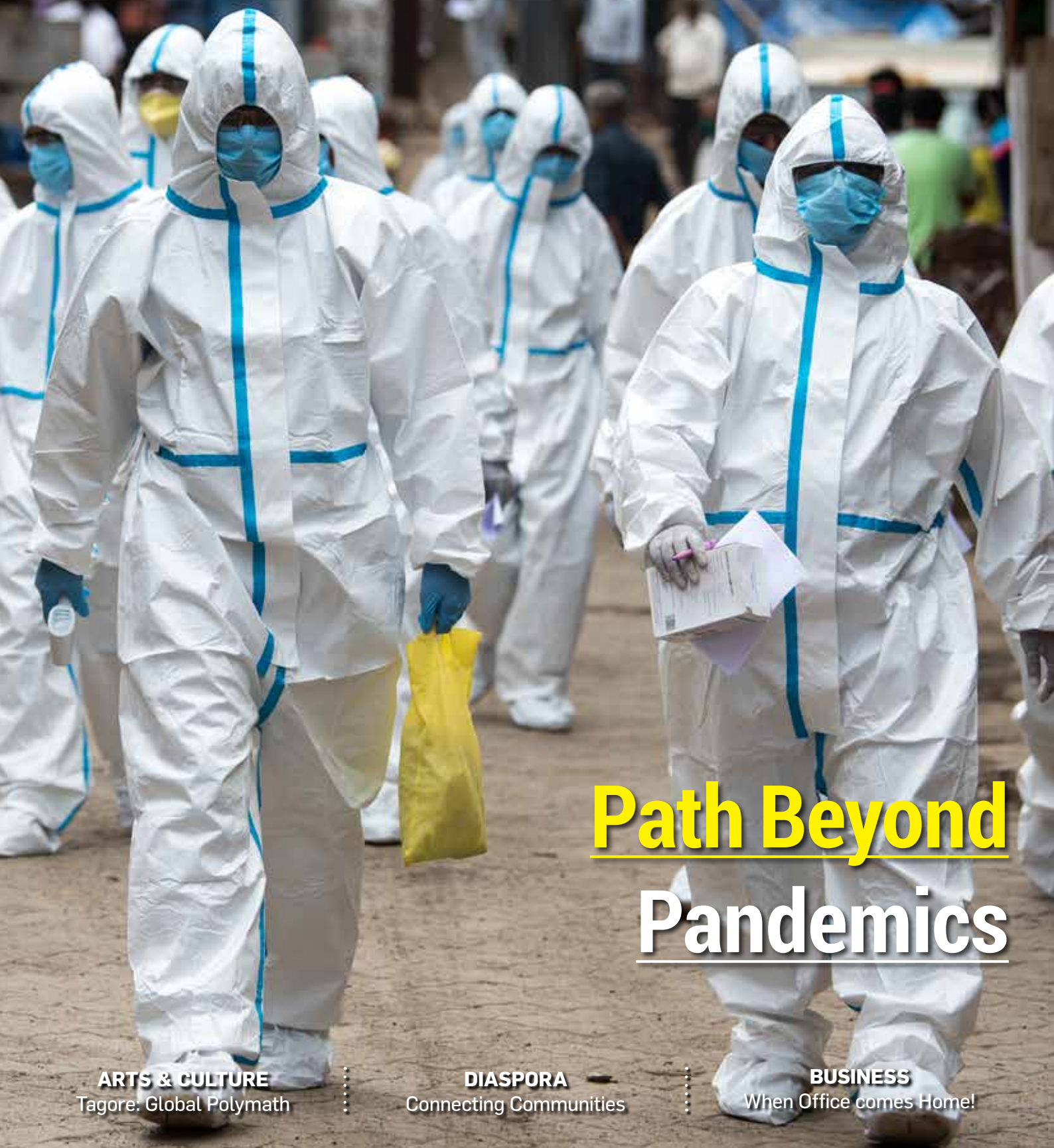


NAMASTE

# BHARAT

ISSUE 2 • JUNE 2021

CONNECTING TO THE ROOTS



## Path Beyond Pandemics

ARTS & CULTURE  
Tagore: Global Polymath

DIASPORA  
Connecting Communities

BUSINESS  
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## Lead, Kindly Light, amid the encircling gloom!

**T**he unprecedented second wave of COVID-19 caught India unawares as it wreaked death, destruction, and despair across the country. There has been an unending stream of reports and visuals depicting the scramble for medicines, vaccines, protective gears, beds, and oxygen that snuffed out thousands of lives, leading to heart-rending wails of relatives and lengthening chaotic queues at crematoriums for last rites. Further, the looming shadow of economic downturn due to continued disruption of business activities caused by lockdown has only accentuated the gloom.

The suffering from the century's worst pandemic has been colossal and all-pervasive but, we a bunch of eternal optimists at *Namaste Bharat* magazine, believe in holding on to hope even while reporting the grim truth. Mankind has to emerge wiser rising like a Phoenix from the COVID-19 ashes. We need to learn our pandemic-lessons well to preserve the delicate ecological balance that is the key to the survival of human race.

It is in this spirit that we need to follow the message of the World Environment Day celebrated on every 5th June. The Day again brings to the fore the harsh truth that we human beings have acted recklessly and ended up committing excesses against environment, a major reason for the continuing outbreak of COVID-19 that the globe is reeling under since March 2020.

We need to emphasise that the country will ultimately withstand and sail through the whirlpool of doubt and despair unleashed by the pandemic's calamitous resurgence.

Invoking the spirit of John Henry Newman's famous hymn *Lead, Kindly Light*, *Namaste Bharat* promises to get our readers umpteen stories of optimism and inspiration to enable them to pick up the pieces instead of fuelling despair among the Indian diaspora spread across the globe, helplessly watching their kith and kin struggle for oxygen, beds, vaccines, etc in the country of their origin. Our magazine also attempts to capture and highlight the diaspora's overwhelming spirit of giving back to the country of their origin as Corona resurgence has made it all the more relevant with Indians abroad deeply concerned with how things are unfolding in their motherland in the wake of the tightening clasp



of the virus.

As stated earlier, COVID-19 is also the consequence of man's limitless exploitation of Nature. But as Winston Churchill aptly puts it, "Never let a good crisis go to waste", let us brave the onslaught of COVID-19, think afresh, emerge more disciplined and contented and change the way we have conducted ourselves so far even though life would no longer be the same for many many years to come.

Given that India's health infrastructure was found to be grossly inadequate to cope with the fury of Corona 2.0, it forms the Cover Story of our June 2021 issue. Reinforcing the need for upgrading the healthcare system and equip it with the ability to withstand any unforeseen pandemic, we have roped in eminent medical practitioners and administrators who have penned down in-depth, comprehensive articles deliberating on various issues including the measures that need to be taken by the Government of India to build a robust healthcare edifice.

*Namaste Bharat* urges the Government of India to increase budgetary allocation on health which would not only ensure availability of adequate healthcare but also upgrade the critical care infrastructure to meet healthcare emergencies.

Happy reading *Namaste Bharat!* ■

RAJESH KUMAR



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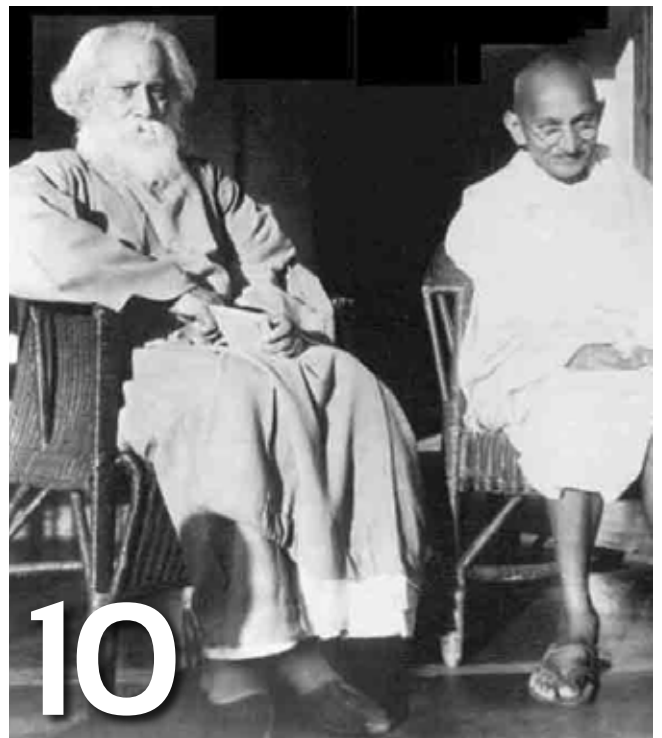
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# CONNECTING COMMUNITIES

**The world heritage city of Bath in England now has a latest addition** to its glorious landmarks: the first-ever Lord Jagannath Temple to be established in the UK and Europe

By Richard Pooley

**B**ath, a bustling city of about 90,000 people in south-west England, attracts over 1.3 million non-British tourists every year. It is renowned the world over for its Baths (hence the city's name), constructed by England's Roman rulers some 1,950 years ago. It is also famous for its 18th and early 19th century architecture, especially the Royal Crescent, the Circus and Pulteney Bridge over the River Avon. This bridge is one of four in the world which has shops all the way across on both sides. Bath is a UNESCO World Heritage City, the only city in England and one of only four cities on the entire planet to be awarded this accolade; the others are Edinburgh in Scotland, and Rome and Venice in Italy. And now Bath has a new addition: the first-ever Lord Jagannath Temple to be established in the UK and Europe.

Before saying more about this exciting development for the many Hindus who live in and around Bath, you need to know some more about what makes Bath special – its intellectual power, its literary heritage and even its politics!

The city has two world-class universities—the University of Bath and Bath Spa University. The University of Bath was established in 1966 after receiving its Royal Charter and has consistently ranked among the top 150 universities in the world. Apart from its innovative engineering courses, the University of Bath is famous for both its flagship MBA and its Translation and Interpreting Studies programmes. Simultaneous interpreting has been taught at this university from the start. By comparison, China only started teaching courses on Interpreting after establishing diplomatic ties with the USA on 1 January 1979,



Deputy Mayor and Deputy Mayoress of Bath at the temple

while India still does not have a single university with a complete focus on Interpreting Studies and a fully-fledged 'Interpreting Laboratory or Suites'. I understand that the lack of qualified professional interpreters of Indian origin has often forced those in India negotiating with the Chinese to over-rely on the Chinese side's interpreters. As someone who has taught international negotiation skills for many years to business people around the world (and co-written a book on the subject), I find this extraordinary. Perhaps someone from the Indian Education Ministry and the Indian High Commission in London, should visit the University of Bath to learn about what they are doing in this field.

Bath Spa University, previously Bath College of Higher Education, got its full university status in 2005. It is known for its Grade I-listed buildings of the 14th century, and for its courses on creative writing, religion, music, and the performing arts.

Jane Austen (1775 – 1817), author of world-famous novels such as *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), and *Mansfield Park* (1814) which have inspired many blockbuster movies, lived in Bath for 6 years. She set many of her novels in the city.

The Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties dominate the politics of Bath. Chris Patten, the last Governor of Hong Kong and currently the Chancellor of Oxford University, was the Member of Parliament for Bath for thirteen years from 1979 but was unseated by Don Foster, a Liberal Democrat, in 1992. Like Mamata Banerjee in the recent West Bengal elections, Patten, as the Conservative party chairman, successfully orchestrated a national victory for his party but lost

“ The idols are made from the auspicious Neem tree (*Azadirachta indica* or Indian lilac) while paints on the images are made from organic materials. ”

his own seat to Foster, who had been a local councillor for eight years.

In the May 2015 General Election, Foster stood down and the Liberal Democrats lost the seat to the Conservatives, but then regained it two years later, retaining it in 2019. Before becoming the MP of Bath, Don Foster served as a councillor for eight years. Foster is now an active member of the House of Lords, as Baron Foster of Bath.

I mention all this because Patten, Foster and the current MP, Wera Hobhouse, are internationalists, as indeed are many citizens of Bath (the city voted by a large majority for the UK to remain in the European Union). It was Foster who encouraged the idea of having a Hindu temple in Bath, and the Hindu community led by the Rajhansh family met him several times to discuss the possibility. Foster always attended the annual Lord Jagannath yatra (Chariot festival) in Bath. Current Liberal Democrat councillors, especially the former Mayor of Bath, Cllr. Paul Crossley, have also been instrumental in making the temple happen.

The temple is the culmination of a twelve-year campaign led by three people in particular —



### Bathed in Glory

- Bath is proud to have two world-class universities—the University of Bath and Bath Spa University. The University of Bath was established in 1966 after receiving the Royal charter and has consistently ranked among the top 150 universities in the world. Bath Spa University got its full university status in 2005, which was previously known as Bath College of Higher Education, and later as Bath Spa University College.
- Apart from world-famous engineering courses, the University of Bath is famous for its flagship MBA and Translation and Interpreting Studies programmes. Simultaneous interpreting has been taught at this university since the day the university came into existence. Even China started teaching courses on Interpreting after establishing diplomatic ties with the USA on 1 January 1979, while India still does not have a single university with a complete focus on ‘Interpreting Studies’ and a full-fledged ‘Interpreting Laboratory or Suits’. The lack of qualified professional interpreters of Indian origin makes the Indian political, military, and business leaders sometimes rely on the Chinese interpreters putting the Indian security issues and related confidential matters in limbo.
- Bath Spa University is known for Grade I listed buildings of the 14th century, and its’ courses on creative writing, religion, music, performing art, and cultural heritage attracting hundreds of overseas students from all the habitable continents. The World Heritage city, which is just 90 minutes’ drive from Heathrow, London—the largest airport in Europe, is proud of Roman & Georgian connections. The author of the world-famous novels which has inspired many blockbuster movies like Sense and Sensibility (1811), Pride and Prejudice (1813), and Mansfield Park (1814) — ‘Juvenilia’ Jane Austin (16 Dec.1775-18 July 1817) also made this town as her abode, after shifting from Steventon village, Hampshire in AD 1800.



Susmita Rajhansh, Ashish Rajhansh and Bath’s first councillor of Indian heritage and the first non-white Deputy Mayor of the city, Dr Yuktेशwar Kumar. Dr Kumar is a well-known Sinologist and a senior academic at the University of Bath, where he is Course Director of the Chinese interpreting and translation programme. He tells me, with evident and warranted pride, that he is the first person of Indian heritage to teach Chinese at any western university.

Dr. Kumar had this to say about Bath’s new temple, “Brilliant people build bridges, buffoons build walls. Temples are the best bridges to be a conduit in connecting communities. Many pseudo-secular people do not realise the significance and importance of a temple. Temples are not only the place of congregation for religious gatherings, but a temple like this is a place where communities from different religions and faith groups can congregate and learn about different cultures, languages, and faiths. Thanks to the huge efforts of many Bathonians over many years, the dreams of hundreds of Hindus in Bath and the surrounding area have come true.”

The temple is currently based temporarily inside a school (Culverhay, then briefly Bath Community Academy) which closed in 2018. The Rajhansh family managed to ship the three idols of Lord Jagannath, his brother Balbhadrā, and his sister Subhadra, all the way from Puri, Odisha, in India. The idols are made from the auspicious Neem tree (*Azadirachta indica* or Indian lilac) while





Mayor and Deputy Mayor of the city of Bath with councillors and Police Commissioner of Avon and Somerset

This temple will not only attract local devotees; people all the way from Liverpool and Leicester have already visited it, and in time to come people from distant European countries will surely pay a visit to the temple.

A senior diplomat from the High Commission of India in London, the Avon and Somerset Police and Crime Commissioner, Mark Shelford, the Mayor & Mayoress of Bath and of course, Dr Kumar and his wife as the Deputy Mayor and Mayoress of the city, along with several councillors were present to witness the idols being lifted to the main sanctum sanctorum.

I leave the last words to Dr Kumar: “In Jagannath tradition, Prasad—a religious offering to the Deities consumed by God in non-physical form and devotees accepting this as a blessing from God—is highly valued. It is said that Lord Jagannath has a very sweet tooth, and sweet foods like Poda Pitha should be offered to him. During the opening

paints on the images are made from organic materials.

As Dr Kumar explained to me, the chief deities of Lord Jagannath in Puri are always constructed from the Neem tree, and they are replaced every 8th, 12th or 19th year, depending on the year that has adhikmasa or an extra month in the Hindu lunar calendar. Everything in this world, Dr Kumar went on, is susceptible to change and decay, and hence replacing the deities’ idols (called ‘Nabakalebar’ in Oriya) has been the tradition of the temple.

Hari Krishna Prasad and his wife Renu Bharati, a long-term resident of Bath, are the principal architects of this temporary temple. Like Ustad Ahmad Lahori, the chief architect of Taj Mahal, Hari and Renu poured their hearts into building this temple, inspiring other Hindu community members to join hands with them. Dr Ganesan Senthil Kumar, who qualified as a doctor from the University of Madras in 1991 and undertook his FRCS qualification in 1999, came to Bath in 2000 and is a renowned orthopaedic surgeon. Despite being extremely busy with his professional work at the hospital during this pandemic, he and dozens of Hindu community members from Bath and the surrounding area sometimes worked till 2 a.m. with Hari to decorate the temple.

The 2021 UK census will soon tell us the exact number of Hindus living in Bath and North-East Somerset. The current estimate is around 1,700.



Priest and Deputy Mayor of Bath

ceremony of the temple, different kinds of sweet foods were offered, and hundreds of devotees had precious prasad, which was made by Shri Anand and Shraddha Gaur, a couple who have also made Bath their home and have been successfully running the best vegetarian Indian restaurant in the city—The Indian Temptation. We hope that this temple will become a golden bridge in connecting communities inside England and peoples from India and England. I also hope and pray that a permanent Lord Jagannath Temple will be constructed soon in the city.” ■



(The author edits and writes articles for an online magazine <https://www.only-connect.co.uk> and runs the Conan Doyle Estate on behalf of the family of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, creator of Sherlock Holmes.)

# THE GLOBAL POLYMATH

*Tagore believed in smooth flow of ideas between the east and the west. Many of his seminal writings and artistic contributions are the products of this extraordinary confluence that defies borders...*

**By Swarnendu Biswas**

O

*n 7th May, Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore's 160th birth anniversary was celebrated in India and elsewhere in the planet, but perhaps not with usual fanfare because of COVID-19 restrictions. The influence of this prolific polymath on the post-modern Indian literature is still very much evident even 80 years after his demise, on 7th August 1941.*

It is common knowledge that he was a poet, novelist, playwright, essayist, composer, philosopher, and educationist all rolled into one. His versatile genius was manifested in varied forms of literature and also in the original music form created by him – Rabindra Sangeet. That was not all. In his late 60s, he began trying his hand at painting, drawing with earnestness, and twenty years later he was already regarded as a celebrated modern Indian painter.

The first Asian Nobel

laureate (in 1913, for his collection of poems titled Gitanjali) was a product of Bengal Renaissance with a pluralistic world view. His seminal writings and other artistic contributions are the products of myriad influences on him, and they, in turn, have influenced successive generations of writers, poets, artists and musicians in India and abroad.

### Short Story Teller

Tagore's literature can be very simply described as a bridge between the nineteenth century Indian literature and the modern Indian literature which began to take shape from 1940s. A bridge you need to cross to get a comprehensive view of the evolution of Indian literature. He can be easily credited with heralding the wave of modern literary trends in India. One of the foremost contributions of Tagore towards Bengali literature was the

developing of the short story format.

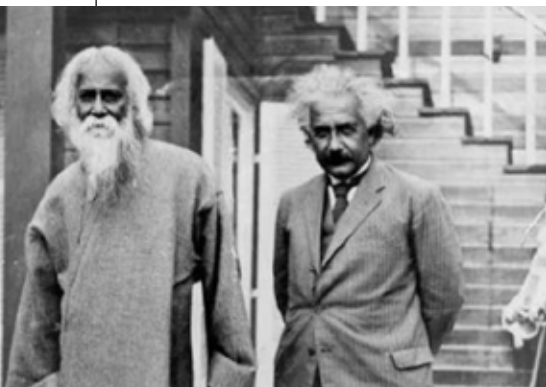
He can be credited for giving birth to short stories in Bengali literature and grooming this literary form from birth to its full blooming youth through his immense literary inputs, from where many other illustrious modern Bengali litterateurs, of course, took the form to its present maturity.

In fact, Tagore as a world class short story writer can be regarded at par with Anton Chekhov, Maupassant and O Henry. It is not sure whether Tagore was inspired by the west in developing the short story format in Bengali literature but it is interesting to note that three of these maestros of short stories began writing their short stories during the same period that is between late 1870s to early 1880s. O Henry began his short literary career of nine years in 1901.

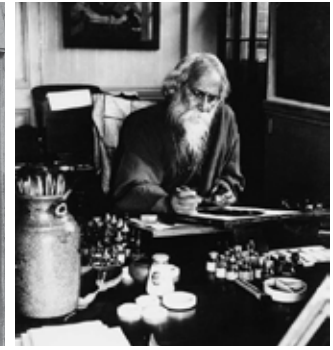
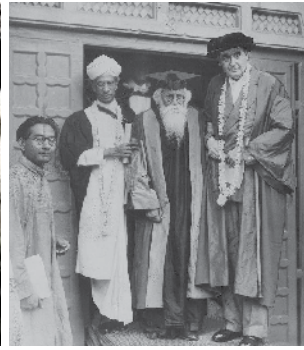
### Feminism and Magical Realism

One can say that thanks to Tagore, short story writing in India was developed and chiseled in the same way as in the west, during more or less the same period. But it can be safely assumed that one of the famous short stories of Tagore titled Streer Patra (The Wife's Letter), which is perhaps the first short story in Bengali literature written in colloquial

Tagore and Albert Einstein



**Tagore was perhaps the first to introduce magical realism and open-ended story telling in Indian literature with his celebrated work Kshudhita Pashan (Hungry Stones)**



Bengali, was inspired by the world renowned drama of Henrik Ibsen titled *Doll's House*.

It is also the first literary work of Tagore with a strong feminist perspective, a stance which he took rarely in his long and illustrious literary career. His female protagonist in the story, Mrinal was etched in far more modernist lines than was then conceivable in Indian literature. The story was written in 1914.

Tagore was perhaps the first to introduce magical realism and open-ended story telling in Indian literature with his celebrated work *Kshudhita Pashan* (*Hungry Stones*). That was almost seven decades before Gabriel Garcia Marquez amazed the literary world with '*One Hundred Years of Solitude*', in 1967, which is perhaps one of the most profound post-modern works of magical realism. Both magical realism and open-ended story telling are among the important elements of western literature. Chekhov can be credited with hugely developing the art of open-ended story telling.

### Evolution of Bengali

Tagore also immensely contributed towards evolving Bengali language and literature to

its present rich and flexible state by removing its rigid shackles, which in turn helped future writers in Bengali literature to flow their thoughts lucidly.

Another Nobel laureate and world renowned economist Amartya Sen while doing a book review in *The New Republic*, said, "In many different ways, Tagore's writings reshaped and reconstructed modern Bengali in a way that only a handful of innovative Bengali writers had done before him, going back all the way, a thousand years earlier, to the authors of *Charyapad*, the Buddhist literary classics that first established the distinctive features of early modern Bengali."

### Multidimensional Characters

Tagore was one of the firsts to introduce nuanced multidimensional characters with grey shades in the realm of twentieth century Indian literature. His writings (especially his novels) often focus more on deep analysis of the characters' mind; their conflicts and turmoil, etc. in the backdrop of complex socio-cultural and socio-economic dynamics rather than the plot or the narrative structure. Tagore's *Gora* and *Ghare*

*Baire* can be construed as apt examples of such a form of literary endeavour.

Similar trend began developing in western literature during the mid to late nineteenth century. In fact, this writer found the narrative structure in his novels to be seldom entertaining and almost never racy; almost always demanding careful, introspective reading.

### Radical Thoughts

The western influence in Tagore's writings was more marked in his later years. In his novel *Sheseher Kobita*, the great literary genius hailed as *Kobigurur*, *Biswakobi* put forward the case for open and simultaneous multiple relationships between man and woman through his protagonist *Amit Roy's* words. In the rigid and conservative India of those times (the book was published in 1929) such a radical thought was seldom discussed in daily life and never in contemporary literature of those times. In *Sesher Kobita*, the influence of western liberal thought is very much pronounced. The book can be regarded as modern in appeal even by the European standards of morality.

Interestingly, in the same year of the publication of *Sesher Kobita*,

eminent philosopher Bertrand Russel's Marriage and Morals, where open marriage is unabashedly advocated and the virtue of sexual fidelity is strongly questioned, created quite a controversy even in the liberal west.

In his short story Laboratory (1941), Tagore even introduced a thoroughly sexually liberated woman protagonist named Sohinee, which clearly indicates



**“Rabindranath was very much influenced by Indian classical music, Bengali folk songs, kirtan and also western classical and folk music”**

influence of western literature and defies the convention of Indian literary trends of those times.

Cigar smoking Neela in the same story also seems to be influenced on western lines and was much

ahead of her times. Such sexually liberated and strongly individualistic woman protagonist is seldom found even in today's Indian literature, which by and large, even today is conformist in its character. However, despite such ambitious attempts, Tagore couldn't handle his women characters with nuance in Laboratory and to this writer the story seems quite contrived, especially in its ending.

### Connecting Thread

Being a true internationalist, Tagore believed in smooth flow of ideas between the east and from



Swagatalakshmi Dasgupta

the west for the growth of humankind. He not only holistically presented India before the west with all its beauty, ugliness, complexities and nuances through his complex and subtle literary creations, but also gave a novel education system to the world through the platform of his experimental school of Santiniketan, which disseminated learning that was far removed from the regimental system of western education.

He wanted to position Santiniketan as a connecting thread between India and the world, and was moderately successful in such praiseworthy attempt.

### Western Musical Influence

The creativity of Tagore is perhaps best manifested through his poetry and Rabindra Sangeet. The latter is a distinct genre of music founded by him. Many of the songs of Rabindra Sangeet genre resonate with universal appeal. Rabindra Sangeet has imbibed varied musical influences, which include influences from Indian classical music, folk music, kirtan, and music from faraway Europe to shape its distinct but diversified musical character.

“Rabindranath was very much influenced by Indian classical music, Bengali folk songs, kirtan and also western classical and folk music,” explains Swagatalakshmi Dasgupta, one of the greatest exponents of Rabindra Sangeet of

our times. Swagatalakshmi is not only a fascinating and soul-stirring singer of Rabindra Sangeet but she has been a distinguished teacher of Rabindra Sangeet for many decades.

According to Swagatalakshmi, who has the unique and astonishing distinction of recording all the 2,232 songs in Tagore's celebrated book of songs titled Gitabitan (her collection of rendition of all the Tagore's songs is termed Ekala Gitabitan), several songs composed by Tagore during 1881-1888 were inspired by western tunes. “Robert Burns's famous Scottish poem and song Auld Lang Syne inspired Rabindranath in creating his famous song Purano Sei Diner Katha; then the world renowned song Ye Banks and Braes (also written by Burns in 1791) inspired him in creating Phool Phool Dhole Dhole”. She goes on to enthusiastically narrate and also sing several more apt examples of western musical inspirations in Rabindra Sangeet while maintaining “In my own opinion, Rabindra Sangeet can be best expressed through piano.”

Thus, we can see that Tagore presented a wonderful synergy of Indian and the modern western traditions in his diversified creative manifestations, which in turn contributed to some extent towards his towering cosmopolitan and global persona. The fact that he kept the windows of his mind open till his last breath helped him to emerge among the very few truly global Indians and a global citizen of his time. ■



A senior journalist and author, Swarnendu is presently working in a Delhi-based publication house. His interests are varied and so are the topics of his writings.

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*"The website [www.crypticsingh.com](http://www.crypticsingh.com) has been created with the intent to providing a junction for the crossword enthusiasts and on-lookers, looking for active participation in different kinds of crosswords – both at competitive and non-competitive levels. the primary objective of this website is to promote crosswords, in black and white, across the board, down the line"*



## EXTRA-C, an endeavour to excel

the underlying objective of extra-C is to promote that missing link which will pave the way for a holistic education system. The immediate impetus for setting up this not-for-profit organisation came in the year 2013 when the world was celebrating the 100th anniversary of the birth of crossword. In the last eight years, the participation and support for the three formats of the game have globally grown beyond expectations. With 'Exhorting Excellence in Extra-curricular Activities' as its motto, Extra-C has conducted crossword and quiz contests for reputed sponsors like NTPC, ONGC, Air India, Coffee Board, Tata Alg, gujarat Maritime Board, Reliance General Insurance, HDFC, State Bank of India and Bihar Foundation among others.



# FIGHTING FOR RECOVERY

**The second wave of COVID-19** has battered the Indian economy, but there is a glimmer of hope that it will gradually tide over the gloom

By Shashi Kumar Jha



C

COVID-19 has delivered a debilitating blow to all spheres of economic activity not only in India but all over the world. The economy of more than 100 countries plummeted so low that they had to beg for help from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Apparently, the Indian economy has not been an exception to this worrisome trend. The coronavirus has severely dented economic activities in the country. As a result, India is facing the spectre of huge slump in government revenue and sources of income for at least two quarters.

The decline in investor sentiment has adversely affected public and private sector. Factories, restaurants, pubs, markets, flights, super markets, malls, universities, colleges have all come to a screeching halt. Supply chains are stalled around the world and this has negatively impacted various levels of supplier network.

Due to lack of demand, online companies like Amazon too are facing downturn in business. The fear of Corona also makes people afraid to step out of their homes. The

demand side has been hit hard by the lockdown and other containment measures. Economic activities have been derailed even with lakhs of labourers forced to return to their homes in desperation. Shadow of global recession is looming large over the horizon.

During the first wave of Corona last year, the lack of vaccines required the government to pay more attention to livelihoods and lives than to economic activities. In the unexpected and unprecedented second wave of COVID-19, infections and mortality rate spread so fast that despite launching an all-out vaccination drive, the government had to struggle hard to contain the COVID resurgence that obviously had a damaging impact on the economy.

Even though there are now signs of some decrease in the fury of the contagion, there are two dangers due to which the path of economic recovery can be prolonged further. The first pertains to the regional impact of the pandemic, due to which the states of Haryana, West Bengal, Karnataka, Goa may have extended periods of lockdown which can have an overall impact on the pace of economic recovery. The other big concern is the lack of vaccines and the slow pace of



vaccination. As a matter of fact, until a large number of the working class gets vaccinated, the threat of the virus will continue to hover over the economy.

The tragedy is that India had not yet completely overcome the economic hiccups of the first wave of Coronavirus, and the second wave has badly shaken the fabric of the economy. It is an uphill task to provide monetary assistance to small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and helping countless families overcome the financial crisis. Much will depend on how companies recover from it and resume their economic activities, and most importantly when the nation begins to unlock.

“As a matter of fact, until a large number of the working class gets vaccinated, the threat of the virus will continue to hover over the economy”

More than that, it will depend on how much Government of India pays attention to public expenditure and how earnest it is to infuse life in the economy to enable it to recover from recession

## Industry calls for urgent steps to boost demand

- The Overall Business Confidence Index nosedived and stood at 51.5 in the latest round of FICCI's Business Confidence Survey after reporting a decadal high value of 74.2 in the previous round. Worsening current conditions as well as muted expectations about the near-term prospects on the back of a sweeping second wave of coronavirus infections pulled down the overall index value by over 20 points.
- The survey was conducted during the months of April/May 2021 and gauges expectations of the respondents for the period April to September 2021. The survey covers participants belonging to a wide array of sectors.
- Survey participants unanimously felt that the government must, first and foremost, focus on controlling COVID cases. They said that only a massive vaccination drive could save India's economy from another pandemic induced shock. While the government has fast tracked approval process of many authorized vaccines, ensuring adequate availability will be of utmost importance.
- Apart from this, a majority of the participating companies called for extension of the moratorium on loans, principal and interest payments, for at least another six months. Participants emphasized on the need for a stable interest rate regime for about 12-18 months. They also recommended that the RBI must continue with being accommodative till sustainable normalcy returns to the system.
- On the fiscal side, companies unanimously felt the need for another fiscal package, focusing majorly on addressing the demand side. Demand boosting measures such as direct income support to rural as well as urban poor, income tax reductions for the middle class and temporary reductions in indirect taxes must be urgently considered.
- Respondents also highlighted the need for continuation of liquidity support and credit enhancement measures to MSMEs as announced in the previous year. They called for targeted fiscal support - in the form of tax waiver and financial assistance - to sectors that were previously kept out of the stimulus package but were deeply impacted by it (including travel, tourism, hotels & hospitality and civil aviation).
- Lastly, a majority of the respondents felt that frontloading capital expenditure, by both central and state governments, was the need of the hour as this would greatly build and sustain market sentiments and demand.

order to restore the confidence of not only investors but also various sectors of the economy. It will have to first of all try to get the vaccination drive done on a war footing as the people who have been vaccinated will play an important role in reducing the negative impact of COVID-19 on the



GDP.

India has been in a very strong position in the world in the field of technology and manufacturing and it is time that it should take the benefits of this expertise to the common people and assure them of the government's efforts to wriggle them out of the crisis. Simplified funding facilities, hassle-free land acquisition for large projects and new business investments, flexible and supportive bureaucratic approach, administrative transparency etc. can prove to be quite helpful in achieving this goal.

Of course, the Government had taken a number of steps last year to tackle the economic crisis, from food security to healthcare and additional funds for states, sector-related incentives and raising the threshold of tax deadlines. Now, most experts are anticipating substantial economic restructuring in the wake of COVID 2.0. Perhaps things will start rolling soon with the end of lockdown and the announcement of an immediate stimulus package for the most affected sectors, small businesses and self-employed people. Due to the shutdown in retail outlets, factory production was affected for some product categories due to which the economic activity in the country has been sluggish during April/May as reflected in the decrease in energy, electricity and oil consumption levels. The Government needs to keep this in mind and open





industrial activities slowly and strengthen the supply chain.

There are some encouraging signs on the agricultural front, whose good position can limit inflationary risks and play a role in strengthening the rural economy. The unorganized sector (SMEs and self-employment) has had to bear the most severe impact of this entire pandemic and consequent lockdown. So, this sector needs to be given the highest priority through loans/guarantees etc which will start to bring about an overall change in economic sentiment.

The potential of relief on the economic front is linked to the possibility of positive growth in the country's gross domestic product (GDP) for the second consecutive time in the fourth quarter of FY 2020-21. Although according to the research report of State Bank of India, there was a decline in both deposits and loan portfolios of all banks in April/May, there is a positive change in the trend of deposits. The State Bank of India research report and assessment of Investment Information and Credit Rating Agency (ICRA) point towards positive GDP growth beginning with the March quarter. According to Aditi Nair, Chief Economist, ICRA, "The GVA (Gross Value Added) rate will be higher than the GDP (GDP) growth in the March quarter. We believe that GVA's performance in the fourth quarter will be a meaningful indicator of an improvement in the economy."

“ Most experts are anticipating substantial economic restructuring in the wake of COVID 2.0 ”

A recent UN report has also boosted this estimate according to which the Indian economy will grow at a rate of five per cent in 2021. Reserve Bank of India Governor Shaktikanta Das too has underlined that financial markets are gaining ground on account of optimism surrounding the vaccination programme. According to him, the manufacturing sector now faces very few bottlenecks, and consumption demand has also started picking up.

So, there is grim battle ahead, but that's no reason to give up. ■



(The author is a senior journalist & columnist, who has worked with Dainik Hindustan & Business Bhaskar and later as consultant to various Central ministries)

# SAGA OF MONUMENTAL MISMANAGEMENT

**India's flawed response to the second wave of COVID** *was not only due to the deficient healthcare infrastructure, but also equally due to lack of application of mind and total regulatory mismanagement. As much, if not more, devastation was carried out by fear, misinformation and panic.*

By Dr O P Yadava

**E**normous human suffering and travails, and the macabre dance of death unfolded on the planet for the last one year. Just when the political masters in the country were turning 'Vishwa Gurus' and extolling the Indian success story in the control of COVID-19, the reality was brought home with telling effect.

### What went wrong?

The newly created infrastructure for control of the first wave of the pandemic was dismantled and all caution thrown to the wind in organising mass events like Kumbh Mela. Thus, failure of adequate response to the second wave of COVID was not only due to the deficient healthcare infrastructure, but also equally, due to lack of application of mind and total regulatory mismanagement. As much, if not more, devastation was carried out by fear, misinformation and panic. There was lack of cohesion between various regulatory bodies and between the Centre and the states leading to problems related to provisioning of beds, oxygen and vital drugs. There were no standard protocols for treatment and there was no-holds barred misuse of drugs, specially antivirals, steroids and antibiotics. Vaccine policy, pricing, sourcing and dispensing







“ There was lack of cohesion between various regulatory bodies and between the Centre and the states leading to problems related to provisioning of beds, oxygen and vital drugs.”

were contentious, leading to hesitancy in rolling out the programme on the government’s part and participating actively on the part of general public. All put together – a sure-shot potpourri of disaster.

### Looking ahead

No point in crying over spilt milk, and arguing about it, splitting hairs. Its time now to move forwards and a few suggested measures are:

1. Government should have reliable, authentic, transparent and single window release of information and statistics, which are currently being obfuscated and even manipulated, besides being confusing. You cannot fix a thing, unless you accept it is broken. Even if the reality is gory, let us reveal it, accept it, own it up and look at means to mitigate the consequences. COVID Task Force must be led and steered by Public Health Experts. COVID response should be based on recommendations of professionals and science, rather than political expediency (e.g. conduct of

elections, Kumbh mela etc).

2. There is a major crisis of manpower. A lot of healthcare personnel, some out of disease and disability and others out of fear, are absenting from work. A sizeable number of young nurses, who came from South and North-East states, have been recalled by their families and, therefore, there is an acute shortage of healthcare work-force all round.

Human resources, therefore, need to be augmented and one would have to rethink on not just having highly qualified doctors, but even a basic intermediary work force, which can be flexible and versatile to serve as a paramedic-cum-medic – something akin to what the Britishers did in the Army, wherein an intermediary cadre of Junior Commissioned Officers (JCOs) was created to act as a buffer between the British officers and the Indian soldiers. This multi-purpose intermediary force can be used during normal times in vaccination drives, delivery of maternal and child health services or even carrying out surveys and such other sundry jobs, but they can double-up during major calamities and provide basic medical services. On short term basis, ruling should be issued to empower the interns to work as doctors and final-year nursing students as nurses during this period of the pandemic. So an official formal policy of healthcare human resource mobilisation and utilisation will have to be drawn



and CHC 1, 71,779 population, which is worse than the planned norms, still this may be acceptable, only if these centres were working in sync with their projected norms and ideals.

Health is a 'state' subject and the budgets allocated for the primary healthcare barely meets the salary bill of even these depleted and deficient medical and paramedical personnel. There is gross, and in fact, I may like to call it criminal, misuse and disuse of even the available resources. For example, in Base Hospital, Almora in Uttarakhand, 2D Echocardiography machine, ventilators, etc were procured, but never used even on an anecdotal patient. Amazing amount of funding is received from international sources and from central government towards bulk purchase of some of these resources for primary healthcare, but staff posted there have neither the technical know-how, nor the willingness and drive to use these facilities. They are either busy doing illegal and unethical private practice or simply exemplify nonchalance, inertia and apathy, typically

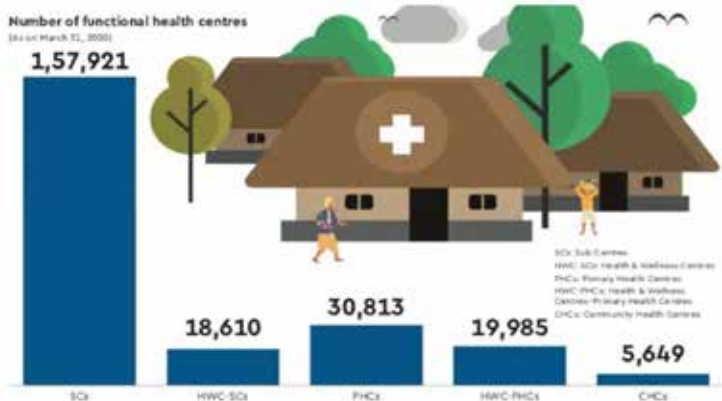
and is the need of the hour.

3. The dichotomy of 'haves' and 'have nots', and the spectrum of contrasting healthcare infrastructure landscape, is nowhere better exemplified than in India. On one end are the sparklingly opulent and gilded tertiary care facilities in metropolitan cities, and on the other side are dilapidated and ramshackle primary care facilities in the rural areas – former an offshoot of privatisation and capitalism, and latter a grim reminder of the grossly corrupt, inefficient and indifferent governance of the political masters and policy makers.

A lot of ink has been spilt on the three 'As' of healthcare viz. availability, accessibility and affordability. Though some success has been achieved under the National Rural Health Mission to improve on these parameters, yet it leaves much to be desired.

Arguably, India has one of the most exhaustive and extensive physical basic healthcare infrastructure for delivery of primary healthcare in the world (Fig.1), but it is dysfunctional in terms of human (Fig.2) and fiscal resources. Ideally, a sub centre (SC) should be serving 5,000 population, a Primary Health Centre (PHC) 30,000 and a Community Health Centre (CHC) 1, 20,000 in 'general areas' of the country.

Even though a recent Rural Health Survey showed that the rural SC serves 5,729, PHC 35,730



attendant to a fixed income government job.

Another bugbear of primary healthcare is absent civic infrastructure in rural areas. The staff posted in these peripheral areas must have adequate facilities for their welfare in terms of educational facilities for their children and overall a basic standard of quality of life with sanitation and recreational facilities. In that sense, it becomes a chicken and egg situation, as better healthcare would lead to improved social determinants, which will, in turn, further improve the healthcare delivery, and the vicious positive feedback loop.

4. The pandemic exposed the grossly inadequate and dysfunctional governmental health infrastructure. A major part of COVID pandemic burden has been borne by the private sector – either at the family physician clinics as first responders, or by the secondary and tertiary care hospitals all over country. The government would

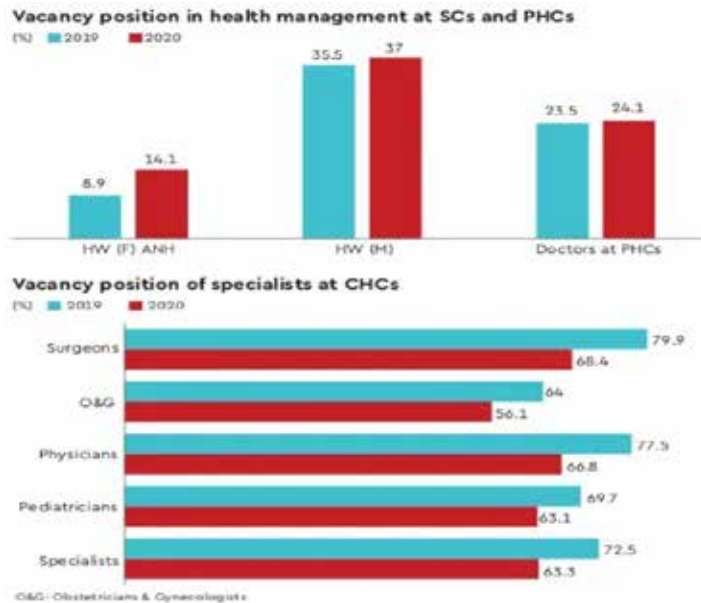


Fig.2: Human Resources in Primary Healthcare in India



probably realise and appreciate this reality and should invest in a healthier relationship and engagement with the private sector under the PPP model. The government may even consider outsourcing some of the PHCs to private players, allowing a nominal and ethical profit margin of around 10 per cent.

5. This pandemic should come as an eye-opener and calls for increased spending on healthcare, especially developing a functional and effective primary healthcare system in India. The current spending of 1.6% of GDP on health, needs to be increased serially to at least 5-7 per cent. This spending is usually not seen as productive by certain ill-informed policymakers, as most benefits of better healthcare are intangible. However, one can still monetize these benefits if one looks at lost DALYs (Disability adjusted life years) and factor in increased productivity of a happy, healthy and content mind. Further, currently the government plays all the 3 roles – of the ‘Provider’, ‘Payer’ and the ‘Regulator’ of healthcare. It must gradually withdraw from the former role, especially for delivery of tertiary care services, and must keep itself confined only to the primary healthcare delivery. However, it may continue its role as ‘Payer’ and ‘Regulator’, albeit with transparency, efficiency and effectiveness.

And to bring up the rear, no matter how great an infrastructure government may create, if sensible, and in fact, just commonsensical policies are not implemented, then all the infrastructure will come to naught. A glaring example is advent of a slew of new medical colleges, where an inadequate infrastructure and a poorly trained

team of teachers, impart knowledge to an otherwise uninterested, financially backed group of students, who in turn use this very inadequate knowledge and poor clinical judgement to deliver poor quality and unethical healthcare, all at the cost of the patient! We must not compromise quality at the altar of quantity – former must reign supreme.

Even hospital designing and architecture need a relook. Hospitals need to be designed with flexibility and with collapsible walls so that they can be repurposed for meeting various natural calamities and sundry challenges. Hospitals need to have lateral integration, rather than working as vertical silos.

6. Corona pandemic has highlighted the lack of a formal supply chain for vital drugs, oxygen and equipment like oxygen concentrators, nebulizers, BIPAP machines etc. The borders have again become sacrosanct between nations and even within the country, from one region to the other. Centralisation of power and authority and relegation of responsibility to states under the garb of federalism is a flawed policy, bringing in its wake untold suffering to the humanity. Therefore, this derailed Centre-State relationships must be brought back on track in an organically functional manner, based ‘on needs and resources’ rather than ‘ideologies’ and ‘political dispensations’.

Even though India has been the pharmacy of the world, we lack adequate infrastructure to indigenously produce the basic active pharmaceutical ingredients (APIs), thus hampering our own manufacturing of life-saving



“ I foresee positive things going forwards. COVID-appropriate behaviour and sensitization of the population at large towards hygiene and sanitation may bring collateral benefits... ”

drugs. Therefore, India will have to take the path to ‘Atmanirbhar Bharat’ in letter and spirit and there should be more focus on the development of local supply chains with more manufacturing of high-end products. This may need a systemic push by the government, besides the active participation of the private players.

7. Planners and policy-makers must also spare a thought for non-COVID diseases, which seem to have taken a back seat. There is a total neglect of other communicable diseases like malaria, tuberculosis, measles, HIV/AIDS etc. Their control programmes should not lose their focus. Even control of non-communicable diseases like malignancy and atherosclerosis needs due attention, because a lot of patients of early malignancy, and candidates for curative therapies, are not getting timely attention and their cancer is likely to spread and become incurable. Even inadequate control of diabetes, hypertension, weight, lack of exercise etc may add to the burden of non-communicable diseases. This, combined with the direct effects of COVID on the heart and the lungs, leading to heart failure and fibrosis of the lungs respectively, may add to the pool of people, who may need mechanical circulatory support devices or even heart and lung transplantation in times to come. One should cater for such futuristic needs also.

8. Miscellaneous issues, like the psychological impact of the pandemic on the healthcare work force, as well as on the general population, in form of increased anxiety, depression, suicidal tendencies and other associated psychological

issues may need focused attention.

The government also needs to target socio-economic determinants of health, more so in a developing country like India. The animal-human interface in the periphery of jungles and villages is getting constricted as human activity, in the garb of development, is extending into the total animal territory in the jungles, with cutting down of trees for cultivation or fire-wood etc. In one estimate, almost 3,500 zoonotic viruses are capable of infecting human beings as there is more and more human-animal contact. Therefore pandemics are not going to be one-off affair, but unfortunately we are going to see more and more of these in times to come.

Lest you label me a misanthropic and cynical pessimist, let me change gears. On the flip side of all the foregoing, I foresee positive things going forwards. COVID-appropriate behaviour and sensitization of the population at large towards hygiene and sanitation may bring collateral benefits, in terms of behavioural changes, translating into less number of infective respiratory and gastrointestinal problems. There will be, in all probability, increased empowerment of patients, wider insurance coverage, sensitization of government towards creating a better healthcare infrastructure, more focus on preventive and health-appropriate behaviour, increased telephony based delivery of healthcare and integration of clinical decision support systems in day-to-day patient care.

All this may sound music to the ears, but ultimately the buck starts and stops at the society – ‘you’ and ‘me’. Unless we take ‘Our Health’ in ‘Our Hands’, we shall not succeed, either in meeting the Corona pandemic, or for that matter any other challenge in life. Total dependence on governments and ‘sil vois plait’ attitude of masses would be fatalistic.

God save the king, should such a day see light. ■



(The author is CEO & Chief Cardiac Surgeon National Heart Institute, New Delhi)



## PATH BEYOND PANDEMICS

**If India has to successfully overcome any healthcare emergency, we need a pre-emptive, comprehensive, well-coordinated and holistic healthcare at all levels – primary, secondary and tertiary care. Healthcare system of the country needs to be regulated by Clinical Establishments Act in letter and spirit.**

**By Dr Jagdish Prasad**

**T**

he first case of coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19) in India was reported on January 30, 2020. Countrywide lockdown was announced on March 25, 2020 due to upsurge in pandemic cases. By May 2020, five cities (Mumbai, Delhi, Ahmedabad, Chennai and Thane) accounted for half of the cases. Infection rate started to drop from mid-September 2020 along with the number of new and active cases. In September 2020, new cases per day were 90,000 and by January 2021, it dropped down to 15,000.

### **Ignoring the signals**

In several countries like UK and Brazil, a second wave had already come and the same was expected to hit India. Also, there was a report of mutation of viruses at different places in the country. We probably ignored the earlier warnings and naturally there was no preparedness in India. It was assumed that we have beaten COVID-19 due to decreasing cases in the last few months. It was also assumed that herd immunity has been achieved although only 21% of population was assumed to have antibodies against COVID-19 as per ICMR report. Herd immunity is considered when a certain percentage of people becomes immune to infection either by





getting the infection or by vaccination. What is the magic figure for herd immunity is not well defined and how long this immunity will last is also not known. Ideally, we will achieve herd immunity as more people around the world receive vaccination that will confer lasting immunity.

**Reasons for intensification of second wave**

There was a sudden exponential rise in new COVID-19 cases from March 2021 marking the onset of second wave, which can be seen as such: March 19, 2021: 40953; March 29, 2021: 56211; April 4, 2021: 100358; April 14, 2021: 200739; April 21, 2021: 314835; and May 7, 2021: about 462000.

The main reasons for increasing COVID-19 cases were the lack of appropriate behaviour among the general population. Proper types of facemasks were not used, sanitation, hygiene and social distancing were not followed strictly. The government also allowed religious congregation and lakhs and lakhs of people from different parts of the country to assemble with abandon. Massive political/election rallies were held defying COVID-19 protocol. Although there were elections in Delhi, Maharashtra, Punjab and Karnataka, people’s migration to these states from such religious gatherings and election rallies also ended up in reporting soaring Covid-19 cases in these states.

Besides, virus mutations were well reported in



**DISSECTING THE VIRUS**

COVID-19 is an infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. The World Health Organization first learnt of this new virus on December 31, 2019 following report of viral pneumonia in a Wuhan cluster in Peoples Republic of China. The virus spreads via close inter-personal contact. This happens to people who are in close contact with an infected person.

Airborne transmission via aerosol formation is considered the most common mode of transmission. It is usually transmitted through droplet infection. An asymptomatic person infected with coronavirus may produce aerosols while they talk, breath, cough or sneeze. Aerosols are infected particles that can float and stay airborne for 3 to 4 hours. The virus can also contaminate surfaces and can be transmitted by touching with hand and then by touching their nose, mouth or eyes. The risk of aerosol transmission with contaminated surface is low and so is the case with faecal or vaginal, anal or oral intercourse route.

the last few months. Several new variants of the virus have been found to be circulating in the Indian population. Some virus variants with greater transmission like B.1.617 were first found in Maharashtra’s Vidarbha. Mumbai saw rising coronavirus cases largely due to re-opening of local trains since February 2021, whereas Vidarbha probably had it because of B.1.167 variant. Another variant of virus, N440K, was found in Kerala which was not the reason for the rise in cases. In Punjab and Haryana, the UK variant was found in more than 80% of cases.

**The way out of the crisis**

Immediate measures are required to be taken to reduce the transmission of SARS-Cov-2 virus. One option is complete lockdown of the whole country for a considerable time with a livelihood plan for the poor people — such as labourers, migrant workers, daily wage workers, etc — who are dependent upon daily earning for their



“ This pandemic should come as an eye-opener and calls for increased spending on healthcare, especially developing a functional and effective primary healthcare system in India. ”

livelihood. The Union and state government together should take the responsibility for their livelihoods. People must be explained as to what's happening and what is required to control this pandemic. All religious places and festivals involving mass gatherings should be stopped immediately to prevent mass transmission. No political rallies should be permitted till majority of the people are vaccinated.

The Government should implement the vaccination program and take it to the logical conclusion. According to Centre for Disease Control (CDC), USA all those, who have been vaccinated, are not only protected from the infection but they are also less likely to infect others. Vaccination should be done in campaign mode, not just in urban but also in rural population which consist 70% of our country's population.

More affected districts should be prioritised. The Government of India already has a system in place whereby local and primary health centres take care of Universal Immunization Programme (UIP). The same health centres can be utilised for the COVID vaccination.

Our medical scientists/expert groups should perform genome sequencing and do its detailed analysis to understand and figure out the order of DNA nucleotides, or bases, in a genome to trace, track and control emerging and more transmissible SARS CoV-2 mutant variants.

Masks, social distancing, restricting mass gathering, voluntary quarantine and testing should be implemented universally. N95 masks and other masks, made of two or more layers of washable and breathable fabrics may be promoted to be used. People must ensure that they use the masks that completely cover the nose and mouth and fit snugly, so that face is completely covered leaving no gaps. Surgical masks should be preferred by those serving and catering to COVID-19 patients. There should be proper provision of air circulation while using air conditioning rooms for COVID-19 patients.

People should be allowed to travel only after they have taken vaccine doses. The vaccinated population should not require to undergo COVID testing before and after travel and need not be quarantined unless specifically required by the local and state administrations. Any unvaccinated person travelling should be tested for COVID-19 before and after traveling and they should be quarantined for 10 days post travel. Once infected patients recover, then they may develop immunity but the duration of immunity is not known. At present, it is recommended that everyone who has



been vaccinated or who has been infected should continue to wear mask, practise physical distancing and avoid visiting crowded places.

There has been an increasing number of COVID-19 patients in rural areas. Gram Panchayats must be involved to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic. Mobile vans equipped with testing facility and medical health kits should be made available at village levels. Families in villages having COVID positive members should be provided with kits consisting of essential medicines and oximeters. It is important that health volunteers must be sensitized to know the oxygen level to understand the severity of infections. For this purpose, ASHA, Anganwadi and auxiliary nurse midwife (ANMs) workers must be involved.

Besides the above measures, adequate supply of oxygen, medical kits for COVID-19, medicine, medical and paramedical staffs, sufficient hospital beds and ICU beds with ventilators should be arranged on a priority basis.

Before discussing the long-term plan for health system, it is necessary to understand the importance of health for a nation. Healthcare is a pre-requisite for peace, stability and security of the country. It would not be a wrong to state that wealth of a nation lies in the health of the nation. Its importance was realised long back by our Constitution's authors and architects of the nation. Though our Constitution has put 'health' under a State subject but there are aspects of health that fall under the Union and Concurrent lists. A healthy individual is an asset to the community while a sick person is a liability. Health is as important as Defence to secure the nation. Defence investment can provide political security while

investments in healthcare would provide economic as well as political security. So, it makes a compelling case for policy makers and politicians to invest in better health care.

Our Union and state governments are cumulatively spending a paltry 1.7 to 1.8 % of GDP whereas USA and UK spend nearly 17% and 9.4% on health respectively. So, time has come that the Union government increases its budgetary allocation for Health sector and mandatorily spends to the tune of at least 5% of GDP till the gap in health system is plugged.

To attain the WHO's goal of 'Health for All', we not only need water, nutrition, sanitation, health awareness and a stable source of income but also a system that not only treats the diseases but also prevents them early. We need a pre-emptive, comprehensive, holistic, and coordinated healthcare approach at primary, secondary and tertiary levels. Health system of the country needs to be regulated by Clinical Establishment Act in letter and spirit.

As we stand at crossroads, India needs a radical change in its approach. We need to go beyond disease control to population's health. It means revolutionary change in our thinking and approach. It's time to make revolutionary innovations in healthcare system. ■



(The author is ex-DG, Health Services, Government of India)



## FROM LAB TO JAB

**India rolled out the world's largest vaccination drive on January 16 against COVID-19. A close look at the headway made in the development of vaccines, and the ground that still remains to be covered...**

**By Alok Srivastava**

**I**

It was somewhere in early December 2019 that the first case of coronavirus was reported from Wuhan city of China. Ever since the focus of the entire world has changed from thriving to surviving. From schools to offices and from marketplaces to vacation destinations, every activity had come to a standstill. In such a dire situation, every vaccine developed is like a Marvel comics superhero that will defeat one of the biggest villains of humanity, the coronavirus. The world has started feeling the cooling effect of an alcohol swipe before getting pricked by a vaccine jab.

On 9th November, 2020, Pfizer and BioNTech, two firms working as partners announced the successful trial of the vaccine that proved 90% effective. Vaccines in the past have taken years to be declared successful. The polio vaccine launched in 1955 had to wait for 20 long years before getting clearance from the American authorities. Isolating the measles virus in 1954 took nine long years before it got its approval. The medical fraternity comprising researchers and doctors needs to be congratulated to come out with a vaccine in less than a year.

### The players in the vaccine market



other.

Currently, nine vaccines have been approved in one country or the other. People in America are being vaccinated by the jab produced by Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna, an American Biotech firm. Britain and Europe are vaccinating their citizens by AstraZeneca (Covishield in India). Russia has its own vaccine Sputnik V that has made an entry in India through a tie-up with Dr Reddy's Lab. China has vaccinated its population by Sinovac Biotech. Johnson and Johnson has also announced a single-dose vaccine that has got the WHO approval and is currently available in the USA market.

Coming to India, the Serum Institute Pune, under a licensing agreement with AstraZeneca, is producing Covishield. The vaccine is supposed to be taken in 2 doses with a gap of 12-16 weeks (earlier the recommended interval was 6-8 weeks). Joining the league in India is Bharat Biotech's Covaxin that has demonstrated 100% efficacy against severe SARS-CoV-2 infection. It has yet to receive the WHO's emergency approval but is expecting the same between July and September. The vaccine is given in two doses at an interval of 4-6 weeks.





**The virus variants**

As the virus spreads, it multiplies. When a virus replicates or makes copies of itself, it sometimes changes a little bit. It's like you are photocopying a paper to share it with your friend. He again photocopies it to distribute it further. In the process one of the photocopying machines that has a defective lens converts an H into two I I's with the central line missing. All the subsequent photocopies will reflect two I I's instead of H. The vaccine that has been taught to read H will find it difficult to read two I I's and thus become ineffective.

In the last year, several variants of coronavirus have emerged. The one currently in the UK known as B.1.1.7 spreads more easily. The South African variant called B.1.351 has worried the scientists as it is considered to be the least responsive to existing vaccines. Brazil has a variant called P.1 while the New York one is called B.1. 526. The Indian strain what is being called B.1.1617 is a double mutant meaning that it had two key



mutations.

**How does the vaccine work?**

This is the tricky part to explain. Most of the vaccines till now were based on the technology of introducing a weakened strain of the virus in the human body. The normal virus particles were inactivated so that they don't multiply in the body and injected in form of a vaccine. The Immune system of the body immediately recognises the foreign body and attacks it by producing a lot of antibodies. An immunised person can resist the virus attack with a huge army of antibodies.

In the case of SARS-COV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, the genetic material was published by scientists on 10th January, 2020. The vaccine researchers were able to single out the gene responsible for the spike protein with which the virus membrane is studded. It's these spikes that get attached to the human cell and infect them.

**Vaccines based on the mRNA technology**

The mRNA vaccines are based on messenger RNA technology. In this technology, instead of using a weakened strain of the COVID virus, sequences of genetic material called mRNA are





injected into the body in tiny capsules made of lipids. The mRNA is a synthetic genetic material that provides the human cell with recipes to make proteins. After immunisation, the body cells churn out copies of the coronavirus spike protein that alerts the immune system and stimulates it to attack the real virus. The Pfizer and Moderna vaccines are based on mRNA technology.

### Vaccines based on the weakened strain of the virus

The vaccines produced by AstraZeneca and J&J use a version of the spike gene that piggy rides on a harmless adenovirus found in monkeys. When the resultant virus infects the human cells, it makes them produce spike proteins that attract the attention of the human immune system. The Bharat Biotech's Covaxin, the Chinese Sinovac, and Russia's Sputnik-V vaccine are all based on weakened strain technology.

### Why the delay in Vaccines?

Making a vaccine is a complicated process. The Pfizer vaccine involves 280 components from 86 suppliers in 19 countries. Even a delay of a couple of components leads to a delay in vaccine production. The recent American export controls have harmed European vaccine companies which need special bags from America in which to make their product. At a vaccine supply chain meeting in March, one of the firms complained of 66-week delivery times for the supply of bags.

Making a batch of vaccines can take between 60-180 days. A disruption in raw materials, packing materials, and other important ingredients may delay the vaccine-making process by few months.

The Serum Institute of India's Head Adar Poonawalla recently requested President Joe Biden to lift sanctions on exports of raw materials.

Biden administration on 5th Feb implemented a law dating from the 1950s called the Defence Production Act (DPA). The Act ensures that the American pharma companies don't run short on raw materials needed to make vaccines. As a result, American companies making raw materials couldn't export them to other countries from Europe to India. On request of the Indian government, the Biden administration gave a one-time waiver. If the supply chains work well and if raw materials are available freely, the world can produce 14 billion doses of vaccine this year.

A part of the responsibility for vaccine shortage in India has to be shared by the health administration that failed to see the second wave coming and ordered vaccines in a much shorter quantity. But with the manufacturers ramping up production, India will soon see enough vaccines for everybody in the next couple of months.

### Are vaccines safe for kids?

People across the country from the common man to the government officials are apprehensive about a third wave that may impact children this time. The current vaccination drive covers 18-44 age groups and beyond but what about children aged 12+.

The US Food and Drug Administration has amended Pfizer-BioNTech's emergency use authorisation to expand the use of its vaccine in the 12-15 age group. A study on 2000 adolescents in the USA showed that the vaccine was safe and effective. Taking a cue, the European Medicines Agency, EMA on Friday, 28th May recommended the use of the vaccine made by Pfizer and BioNTech to be expanded to children of the ages 12-15 years.

As the vaccination drive accelerates, vaccines of all makes will be cleared by authorities of the respective countries after successful trials. Inoculating children is considered a critical step towards reaching herd immunity and taming the pandemic. It's only immunisation that will help the schools get back their students once again. And, its immunisation that will see the world get back on its toes. ■



(The author, who served as president, *Outlook*, is now a full-time blogger and into creative writing)



2,89,09,975 INFECTED,  
2,71,59,180 RECOVERED,  
3,49,186, DEAD,  
23.27 CRORE VACCINATED  
ON JUNE 7

**By Parsa Venkateshwar Rao Jr**

**W**

hen Union Minister for Health and Family Welfare made a suo motu statement about Covid-19 in the Lok Sabha on February 10, 2020, there were just three cases in India, all from Wuhan, and the three travelled to Kerala, where they were quarantined, they got well and went home. But the country had to take other precautions and prepare itself for the pandemic. Dr Vardhan told the House: “The ever increasing magnitude of this outbreak calls for a concerted effort not only by health but all sectors of Government.

Government of India has initiated a series of action to prevent entry of the

disease and contain it.” One of the things was to screen passengers coming from Singapore, Thailand, Hong Kong, and China at the airports. Vardhan said, “As of today, a total of 1818 flights have been screened covering a total of 1,97,192 passengers.” And the screening of passengers had begun on January 18. The minister had also informed that on January 31 and February 1, Air India flights airlifted 647 Indians and seven Maldivians had been airlifted from Wuhan, which was placed under a lockdown, and brought to Delhi and they had been quarantined in special camps at Manesar set



“ This pandemic should come as an eye-opener and calls for increased spending on healthcare, especially developing a functional and effective primary healthcare system in India. ”

up by the Indian Army and at Chawla camp set up by Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP).

By the time, Dr Vardhan had made the statement, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had set up a committee of Group of Ministers on February 3, headed by the Health Minister and comprising the ministers of civil aviation, external affairs, minister of state for home, minister of state for health and family welfare, and minister of state for shipping. The first meeting of the GoM was held the same day. At the third meeting held on March 3, the GoM was told that 5,57,431 passengers were screened at the airport and 12,431 at seaports.

On March 15, Prime Minister Modi addressed a South Association of Regional Cooperation (Saarc), and informed that India had been proactive, and it has set in place protocols like

screening people coming into India and of evacuating Indians struck in other countries. He said, “We fully recognize that we are still in an unknown situation. We cannot predict with certainty how the situation will unfold despite our best efforts.

The prime minister declared a national lockdown of 15 days starting from March 25. On April 1, there were 1673 confirmed cases and 38 deaths. On May 1, this number grew to around 32,000 cases because the PIB release for May 1, 2020 says, “So far, 8888 people have been cured. This takes our total recovery rate to 25.37 per cent.” On June 1, 2020, the PIB release says, “Thus so far, a total of 91,818 patients have been cured of Covid-19. The recovery rate in the country is progressively increasing and has reached 48.19 per cent amongst Covid-19 patients. The recovery rate on 18th May was 38.29 per cent. On 3rd May it was 26.59 per cent. On 15th April it was 11.42 per cent.” Then the press release goes on to say, “Presently there are 93,322 active cases in the country which are under active medical supervision.”

On Jul 1, the cumulative figure for cured people stood at 3,47,978, and recovery rate was 59.43 per cent. And the press release says, “Presently there are 2,20,114 active cases and all are under medical supervision.” And on August 1, 2020, the PIB release gives a clear graphic of





the Covid-19 numbers: 16,95,988 confirmed cases, 10,94,374 recovered, and 36,511 deaths. On September 1, 2020, the Covid-19 numbers rose dramatically: 36,91,166 confirmed cases; 28,39,882 recovered; 65,288 dead. And on October 1, 2020, the numbers were: 97,40,705; recovered cases: 52,73,201. The PIB release avoided mentioning the cumulative figure of those who died on this date. On November 1, the cumulative recovered cases were 74,91,513.

It is in December 2020 that the total number of Covid-19 infections crosses 10 million or one crore. The exact figure was 1.02, 66,674, and it is in October 2020 that the death toll due to Covid-19 crossed the 100,000 or one lakh mark. It stood at 1,21, 641.

On April 8, 2021, the total number of infections in India were 1,29,28,574. There were 1,18,51,393 recoveries, which amounted to 91 per cent of recoveries. The number of people who had died was 1,66,862, and the fatality rate stood at 1.29 per cent. But on May 8, the number of total cases stood 2,18,92,676, of whom 1,79,30,960 had recovered, and the recovery rate stood at 81.90 per cent. The number of people who had died stood at 2,38,270 and the fatality rate was 1.09 per cent. On June 7, the total number of infections was 2,89,09,975, of whom 2,71,59,180 had recovered, and the recovery stood at 93.94 per cent. The total number of deaths stood at

3,49,186, and the fatality rate was 1.21 per cent.

In these two months, larger number of people were infected, larger number of people recovered and larger number of died than in 2020. This was the fatal second wave, where the number of infections rose from 1,29,28,574 on April 8 to 2,89,09,975 on June 7. Similarly, recoveries rose 1,18,51,393 on April 8 to 2,71,59,180 on June 7. And the number who had died rose from 1,66,862 to 3,49,186 in these two months.

The silver lining is that the number of people who had been vaccinated had risen too in these two months, from 9,01,98,673 on April 8 to 16.73 crore on May 8 to 23.27 crore on June 7.

The numbers show the enormity of Covid-19 in India. The people who had survived is overwhelmingly large, but the people and the country have paid a heavy price due to deaths as well. The numbers in India can be misleading if we see them in proportion to the 1.35 total population of the country. But in terms of absolute numbers, a large number of Indians had paid a price. It is these numbers that had to be kept in mind because our health system was unable to cope with the number of people who had fallen sick. Only a small proportion of them were critical but the hospital system could not cope with the challenge when the infections crossed 400,000 every day for a few days in the last week of April. ■



President of alumni association Rajesh Kumar with JNU VC Dr M Jagadesh Kumar

# ACADEMICS IN ACTION

**Meet the new generation of the intelligentsia drawn from the premier institutions of the country that refuses to watch the unfolding COVID crisis from their ivory towers...**

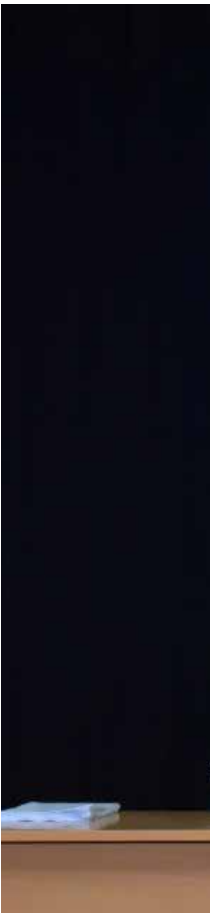
**By Suvam Pal**

**I**n January last year, the world witnessed the biggest ever crisis our planet has seen in several generations and undoubtedly COVID-19, is the biggest catastrophe we have witnessed since the World War II. While 70 million people perished during the WWII, and 40 million became a victim from the tragic ravages of the World War I, COVID-9 has already spread its tentacles, infecting 3.89 million people in the world till the time this piece goes to the press.

When Coronavirus gripped India in its lethal tentacles in March 2020, Prime Minister, Narendra Modi ordered the biggest and most stringent action undertaken anywhere to stop the spread of the coronavirus. “There will be a total

ban of coming out of your homes. Every state, every district, every lane, every village will be under lockdown”, Modi had declared on that eventful Tuesday night on Television in March 2020. It was health versus economy for Modi at that time, and the Prime Minister put a premium on human life over the sluggish economy.

The second wave of the Covid epidemic in April 2021 in India was more tragic, though. However, a recent but extremely significant shift to the policy of changing from the individual states to the central government in procuring the vaccination and inoculating the country’s large population will hopefully bring massive relief. Although Christopher Leffler of Virginia Commonwealth University thinks that the actual death toll because







A JNU alumnus preparing to send off relief materials to India

of COVID in India might be around 16 lakhs (Almost 4.5 times the official figure), even then, India's per capita death toll will be lower than that of the United States.

India is a vast country and admittedly a poor nation as well. The health infrastructure and government hospitals cannot be compared with those of the developed nations, and COVID did further crumble the country's health infrastructure. The central or state government on their own would be unable to tackle this problem, and support from various non-governmental organisations was vital.

The alumni of India's premier educational institution, the Jawaharlal Nehru University, came forward enthusiastically and garnered almost 8 lakh rupees and donated to the Prime Minister's corona relief fund last year. This year once again, in the wake of the second wave of the deadly virus, the alumni has come together to donate funds for helping the families drastically affected by COVID-19. President of the Alumni Association of the university, Rajesh Kumar who has been a senior journalist in several established media conglomerates tells me: "It is only through volunteering for help and desire for togetherness that we will be able to see light at the end of the tunnel. We are on a mission to reach out to people, educate them on the best practices against COVID-19, debunk misinformation, cheer our healthcare workers, support the poor, deprived, elderly and all the vulnerable sections through medical and other relief materials put together by way of funds mobilised by us ever since the pandemic struck us devastatingly."

Besides generously contributing to the alumnus fund, some non-resident Indians, settled overseas, from the JNU went one step further and thought to do something bigger for their motherland and the villages where they grew up. The most prominent among them was Ravi Shankar Chand, who studied German at the university and then went to Australia for higher studies. I met Ravi recently in Dubai, who told me, "It is a collective responsibility of each and every individual in our society to stand up and take the lead to fight against the deadly wave of coronavirus instead of just blaming the government."

Ravi took the cudgel in his hands and formed a group of NRI friends based in various countries in all the habitable continent, most of whom are mainly from the JNU and have deep love, passion, and eagerness to help their motherland during this distressful time. As soon as Dr Yukteshwar Kumar, a senior academic and the first Deputy Mayor of the city of Bath, the United Kingdom from the Asian heritage, learnt about it, he jumped into the ship of saving lives with Ravi and along with several other friends immediately commenced the works of sending oxygen concentrator, oxygen flow meters, and other medical equipment from Dubai to various districts in Bihar. So far, Bhojpur, Rohtas, Buxar, Gopalganj, Nalanda and Patna district have been benefitted. But the juggernaut of the chariot of helping others is not going to cease soon and will roll out to various other districts.

Prakash Bharti was born in the Nalanda district of Bihar in 1985 and, currently based in the UAE, suggests, "What we need to combat this



The alumni association of JNU spread across the world organises Covid-19 relief drive

unprecedented crisis is a set of values such as solidarity, commitment, courage, fortitude, perseverance and hope. So, let us come together and contribute to helping humanity prevail.”

They say charity begins at home. At a very early stage, most of these NRIs have started earning for their families from an early age so that their siblings could continue their studies and pursue their calling. All these noble souls know the importance of dreams and try to help everybody to the best of their abilities. US-based Anil Gupta, a JNU alumnus, happily contributed to Ravi’s ‘Help India’ initiative. While talking to us, he echoed Lord Mahavira’s philosophy “The excess of wealth in your hands is for the society...”

Amitabh Singh, who studied Spanish at the JNU and is currently based in Brazil, Latin America, quoted the former President of the United States Barack Obama, “The best way to not feel hopeless is to get up and do something. Don’t wait for good things to happen to you. If you go out and make some good things happen, you will fill the world with hope; you will fill yourself with hope.”

Chandra Choubey, who too studied Spanish and lives in Mexico, South America, quipped, “A friend in need is a friend indeed; if not, he is a ‘fiend’ in greed. I personally see good people in this world. There is hope in this world. The hope of helping those in need without any greed.” Chandra donated graciously and strengthened the hands of Ravi Chand, who has also founded an organisation called ‘AmbedkarGlobal’. Ravi had recently organised a seminar in Dubai to celebrate the Birth Anniversary of Dr Ambedkar where the chief guests and guest of honour were Shri Santosh Kumar Suman, the minister for SC/ST Welfare and minor irrigation, Bihar, as well as Mr K. C. Tyagi, a former member of the Indian parliament

and the general secretary of JDU.

“I don’t want to live in the kind of world where we don’t look out for each other. Not just the people that are close to us, but anybody who needs a helping hand. I can’t change the way anybody else thinks or what they choose to do, but I can do my bit.” Ranjeet echoed Charles de lint, who studied Russian at the JNU and made Pattaya, Thailand, his home for more than two decades.

Help from the NRI Indians has been extremely timely and prompt as at a time when the whole country was in desperate need of oximeters and other medical equipment, and these life-saving devices were not readily available, an extension of friendly and timely assistance by these noble souls was extremely praiseworthy. The world is indeed very large, and we will never know who and which organisations came to help during the recent crisis, but we must acknowledge those who came forward and helped millions of Indians in the most crunching and crucial time.

This is a fantastic example of brotherhood and service for the communities and humanity. Our society, nation and the world will become better from these selfless, kind contributions. In the end, I would like to quote Leo Buscaglia, who said, “It’s not enough to have lived. We should be determined to live for something. May I suggest that it be creating joy for others, sharing what we have for the betterment of personkind, bringing hope to the lost and love to the lonely.” ■



(The author is an international media professional and documentary filmmaker)



# RALLYING TO HELP HOMELAND

**Indian diaspora stands by its land of origin** *at the time of unprecedented crisis brought about by the devastating second wave of the pandemic...*

**By Shankar Kumar**

**A**

*s international focus is increasingly shifting towards getting to the bottom of truth behind the emergence of Coronavirus and China's alleged role in developing it in a lab in Wuhan, India is profusely thanking its global partners and diaspora for the medical and humanitarian aid they offered when it needed the most.*

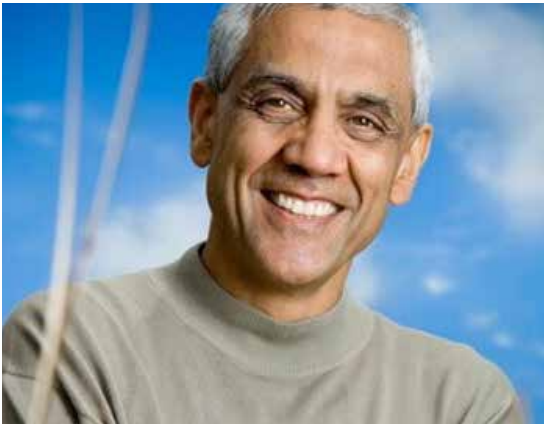
More than 40 countries supplied oxygen concentrators, cylinders, oxygen generators and

medicines to India. On the other hand, Indian diaspora from the US, the UK, Germany, France and other European Union countries, Gulf, Southeast Asia, Africa and Latin America spared no effort in helping its country of origin in its fight with the virulent virus.

As the desperate situation demanded an effective and coordinated action plan, the Ministry of External Affairs created a dedicated COVID-19 cell with an Additional Secretary-level IFS officer

and 10 others to coordinate with external and domestic activities related to pandemic abatement. Besides keeping in touch with Indian missions and foreign agencies, the cell coordinated with various other ministries and agencies to expedite clearance of medical supplies and ensure that materials are delivered to the needy.

Working 24x7, these MEA officials helped states and union territories to procure urgently needed medical aid from abroad. Ministry officials were prompt in dispatching aid that was flowing in from foreign countries and Indians abroad to the states and union territories. There was equal enthusiasm on the part of foreign governments,



Spokesperson Arindam Bagchi said.

But then, remember, not all medical supplies coming from abroad have been free; some of them have come in as grants or secured under B to B basis. This was not the case with diaspora. Concerned by an alarming rise in COVID-19 cases with patients scrambling for beds, oxygen cylinders, medicines, and healthcare system teetering on the brink of collapse, Indian-American billionaire Vinod Khosla has pledged US \$10 million for medical oxygen supplies to India. He has partnered with GiveIndia, a Bengaluru-based non-profit organisation to make available oxygen concentrators, cylinders and

“ Indian-American billionaire Vinod Khosla has pledged US \$10 million for medical oxygen supplies to India. He has partnered with GiveIndia, a Bengaluru-based non-profit organisation to make available oxygen concentrators, cylinders ”



(From left to right)  
Google's Pichai  
and Microsoft's  
Nadella

agencies, and the diaspora as they sent in aid on a war-footing. Adding to their enthusiasm has the quick response from foreign governments and diaspora to India's emergency needs.

India received hundreds of oxygen concentrators, ventilators and other medical supplies from the UK, the European Union and the US— all in an effort to prevent any further loss of life from this deadly virus. “We appreciate the solidarity and assistance extended by foreign governments and diaspora organisations across the world in our efforts to combat the second wave of COVID-19,” the Ministry of External Affairs

other necessary medical help to the country of his origin. For him, it is a critical moment for India and one should come forward to generously donate whatever he could afford.

“Scale of the problem is so large that it is hard to imagine how it will be addressed. If thousands of people are dying every day, then the first thing is obvious...You have to immediately respond. Because, every single day oxygen supply is delayed, somebody dies...So sooner and immediately you act, it makes a huge difference,” Khosla said in a chat-show with Indian actor Priyanka Chopra on May 14.

“Diaspora's keenness to support India was matchless in substance and resolve in Germany, the UK, France, Italy and other European countries”

Neena Shukla Hartmann of  
Prexma Consultancy



It was not just billionaire Vinod Khosla, but also thousands of Indian-American community members responded immediately to India's once-in-a-century crisis with money and medical help. Google CEO Sundar Pichai announced that his company and its employees would be providing an assistance of \$18.54 million.

Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella said his company will continue to lend its voice, resources and technology to aid relief efforts, and support the purchase of critical oxygen concentration devices.” Pressure was also mounted by Indian-American community members on the political establishment to send humanitarian aid to India. It resulted in the Joe Biden administration backing India and South Africa's call for waiving the intellectual property rights over COVID-19 vaccines. Without much delay, the US administration rushed oxygen concentrators, cylinders and other medical assistance to India in multiple flights.

Diaspora's keenness to support India was matchless in substance and resolve in Germany, the UK, France, Italy and other European countries. In Germany, Bajinder Sodhi, who runs a restaurant in the middle of Berlin which is often frequented by who's who of the country, contacted 40 big multinational companies to provide India the much-needed medical assistance.

On his own, he managed to send 150 oxygen concentrators to India when the second wave of coronavirus was pulverizing the country's healthcare system. The sudden spike in cases from the third week of April had fuelled demands for hospital beds, oxygen and medicines. Reports of the mounting death toll due to the virus were doing the rounds in social media and making headlines in the national and international media.

As a member of Indian diaspora, I was in utter

shock. Messages on Indian social media about deteriorating health conditions were making me restless and it was then, I decided to rush medical help to India. I immediately managed 150 concentrators and sent them to Delhi hospitals,” Sodhi, who is

also popular among German politicians, said.

Similarly, Neena Shukla Hartmann of Prexma Consultancy, a Germany-based public relations, marketing, exhibition and event management company, swung into action and created a group called SOS PROCUREMENT.

Backed by dynamic and enthusiastic Indian-origin people like Daniel Raja and 32 others, including German and Turkish nationals, the group started contacting German companies, NGOs and individuals who can stand by India at a time of unprecedented crisis.

Regarded highly among the Indian diaspora for her helping attitude, Neena, who left India three decades ago, sent emails individually to German business leaders and non-profit groups asking them to help suffering Indians with oxygen cylinders, oxygen concentrators and ambulances.

She didn't stop at that. In her online magazine portal, [www.indienaktuell.de](http://www.indienaktuell.de) which she launched in cooperation with her husband Alexander Hartmann, she put up a special section: ‘Help for India, how can I donate?’

Many people tried to ship their donations on their own without knowing whether their consignments will reach the rightful place or not,” Neena said. Her portal, which is popular among Indian diaspora, presents a list of guidelines for donations, shipments of medical goods and medicines and who should be contacted for what purposes in detail. She claims this has, to a large





Bajinder Sodhi,  
restaurateur in  
Germany

extent, eased her job of helping India in need.

Yet, challenges don't come knocking at one's door. They come suddenly and like the virus, whisk away many happy people and families to the alleys of immeasurable sorrow and sufferings. This is what has hurt Indian diaspora in Germany deeply and they want to address the situation without any delay

Neena says "her heart bleeds for India." She is working hard to see that immediate and long-term needs of people back in India are met. Through her portal and social media tools, she has encouraged people to contribute, whatever they could for victims of coronavirus in India.

Her portal [www.indienaktuell.de](http://www.indienaktuell.de) said Frankfurt-based German-Indian Cooperation eV (an NGO) is working with 25 Indian partners who are active in urban slums and rural areas, where they support students whose parents have lost their jobs due to the crisis and are involved in building hospitals. To sustain their activity, Neena has sought donations from donors, philanthropists and others.

Similarly, Indian communities in the UK were distressed by sorry spectacle of people standing in in a queue at crematoriums for their turns to cremate their dear ones. They had never seen such heart-wrenching scenes before.

"I am deeply worried about the situation back in India. I lost some of my family members in Uttar Pradesh. I don't want to see more people die due to lack of oxygen, beds in hospitals or medicines. We will do whatever we can for the motherland," Ravindra Singh, who is pursuing a business and management course at the University of Stirling in Scotland, said.

With the help of his friends, he made a 'GofundMe' appeal and within hours raised 100,000 pounds. British-Indians make up 2.3

percent of the UK's population. BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha, which has a temple in London, didn't encounter any challenge when The BAPS India COVID Emergency was established and raised 100,000 pound. However, it was not sufficient. The BAPS organized a 48-hour, non-stop static relay cycle race called 'Bikeathon' at its Neasden Temple in North London, Swaminarayan Temple at Chigwell in East London and the Swaminarayan Temple in Leicester in the first week of May and raised more than 500,000 pounds.

This exercise helped the organization in developing a new 500-bed facility in Vadodara, equipped with ICU facilities and life-saving oxygen, which is still running non-stop and providing pandemic-related treatments to people in Gujarat. Several BAPS-run temples situated in the UAE, Australia and the US also come up with appeals for donations, with the help of which they send medical equipment back to India.

Among the diaspora, which is one of the largest in the world with almost 20 million people of Indian origin spread across the globe, one thing is common: They are concerned about the wellbeing of their countrymen back home. They didn't hesitate a bit when it came to offering help to India in a time of crisis. For medical and other aid to India, they not only raised funds for fund-raising through innovative ways and means, they also influenced governments of the countries of their habitation to support India. This is the reason why even today, several countries continue to send relief materials to India. ■

*(The author is a Delhi-based journalist with core interest in diplomacy and international affairs)*



# SUPER ILLUSIONIST

**At 50, Kerala-born mural artist Suresh Muthukulam** has carved a unique position in the art world. He has pulled the ancient mural tradition out of Kerala temples and palaces and placed them in people's living rooms showcasing contemporary themes.

**By Malvika Kaul**

**M**ural artists can be like clairvoyants – they see more and can see far. At times magicians, and at times shamans, the extra-terrestrial, the divine and the human are painted in a mural with brilliant ease. Kerala-born Suresh Muthukulam is one such super illusionist. Trained in the 9th-18th century mural tradition, Suresh's works are magical spells cast on canvas. He sees the divine in humans and the fallible in the supernatural. His brush has converted Lord Krishna to a toddy tapper, a cyclist and an elephant trainer. In one Delhi exhibition, 'Backwater Cameos', Suresh presented the everyday rural life of Kerala blending myths, reality and fantasy in deep

blue, bright ochre and calm green. Some who visited the 2010 show still remember Suresh's creative genius to show celestial beings hanging around in the backwaters with chilled out boatmen while the dragonflies danced in the air. His paintings appear to be grounded on earth but transport you at times to the paradisaical, blissful world.

For close to two decades, Suresh's art appears like a homage to the mural tradition. Since childhood, Suresh was fascinated by murals. He was mesmerised when he first saw the Gajendra Moksha (largest mural panel in Kerala) in the Krishnapuram Palace in Kayamkulam,



founder of the Guruvayur Devaswom. Suresh says he not only trained him in artistic skills but encouraged him to develop his own expression and style. His guru wanted him to take the murals out of the temples and put them in living rooms and art spaces.

In many of Suresh's works, Hindu gods and goddesses appear along with village belles, farm labour and schoolchildren that seem to be in rhythm with the flora and fauna. This is a deliberate artistic intervention. Suresh says at the beginning of the millennium, the Indian art scene appeared to become more accessible to public. Art exhibitions, festivals and biennales nourished the art scene in India. It is around this time that he decided to transition from ancient mural art to contemporary mural art. "I am proud to have led this movement," he declares.

Jaya Mani, prominent art curator, based in Bengaluru who is also the founder of Dravidam a gallery that has showcased Suresh's work since 1992, says Suresh has developed a contemporary aesthetic style which is now widely recognised as his trademark. "Watching Suresh grow and evolve as a contemporary artist and develop a unique style has been one of the most fulfilling experiences



“ Indian art scene appeared to become more accessible to public. Art exhibitions, festivals and biennales nourished the art scene in India.”

Alappuzha district in Kerala. Suresh visited the palace many times and every visit left a deep memory. In a few years, he joined the Institute of Mural Painting, Guruvayur Devaswom, in the pilgrimage town of Guruvayur.

Suresh says a mural artist should have deep knowledge of ancient texts, history and colour combinations. Mural painting requires immense patience and determination. It takes years to grasp the nuances, understand the rhythm of colours, and appreciate the tone and texture of the visual fantasies that will be woven on the walls. In a mural, the past, present and the future can be entwined. Suresh is particularly indebted to Sri Mammiyoor Krishnakutty Nair, his teacher and

of my long career in the arts.” Suresh's magical canvases find space in the Delhi Chief Minister's office (former Chief Minister Late Sheila Dikshit was a fan), the Vatican Museum (featuring the Last Supper in mural style), the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj International Airport Mumbai T-2 (displaying a 17-foot mural of the guardians of eight directions), and the Gandhi Darshan in Delhi (showcasing Gandhi's life story).

Suresh's clientele is both young and old – those who appreciate the indigenous, desire something close to their cultural roots but also love to indulge a visual fantasy. In his 2014 exhibition 'Holla Mohalla' in Delhi, Suresh married two very diverse landscapes of Kerala and Punjab. Suresh created



“ Mural artist should have deep knowledge of ancient texts, history and colour combinations. Mural painting requires immense patience and determination. It takes years to grasp the nuances, understand the rhythm of colours, and appreciate the tone and texture of the visual fantasies ”



a new vision of the Nihangs, the armed Sikh warriors who through the traditional three-day Holla Mohalla festival – a vibrant display of sports competitions and martial arts during Holi at the Anandpur Sahib in Punjab. After attending the festival in 2013, Suresh decided to blend the spirit of valour of Nihangs with the serenity of a Kerala boatman. His warriors were flying in the sky with their swords, riding bicycles with children, and playing a musical instrument. They were painted mostly in conventional deep blue and white, but the ambience of saffron and ochre almost took you back to the clay-tiled roofs of Kerala.



Recently, Suresh worked under the guidance of acclaimed film director Adoor Gopalakrishnan on the Varkala project, a performing art centre developed by Kerala Tourism department. Varkala is around 40 km away from Thiruvananthapuram, the capital city of Kerala. The project attempts to visually document the rich art heritage of Kerala – the folk and classical arts like Thiruvathirakali, Theyyam, Thira and Padayani along with Kathakali and Mohiniyattam. Close to 2,000 square feet of murals have been painted by Suresh and his

students during the lockdown months in Kerala. It has been one of the most demanding and satisfying experiences. Suresh would like to see more art being taught in schools and colleges. And more freedom for art students and artists in India to explore various aspects of their creativity.

The pandemic has turned human life upside down. These are the worst times, but Suresh also sees them as the best of times. “This is the best time for an artist to concentrate more on her/his

subject while sitting at home. I think many artists have utilised most of their time at home in learning and absorbing and creating.” Suresh believes an artist grows only if s/he creates more. “I believe we are now waiting for the sun to rise again in this world.” ■



(The author writes a blog on art <https://iforart.wordpress.com/>)



# CELEBRATING THE WORD ACROSS BHARAT

**The fifth edition of Valley of Words: International Literature and Arts Festival will be held in different cities in phygital format, mixing digital and physical elements, making it a uniquely immersive experience**

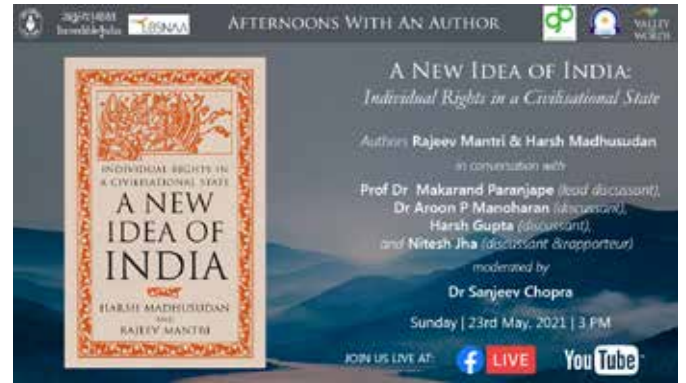
**By Dr Sanjeev Chopra**

**M**ost literature festivals are rooted to a city, and it certainly makes a lot of sense to ground a festival in a particular locale – for it lends continuity and a cultural connect and also affords an opportunity to young people to interact with the participants. Thus, we have the Jaipur Literature Festival based out of Jaipur, the Khushwant Singh Litfest from Kasuali, the Tata Litfest at Bombay, the Bangalore festival, Chandigarh Military History Festival as well as the AKLF at Kolkata, to name a few. In recent years, smaller towns – or Tier II/III cities (in marketing jargon), like Hoshiarpur and Kolhapur have also tried their hands at organising events around in their cities.

This has not only been good for the publishing industry – it has also encouraged many young authors, readers and critics to ‘demystify’ the world of books and literature. Till

the turn of the century, a published author was held in awe, but over the last decade, one has seen a very positive trend of teenagers and even children below the age of five publish their books and participate in festivals and events. Valley of Words (VoW) has been a witness to this change, and has also been invited to support these events through our (limited) resources, though our anchor city has always been Dehradun (so far!)

Meanwhile, last year, thanks to the challenge of the pandemic, VoW had to bring about a major change in the format of the festival. As social and physical distancing made it virtually impossible to organize ‘physical events’ especially with the possibility of last-minute cancellation of flights and restrictions on the number of attendees, we moved to what our event management partners, Wizcraft describe as a ‘phygital event’. A phygital event is one in



which there is 'limited physical interaction, but the online presence makes the 'world a stage', and it is possible to get panellists and participants from across the world. The 'phygital' also ensures that everything is achieved forever – something which is obtrusive, and not in the natural order of things in an offline mode.

This year, even as we were getting ready for the fifth edition, the thought came up that given the new opportunities which technology has opened up, why not do this phygital event across the country in four or five locations so that the experience can be shared by many more people. It would also be a unique experiment in which the knowledge verticals of the festival are held in different cities – because even when the festival is held in one city alone, there have to be multiple venues.

Now these venues will be in different cities – with Baroda's Railway Staff College agreeing to host the sessions related to Hindi fiction, contemporary writings and translations from Indian languages to Hindi. As a city Baroda has always been a patron of the arts, and the best paintings of Ravi Verma were not only made in this city, but are also displayed in the Baroda Museum. The Tollygunje Club of Kolkata, one of the oldest and most prestigious clubs this side of the Suez will be the venue for English fiction and contemporary writings. Tollygunje club has a tradition of hosting its own, as well as literary events of other festivals as well and the picturesque settings facilitate the cerebral outpour!

Issues concerning Military history are perhaps best discussed in cantonment towns and regimental centres. VoW was therefore delighted to extend its support to the proposition of the Garhwal Rifles to co -host the Military history sessions at Lansdowne. This will also encourage the

universities and colleges in Haridwar and Garhwal to get a flavour of a literature festival in their vicinity. The MHS sessions have been done in collaboration with the United Services Institution of India – India's oldest and most prestigious think tank on defence and military matters. This year the theme of the discussions will be the war of liberation of Bangladesh – an epochal event in the history of the sub-continent!

Tributes will be to Padma Bhushan Sunderlal Bahuguna, the environmentalist known for having steered the Chipko and the movement against large dams in his native village in Tehri Garhwal, and the doyen of Hindi literature Narendra Kohli whose ten volume Maha Samar is a contemporary transcreation of the Mahabharat, and explains the context in which the literal text has to be read.

Last, but not the least, the festival will also have a knowledge vertical on the history of science in India. Unlike the West, where they looked at science, material, commercial and spiritual worlds in different silos, the Indian tradition is different. There is no divorce between the spiritual and the temporal, or the material and the ethical. The Uttarakhand Council for science and Technology will curate sessions on the history of science in India, and pay tributes to Indian sages who were masters who pronounced no artificial distinctions and took a holistic view of human life in the larger eco system of the universe.

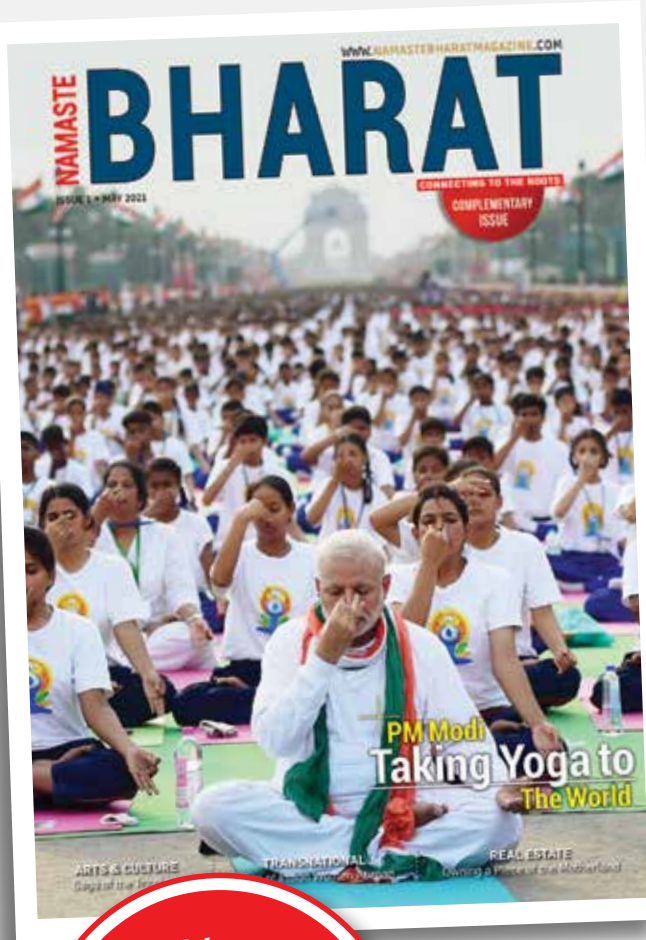
Meanwhile, the monthly webinar series 'Aftersnoons with an Author' is gaining traction, and last month, VoW had Rajeev Mantri and Harsh Madhusudan's book 'A new Idea of India: Individual Rights in a civilizational state in conversation with Makarand Paranjape, Director of the Indian institute of Advanced Studies and Aroon Manoharan of the University of Boston take up the core issue of this book – how does one place a nation in the context of a civilization? This month, on the 20th June, we will be discussing The Buddha: The light of Asia by Jairam Ramesh who will be in conversation with Professors Malashree Lal and Siddiq Wahid. May I urge the readers to log into [www.valleyofwords.org](http://www.valleyofwords.org) to stay connected with this unique festival! ■



(The author, an IAS officer of the 1985 batch, who has served in multiple capacities with the central and state governments in India, is Director, the Valley of Words: International Literature and Arts Festival)

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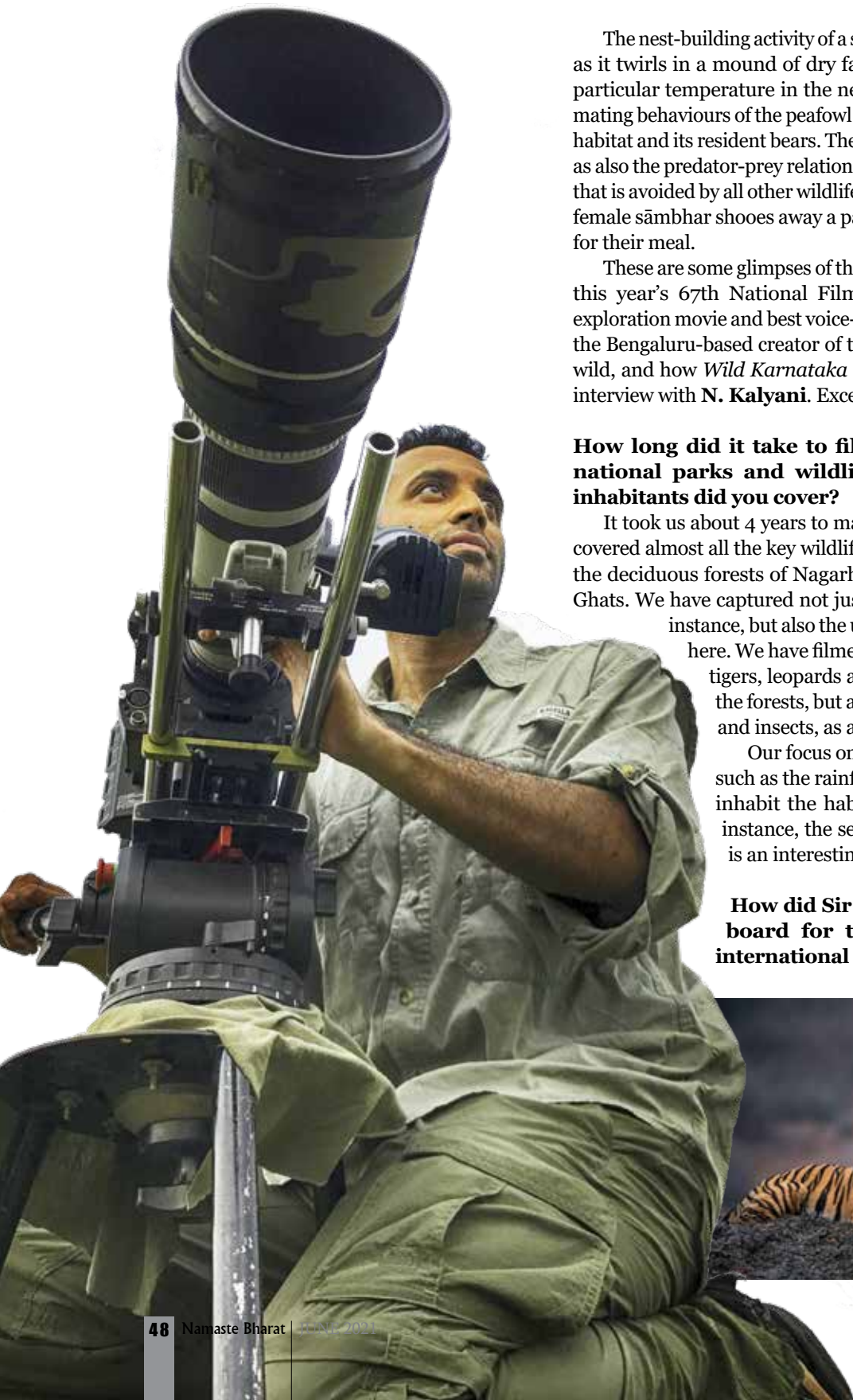
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# “THE MYSTERY OF JUNGLES ALWAYS CAPTIVATED ME”



The nest-building activity of a snake, in camouflaged surroundings, as it twirls in a mound of dry fallen leaves, to eventually create a particular temperature in the nest for its eggs. The courtship and mating behaviours of the peafowl and the Draco lizard. The dry, rocky habitat and its resident bears. The feeding habits of animals and birds as also the predator-prey relations of the wild. Hornbills eating a fruit that is avoided by all other wildlife being neurotoxic to them. An adult female sāmbar shoos away a pack of dholes wanting a young fawn for their meal.

These are some glimpses of the film *Wild Karnataka* that has won this year’s 67th National Film Award in two categories: best exploration movie and best voice-over/narration. JS Amoghvarsha, the Bengaluru-based creator of the film, shares his journey into the wild, and how *Wild Karnataka* came into being, in a freewheeling interview with **N. Kalyani**. Excerpts...

## **How long did it take to film *Wild Karnataka*? Which national parks and wildlife areas, and their wildlife inhabitants did you cover?**

It took us about 4 years to make *Wild Karnataka*. And, we have covered almost all the key wildlife areas of Karnataka, starting from the deciduous forests of Nagarhole and Bandipur to the Western Ghats. We have captured not just the rocky habitats of Hampi, for instance, but also the underwater marine life that is found here. We have filmed not just the big mammals such as tigers, leopards and elephants that are to be seen in the forests, but also the small ones like frogs, snakes and insects, as also marine wildlife.

Our focus on the lesser known areas of the state such as the rainforests, and the wildlife species that inhabit the habitats has been quite unique. For instance, the sequence on the flying lizard, Draco, is an interesting and a lesser-seen sequence.

## **How did Sir David Attenborough come on board for this film? What kind of an international collaboration was this?**





Sir David Attenborough became part of the film as its narrator thanks to our international partner Icon Films. They showed Sir Attenborough the film we had made. He really liked it, and agreed to do the voice-over. Icon films in Bristol, UK, was our production partner. We did all the editing and post-production work of the film at their facilities and with their teams.

### What was the experience like to interact with Sir Attenborough?

It has probably been one of the best experiences ever to meet someone who has inspired me all my life. He was more than what I had imagined of him. A down-to-earth, humble, witty and dedicated legend. He is all that and more.

### Who penned the script of the film?

The script was written by our core team that included Bengaluru-based wildlife photographer and filmmaker, Kalyan Varma; our edit producer of Icon Films, Nicholas Gates, who is a naturalist and author based in Bristol, UK; and myself.

### What message(s) have you tried to bring out through *Wild Karnataka*?

The film aims at letting viewers experience wonder at what they watch in it. The film also lets viewers know that they do not have to travel far and wide to appreciate wildlife. The state of Karnataka has a great deal to offer in this respect. The film sends out the message that we all need to pay attention to and start caring for wild areas.

### You have done your bachelors in computer science, and you moved from being a corporate executive to making wildlife films. What prompted you to make this shift?

My journey started with working with Amazon. Subsequently, I worked with a few tech startups. I often joke that I got into wildlife photography as I could not find parking space in Bengaluru! My trips to the jungles soon became an addiction. Coming from a tech background, the camera was a natural extension that helped me connect with the natural world. This passion soon let me quit my day job, and

### Salient aspects of *Wild Karnataka*

The 52-minute film has a high exploratory quotient. Technology has played a huge role in this film, as one gets to see the aerial view of various habitats and landscapes too, as for instance, of River Kabini and its surroundings.

Made by wildlife photographers, filmmakers and conservationists, JS Amoghavarsha, Kalyan Varma, Sarath Champati and Vijay Mohan Raj, the film has been narrated by internationally well-known British broadcaster and passionate naturalist Sir David Attenborough. And the credit for the well-orchestrated background score goes to the Grammy award-winning music composer and producer, and environmentalist, Ricky Kej.

The Ultra HD film on the rich biodiversity of the state of Karnataka has been filmed fully in 4K, using both aerial and hidden cameras. It shows some rare occurrences and events of the natural world.

The film was also released in PVRs in India. Besides the National Film Awards, the film has won several other awards. JS Amoghavarsha is involved in various conservation and education projects, and also conducts photography workshops. He has worked with the National Geographic and BBC. In 2020, he spoke at the United Nations headquarters where there was a screening of *Wild Karnataka*.

take up wildlife photography as a full time profession. It was in 2005 that I quit my software job, and dived into wildlife photography and filmmaking full time.

### What are the wildlife films that you have made, besides *Wild Karnataka*?

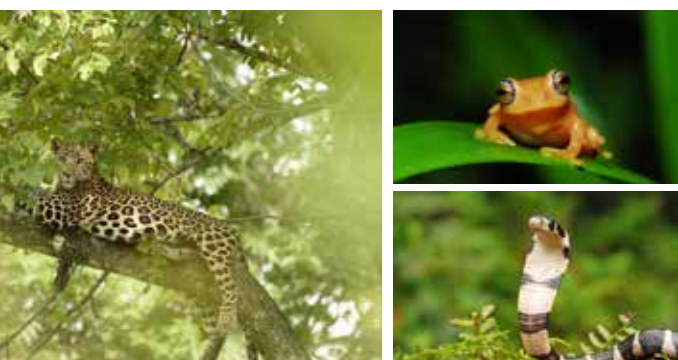
I have made a film on river terns eponymously titled River Terns. Another film that I have made is Kali. This award-winning film on the Kali River that flows through the Western Ghats of India follows the journey of a 100-year-old grandmother to the source of the river. Following an unequivocal response from policymakers after watching the movie, the Dandeli Anshi Tiger Reserve was renamed Kali Tiger Reserve. The movie won the Impactdocs award of merit in 2016.

### Going back to your early years, when did your interest in Nature and wildlife take root?

Having grown up in a home filled with books that my dad collected, I started reading Jim Corbett and Kenneth Anderson during my school days. The mystery of the jungles and the creatures portrayed in these books always captivated me, and made me want to travel and visit thick forests. ■



(The author is an environment writer, and has written for various Indian newspapers, magazines and journals. She has also done programmes for Radio.)





# WHEN OFFICE REACHES HOME!

**Is the work from home trend here to stay in the post-COVID world? If so, what are the pros and cons on the way people live and work in the future?**

**By Swarnendu Biswas**

**I**n the last one-and-a-half years, the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has not only brought unfortunate deaths to more than 37 lakh lives (according to the statistics provided by Worldometer; the actual figure may be much more) across the world's close to 700 crore population, and caused huge economic distress and mental turmoil to many more millions but this pandemic could have short-and even long-term influences in myriad spheres of our lives long after humankind achieves a conclusive victory over this virulent virus.

And, if we reflect a bit we can infer that

not all possible long-term impacts would necessarily adversely affect our well-being. One of the visible impacts of Covid-19 pandemic is the significant shift in our work environment from office cubicles to homes.

Of course, for blue-collared factory workers work from home (WFH) would not be a feasible option but for several other work profiles, working from home and being impressively productive is very much possible at the same time in this digital age.

#### **Cost Benefits for Businesses**

The pandemic has necessitated work from home to quickly evolve from a happening trend to

a mainstream norm across several sectors and it would not be far-fetched to assume that this norm has a high probability to continue for many more years... long after the pandemic and its threat would cease to trouble us and remain only as sad memories and nightmares. And more importantly, the norm of WFH has high probability to gather momentum with the passing of years.

It is so because there are inherent economic advantages for businesses in adopting WFH model, which I am sure many corporates across the world have already realised and many others would realise soon.

For example, a company hires 500 people, for which it needs say three offices. Now say out of these 500 personnel 375 can function effectively from home with a laptop connected through Internet. Then the company would prefer those 375 people to work from home and only 125 people to report to office or say factory. This way the company needs to rent only one establishment instead of three. Not only the rent of two establishments but the costs of electricity, tea, snacks, stationery, depreciation, etc. of the other two establishments can also be saved in this manner.

“Significant growth in WFH options can save huge rental & associated operating costs for organisations. This would mean reduction in fixed expenses, especially for organisations operating out of big cities that attract very high rentals,” says Soraya Rebello, Vice President – CSR & Corporate Communications, Jakson Group. She, however, maintains that WFH cannot become a norm across all offices across all sectors. She has recently written a book called ‘Paving the Highway to Success from Home’ where WFH options are explored and and discussed elaborately.

“The growth of WFH can also reduce travel costs. Today we have observed that virtual meetings are possible across the globe thereby helping organisations to save on hotel stay, travel & other associated costs,” remarked Soraya. Yes, that is another reason for corporates to prefer WFH options wherever feasible. One can also infer that with WFH gaining momentum, business travels would decrease around the globe. This may further impact the already severely affected hospitality industry of India.

So, it doesn't come across as surprise that Twitter declared in May 2020 that its workforce can keep working from home forever if they



choose to. I feel soon the WFH option across many, many offices of the world would no longer be a choice for millions of employees; it would become mandatory.

“As far as WFH trend is concerned, I think it should be long-lasting. In fact, several companies in USA have already expressed their intention to promote and provide this option. I believe that in India too we should be moving towards a hybrid office/WFH model. Of course, this will require a shift in mindsets and skills; both hard and soft,” observes Ashley Fernandes, Country Head, Emlyon Business School, a leading business school based in France. He says, “One cannot manage a team scattered around the country or the world in the same way and with the same tools as she/he did before. So, the need of the hour for organisations is to reinforce an agile and innovative work culture, irrespective of the pandemic.”

According to Nikunj Sanghi, Chairman, Automotive Skills Development Council, “Several businesses have implemented remote working in varying degrees. While this comes naturally to service industries, including retail, healthcare, education, entertainment, it is harder to do it for industries which need a physical location or a presence.” He prefers the broader term work from anywhere or remote working rather than the specific case of WFH to describe this new evolving work culture.

Nikunj adds, “This remote working trend has been gaining momentum in the last few years. COVID-19 will accelerate and catalyse it further.”

### Can Benefit Productivity

It is not that only businesses are



“One cannot manage a team scattered around the country or the world in the same way and with the same tools as she/he did before. So, the need of the hour for organisations is to reinforce an agile and innovative work culture, irrespective of the pandemic”

**Ashley Fernandes,**  
Country Head, Emlyon  
Business School, France





“Several businesses have implemented remote working in varying degrees. While this comes naturally to service industries, including retail, healthcare, education, entertainment, it is harder to do it for industries which need a physical location or a presence”  
**Nikunj Sanghi, ASDC**



likely to gain from the benefits of WFH deal. Employees would also gain as their cost of commuting and considerable amount of time and energy (which they can use productively) would be saved if they engage in WFH instead of rushing to offices.

The suspicion that productivity can be compromised in WFH also sounds unfounded in this digital age, where employees can be easily asked to file daily productivity reports through e-mail or Whatsapp, and to and fro communication can also be frequently exchanged through these mediums, thereby facilitating in fixing accountability quite easily.

“Several organisations across the world have realised today that WFH can, in fact, ensure a more fruitful work environment compared to typical office cubicles, allowing employees in the process to enhance work-life balance. The current pandemic has changed the way we work, and more companies are turning to at-home solutions,” says Ashley while mentioning that a Stanford study of 16,000 workers in 9 months found that working from home increased productivity by 13 percent.

Nikunj says that working from home can be a way of the future. “With more companies exploring the benefits of remote workers, some believe it could bring the next wave of globalisation. WFH is the new mantra for many organisations as it leads to cost savings, convenience and productivity benefits if properly executed,” says the corporate leader.

“Since remote workers don’t have a hectic environment and the interruptions of unnecessary meetings, it is thought that this improves productivity. Moreover, since the stress of commuting is eliminated in remote working, workers can focus on their tasks rather than having to deal with the stress of the morning rush hour,” Nikunj asserts further.

“If you go by research, then you can see that work from home leads to more productivity, but

certain things need to be kept in mind. In WFH environment, one needs to be a very good communicator to ensure that the employer knows that he or she is putting in his or her hundred percent in the work. At the same time there must be a lot of trust, understanding and clear work ethics between the employees and their manager to make the workers deliver their best in WFH environment,” explains Nikunj.

### Less Stress on the Planet

WFH has other latent benefits too which may not be visible in the short-run but could have long-term impacts. One of them is the effect on environment. “WFH can also help in reducing the carbon emissions on

earth & assist organisations in contributing towards a greener planet by bringing down pollution levels - a case we have witnessed in Delhi last year during lockdown,” Soraya elaborates.

“Every business is unique, but I believe that overall WFH taps into the current mainstream perception of People, Purpose and Planet,” pointed out Ashley.

### Latent Pitfalls

But WFH has a flip side, which is becoming perceptible. “WFH for a long stretch of time can lead to digital fatigue, monotony, anxiety & thus can impact the mental well-being of individuals. Moreover, there are many bosses who don’t know when to switch off and WFH atmosphere gives further fillip to their ‘zeal’. Thereby they can cause mental & physical strain & eventually burnout among their subordinates,” reasons Soraya.

“However, WFH coupled with enough work breaks, physical exercise, training & interactive programmes, can boost productivity as employees get the best of both worlds of office & family by this way,” suggested Soraya pragmatically. She rightly believes that happy employees are productive employees.

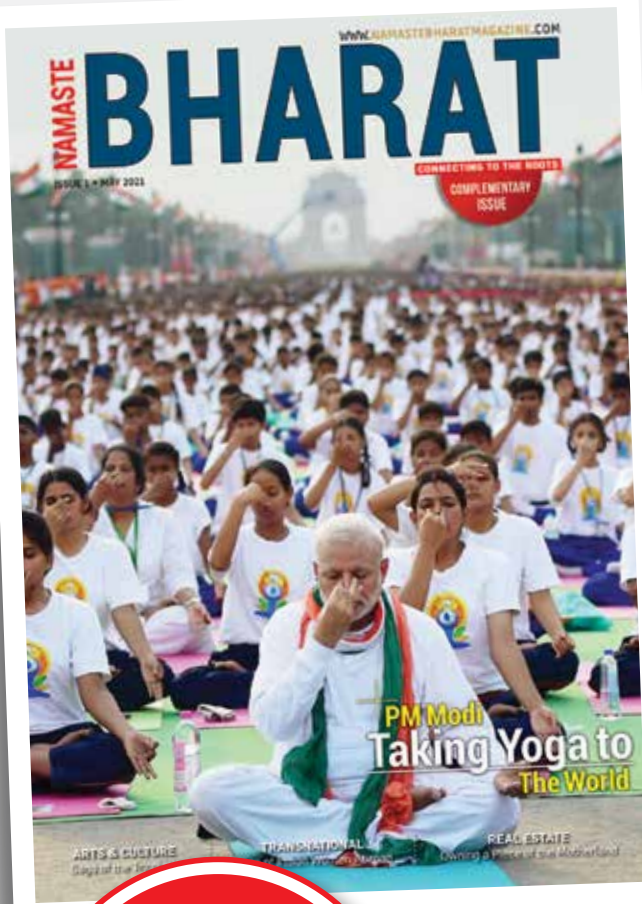
### IT is the Key

We can conclude that the possibility of the growth of WFH culture seems evident from the present trends as it can accrue cost benefits to the employers as well as employees and at the same time has the potential to enhance productivity.

However, the possibility of WFH becoming a norm in the post-COVID environment of India will largely depend on the speed of digitisation in the country to emerge as a welcome reality in the near future. ■

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# OPENING A PANDORA'S BOX OF DISEASES

**The COVID-19 pandemic has brought into focus the perils of over-exploitation of natural resources. Proximity with wildlife through trade, hunting, or habitat loss is leading to risks of outbreaks of viral pandemics...**

**By Muqbil Ahmar**

**A**s societies across the world grapple with one of the most extraordinary pandemics in the history of mankind, the focus is back on man's relationship with nature and the fact that it needs to be symbiotic and not exploitative. The disastrous COVID-19 pandemic indicates the catastrophic costs of the loss of ecosystem. Optimum environments can lead to the growth and evolution of virus such as the coronavirus and provide them with the perfect grounds to breed as well as continuously evolve its virulence. Ideal circumstances could have been created due to the loss of space for natural habitat for wildlife and by extension other organisms that are closely connected with those ecosystems.

This unprecedented health emergency is forcing human societies to reconsider man's association with natural bionetworks and how changes in biodiversity can amount to interfering in delicate balances in the ecosystem and could end up opening the Pandora's Box of diseases and natural epidemics. Therefore, the interrelationship between the human race, on one hand, and biodiversity, on the other hand, needs to be studied with a new perspective. In fact, empirically speaking new evidence continues to emerge of the connection between exploitation of natural resources, particularly wildlife, and pandemics. Proximity with wildlife through trade, hunting, or habitat loss can endanger the existence of mankind and lead to increased risks of



outbreaks of new strains of viruses.

The coronavirus is supposed to have existed in bats. Other wild animals, such as pangolins, can act as possible intermediaries that could have played a significant role in this transmission to human beings. As per studies and reports, there are significant interconnections between a link to trade and a wildlife source. Scientists are continuously looking for fresh evidence in the form of earlier papers and reports on diseases which have made the cross-over from animals to humans.

It is high time, scientists and scholars come together and discover the mechanisms through which such transfers take place. This can then be combined with existing data on such crossovers. They should also investigate if it is related to the existential crisis being faced by wildlife. The coronavirus could be the result of such a phenomenon where the dangers of existence is forcing the development of such pathogens and leading to the

outbreak of such diseases.

The shift in distribution of wildlife in order to account for anthropogenic activities and the modification of natural landscapes could also be possible reasons, which have quickened disease emergence from wildlife. This in turn could be putting us at the risk of such natural outbreaks as we are all connected globally through trade and travel.

For protection against global pandemics in the future, efforts should be made to preserve biodiversity. Particularly, interference and regular associations with wild animal species need to be minimised. Steps are needed to conserve nature for the better health of the planet. ■



(The author is Editor-in-Chief and Founder at [greenubuntu.com](http://greenubuntu.com), a website focussed on environment)

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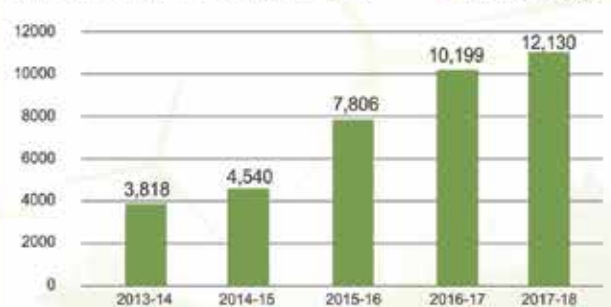


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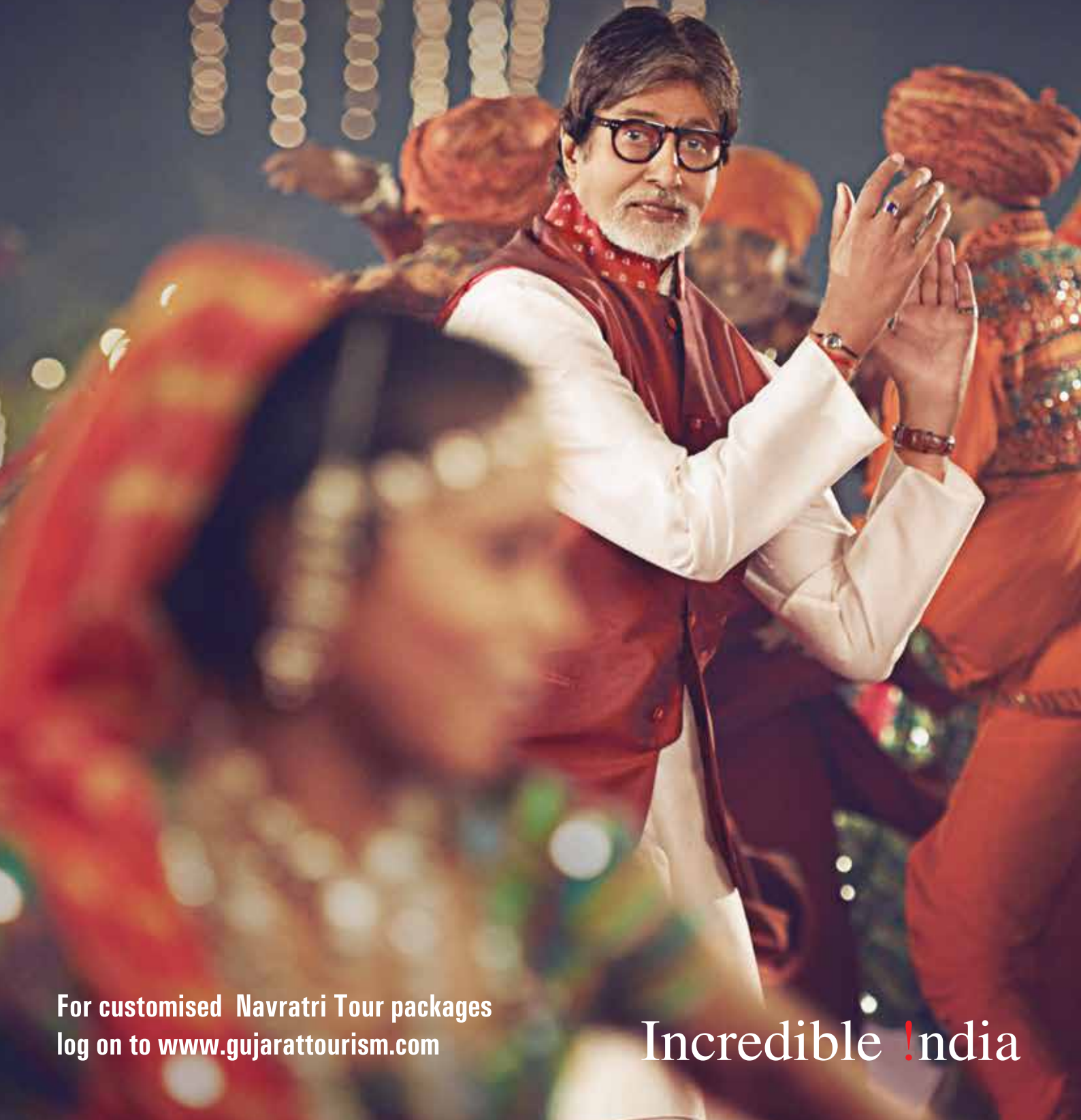
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