for his mastery in depicting life so beautifully. I love Amitabh Bachchan—the work he has done in the past twenty years is unbelievable. Naseeruddin Shah's craft on stage and in front of the camera is something that every actor looks up to.

Which is the medium that interests you the most: theatre, films or web series?

→ I like to express myself. Thanks to my family, the earliest form of expression I learned was music. And that is why I wanted to be an artist. I knew that early in life, but probably couldn't put the thought in words at that time. While music came to me first, I eventually made acting a profession and that's how people got to know me. And because I got to do so many things, I feel the question is like asking a mother, "Who is your favourite kid?" I don't think any mother would be able to answer that. 



Harmonic Progression

When did the silver lining to a global disaster appear to have an aureole of gold? We're talking about the One World: Together At Home concert organised by WHO at the initiative of Lady Gaga—nearest thing to an online Woodstock in support of health workers and delivery, grocery and NGO staff across the globe. There were the Rolling Stones (Mick, Keith et al in a composite quartet) singing *You Can't Always Get What You Want*, the shrivelled up Celine Dion, the dependable Stevie Wonder, the statesmanlike Elton John, Beyonce and...Paul McCartney at the piano, singing *Lady Madonna*. "When were the Stones and a Beatle on the same billing last?" asked someone. PS: Shahrulk and Priyanka also paid solemn homage.

Our Lady In Big Apple

Spare a thought for those first responders to COVID-19 patients in a city that has seen the virus at its most virulent. Doctors and nurses there have paid the heaviest price too—their own lives. Out on this cratered battlefield, soldiering under constant barrage, is Mona Milka Singh—a doctor at New York's Metropolitan Hospital Center and daughter of legendary athlete Milkha Singh. Five days a week, 12-hour shifts, dealing with constant stress... "It's like a marathon," says Mona. That's her in the middle, flanked by colleagues, wrapped in a hazmat suit, geared up for another bruising bout.





Adah, Or Ardour

Does sleepy-eyed, long hair-smothered beauty go with leopard print swimsuits? The question was in Adah Sharma's mind as she languorously filled up those afternoons in her porch. Soon, she had her answer, on the same porch, in the piece of her choice, her dominant mood unchanged, in poses made classic by master craftsmen. It makes us wonder though—what's with these leopardish abbreviations (revisit last week's *Outlook*)? Could it be the suggestion of feline grace in watchful repose? Time to clarify with Emily and Adah.



MAGAZINE KING



Each Day A Masked Ball

Two-metre social distancing and a strict proscription of all bodily contact make kissing a problematic proposition. Yet, what is to be done when you're a Hollywood A-lister out on a stroll in Venice, LA, with your new-found lady love? Sensing that some of the bemasked stragglers ostensibly minding their own business are paparazzi, Ben Affleck did what was expected of him—stooped down on girlfriend Ana de Amas and planted a kiss. Of course, both had face masks on. Our advice to Ben: heighten the amour and take it indoors, so that descendants of Philip Marlowe have some work in these slack, fiery-red LA dusks.

LONDON Diary



Amish
is the bestselling
author of Shiva Trilogy
& Ram Chandra series

Out of the syllabus

When I took up my diplomatic role as the Director of Nehru Centre, London, a few months back, I did expect and plan for many challenges. But not in my wildest dreams did I imagine I would be handling the fallout of a global pandemic! It is, to use a term from our college days, “something completely out of syllabus”! But my team and I have been coping in the best way we can. For me, there is the additional challenge of being stuck alone in my flat in a cold, unfamiliar city I had not lived in before!

Workwise the Nehru Centre had closed on March 12th and postponed all events, as a measure of abundant caution. Our staff were asked to work from home. Within a few weeks, the UK government also announced a lockdown. The High Commission of India in the UK is working hard to facilitate and support Indians stuck in the UK. Our weekly meetings have moved online through video calls, and practically all work is being done through emails or phone calls, since physical meetings are impossible. Getting anything done has become a far more complicated process.

Dark circles of sleep

At the beginning of the lockdown in London, I did face some trouble getting foodstuff. Eggs had run out for some reason. I called a friend (who owns the exclusive Benaras restaurant at Berkeley Square) to get my essential breakfast ingredient. Indian vegetables are also hard to find in the area I live in, Mayfair in central London. So, one makes do with what's available. Fortunately for me, I'm not too picky about food. In London, we are allowed to venture outdoors for a jog or some form of exercise once a day (for an hour), provided we maintain social distancing. Hyde Park is right next door



and I go for a run every day. I couple that with my regular yoga, pranayam and dhyaan (meditation) every morning.

I am using the free time to write. I have started working on the fourth book of the Ram Chandra Series (the third book of the series, Raavan- Enemy of Aryavarta, was released in 2019). There is a non-fiction book idea my mind had been flirting with, which I have also started working on.

Many institutions are organising webinars, where writers/thinkers meet online with their readers. I have started participating in some of them. So,

all in all, I'm able to keep myself busy. Having said that, I notice that I am sleeping a lot more than I used to. I normally wake up early (around 5-5:30 a.m.), which continues as a habit. But I find that I'm sleepy a lot earlier; I doze off by around 9 p.m. as compared to 10-10:30 in the pre-lockdown days. And I've discovered that lack of sleep is not the only way to acquire dark circles and bags under the eyes. You can get it by sleeping too much as well. One sleeps and learns!

Missing the big happy family

We take some things for granted in India, where societal structures are still strong. Most of us in India do not live completely alone. We usually have family members living with us. Or we have strong relationships with our neighbours. We bond with our live-in staff, who become like family members. There are downsides to this, I won't deny it; people do not hesitate to blithely interfere in each other's private lives. But such societal structures have one immeasurable strength in crisis time i.e. you are not alone. This realisation has hit home when I look at the atomised society of the UK, where many people live completely alone; this is especially true of London. I've been reading about people dying alone at home in the UK from the Wuhan Corona virus. Reading about this in the London newspapers deeply disturbed me. I can only hope that I am able to come back to India soon to see my son, Neel. I miss him terribly; and video calls are not a substitute for the real thing, no matter what the technologists say.

Turmeric latte

Not much can be done to prepare for the Wuhan Corona virus. There is no cure. There is no vaccination. But you can do a few things to strengthen your immunity and reduce the likelihood of suffering severely from it. Grandma's nuskas, we call them. I try and practice some every day. So, I drink haldi-milk every night (the woke westerners call it “turmeric latte”!). I do salt water gargling 3 times a day. I do pranayama every morning. I eat healthy Indian food. And stay away from cold stuff. Also, I practice social distancing. Stay home. Stay safe. And please try to help the less privileged. For privileged people, like those reading this magazine, the biggest problem is the ennui of being alone. Others are facing far bigger challenges. Contribute money, food, resources and whatever else you can to help them. If not now, when? 