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2020 *A year of fear and hope*

**When Nature got a much
needed break**

Pitching for newer businesses

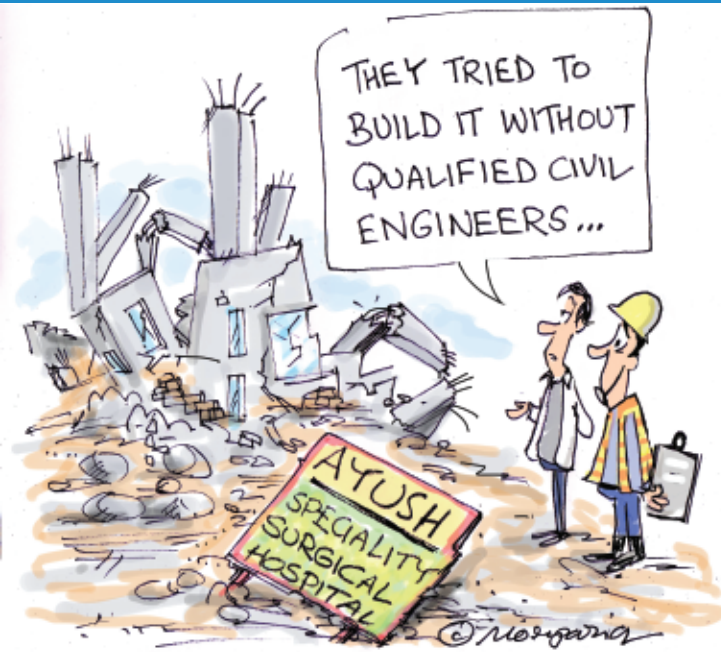
Key is to seize the moment

Know India Better

The Forts of India

Face to Face

Deepak Mundada



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When Nature got a much needed break

*The nation-wide lockdown came as a blessing in disguise to the beleaguered flora and fauna of the country. With the air cleaner and fresher and the green cover taking a cue from an amenable environment, Mumbai looked and felt like a shadow of its pristine past. The onus is on now on us to ensure that Nature continues to thrive and flourish, reminds **Nikita Shastri**.*



A deer freely crossing the road at SNGP, Borivili during the lockdown

The national lockdown that came into effect on 25 March 2020 triggered a myriad fears among citizens who weren't sure what to expect in the days to come.

The lockdown drastically affected life across the country and the absence of vehicles on city roads brought about some welcome changes in the environment that many hoped would stay longer. Now, as the country struggles to return to normalcy, it's important to appreciate the lessons learnt during the lockdown and take them forward in the 'new normal'.

Within days of the first phase of the lockdown, the air in Mumbai suddenly seemed easier to breathe. Residents, who always complained of poor air quality, striving for green and open spaces in the city, were relieved and happy. With the roads devoid of traffic and the concurrent noise pollution, Mumbai's residents, for the first time in years, saw sparrows, even peacocks. Pigeons, black kites, sparrows and crows began to swoop down till street levels in urban zones. After a long time, Mumbaikars saw birds flying in traffic zones, some even sitting on roads making their noisy presence felt.

"It was a month after the first lockdown when one morning I saw a bunch of sparrows in my balcony. I don't remember seeing these birds in a long time," says Mumbai-based chef Jenny Fernandes. "In fact, I was almost certain that sparrows would be extinct by now or may be confined only to villages and smaller towns with lesser people," she maintains.

Metropolis Mumbai turns a new leaf

Jenny was not alone in realising how nature responded to minimal human activity and interference. Residents in Mumbai's Walkeshwar area were in for a colourful surprise. "It was in the second week of April when we saw peacocks in our society prancing around," says Ritika Shah. Not only did the residents were thrilled at glimpse of India's national bird, netizens too went into a frenzy sharing images of the national bird atop parked cars in full bloom, chasing peahens all over the zone. "Even my 10-year-old son realised that these birds came down to the roads from the adjoining Hanging Gardens as there was no traffic to impede their



Madhuri Deshmukh, an avid photographer and birder shot on camera some rare birds from her window at her Vile Parle home

movement."

A little ahead, at Mumbai's iconic Marine Drive, the residents sighted the Indian Ocean Humpback Dolphins in the Arabian Sea coastline off South Mumbai generating posts on social media and trending hash tags. The Indian Ocean Humpback Dolphins have been visible to the Mumbaikars from way back but 'locked' residents could behold from out of their windows pods of Dolphins jumping in and out of the sea waters.

"There's no doubt it's basically the absence of water traffic and the concurrent human activity in the zones that has led to the dolphins coming closer to land," says Chowpaty resident and interior designer Ashish Ramani. "The dolphins are now visible everywhere in the waters. I see them frolicking in the waters off Marine Drive almost daily."

Not only birds and dolphins, Mumbai's Sassoon Docks, famous for its commercial fishing activity, also had dolphins inching much closer to land. In the absence of commercial activities in Sassoon Docks, the entire zone is cleaned out and free of encumbrances and pollutants. Why, the waters that were layered with oil spills and fish waste are now a lot clearer too in the lockdown.

National Park welcomes 'new lessons'

Mumbai's Sanjay Gandhi National Park (SGNP), the only national park that lies 'within' a city, teemed with life during the lockdown. According to Chief Conservator of Forests and Director of SGNP Anwar Ahmad, "The lockdown infused much-needed life in the national park." With humans confined to their homes, the fauna had reclaimed its lost space. The birds too enjoyed human absence while leopards emerged from their bushes even during the day. The park boasts of 251 species of birds, 38 species of reptiles, 5,000 species of insects and 40 species of mammals that stay deep in the jungle. It was never easy to spot leopards, cheetals and sambhars during a visit to the park.

"I really hope we can limit human interference with nature, at least in places like the National Park. As it is we have encroached upon the land that belongs to these birds and animals. Now as the lockdown phases out, it's important to ensure they don't lose this new-found freedom," feels Mumbai-based blogger Manasi Nanda.

So when SGNP re-opened mid-October for morning walkers and with guidelines, the government went an extra mile implementing the lessons learnt during the lockdown.



Tourists being taken around the Hampi site on a battery operated vehicle

Entry of private vehicles will be prohibited in to the park when it reopens for tourists after the lockdown. Instead, 16 battery-operated buses will operate to ferry people inside the park, especially to Kanheri Caves, one of the most popular tourist destinations inside the park. SGNP Director G Mallikarjun maintained private vehicles disturbed the animals venturing out for prey or water and these restrictions will stop that.

Air Quality best in decades

An analysis published by the System of Air Quality Weather Forecasting and Research (SAFAR) maintained that traffic pollution levels fell by three-fourth across Mumbai for period between March 24 and April 25 as compared to the preceding month and in the period of February 20 and March 20. The analysis maintained that the month-wise comparison of air quality levels for four cities – Mumbai, Delhi, Pune and Ahmedabad – also revealed that the highest reduction was witnessed in nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) levels for Pune at 70 per cent, followed by Mumbai (69 per cent). Delhi and Ahmedabad respectively recorded a 33 per cent and 30 per cent slump.

India embraces positive lockdown outcomes

The lockdown gave a much-needed break to 'nature' in towns and cities bustling with human activity and interference. With reduced industrial activity, no vehicles on roads, nature responded immediately and how. There's a new sense of responsibility that people are now exhibiting as they got a chance to appreciate nature in its full glory during the lockdown. Many state governments are taking care in framing

guidelines for opening up industries and activities post lockdown. Karnataka government, for example, reopened several tourist destinations including Mysuru Palace, Virupaksha Temple at Hampi in Ballari, Chamundeshwari Temple atop Chamundi Hills, etc. At Hampi, authorities are in the process of lining up ten new buggies for tourists who wish to visit different locations in Hampi. According to the Hampi World Heritage Area Management Authority (HWHAMA), the process to ply rail buses has started too.

Hampi was opened for tourists from June 6 after a lockdown of nearly three months. In the last two weeks hundreds of tourists have visited Hampi and surrounding areas. "This is a large tourism project initiated by the HWHAMA in the recent times. The buggies have already arrived at Ballari and soon they will be brought to Hampi. The tourists will have much safer and easier option of visiting the monuments in the buggies. Currently there are eight buggies and ten more will be added to the fleet," said an official. Additionally, provisions are being made to promote eco-tourism and reduce the carbon footprint of tourists in the zone. Industry players are roping in low carbon footprint electric bicycle rides for sightseeing in the zone. At the popular pilgrimage site of Anjanadhri Hills in

Koppal district, near Hampi, a ropeway is set to be built to ferry visitors to Lord Anjaneya temple to enhance visitors experience and help mitigate losses in the future.

The Lahaul Valley in Himachal Pradesh had imposed a blanket ban on tourism in the valley after a sudden spike in Covid cases. When the Rohtang Tunnel reopened, a swarm of tourists flocked to the region. 'Save Lahaul', a local NGO working for the preservation of the environment, ecology and local tribal culture has been protesting against the unrestricted influx of the tourists to Lahaul and Spiti. Tribal scholar and director, Institute of Vocational Studies at HP University, Shimla has been asking for special packages from the central government that 'develop tourism but also take steps for preservation of the ecology and distinctive tribal culture'. Locals are more perceptive and more vocal about assimilating these concerns in the new guidelines, post lockdown.

This generation has now witnessed nature in its full grandeur, sans the modern-day vehicular, air and water pollution, one that had only been heard about. And, we must salvage it, this time around.

Nikita Shastri is a researcher with The History and Heritage Project – a DraftCraft International Initiative to document details, analyse facts and plug lacunae generated by oversight or to further national or foreign agenda in History and Heritage Across India and Beyond Borders

Pitching for newer businesses

*The Covid-19 broke their hearts but not their spirits. When all seemed hopelessly lost and survival looked bleak, Mumbai scripts heartening never-say-die stories of enterprise and sets an example to all those who give up without a semblance of fights in the wake of adversities, discovers **Tanya Sinha**.*



Dadar flower market where Navin Jambhale used to sell flowers. During lockdown he switched gears to sell potatoes and onions which were in demand

The Covid-19 crisis came like a bolt from the blue with mankind having no clue to ward it off. With it came the inevitable lockdown and its attendant risks. The biggest setback was the Economy which took a bad hit – loss of jobs, pay cuts, businesses shutting down et al. The after-effects were devastating. There was a reverse migration of sorts with people fleeing cities and the pandemic testing the resilience of the people like never before.

Navin Jambhale had been selling flowers all his life through a small stall tucked away in Dadar's famous flower market. He was forced to shut shop bought more than six decades ago by his father when he migrated to Mumbai from Satara. There was little or no business even after restrictions were eased phase-wise as temples and other places of worship continued to remain shut.

A couple of months into the lockdown, when his savings started to dwindle and expenses continued to soar with an ailing mother at home, Navin decided to pull

himself together. "It was a very difficult phase. I had to fend for my family of five and had to step out of the house," says Navin. He decided to return to what his Baba did and started selling onion and potatoes. "God stood by me. Since vegetable vendors were allowed to operate, I could shift gears and made sure there was something to subsist." Navin found many new customers here. What helped his cause was only a few vegetable shops were operating and onions and potatoes were in high demand because there were not adequate supplies of other vegetable varieties. It was a new learning curve under the circumstances but nevertheless a good one.

With restaurants and eateries also shut during the initial phase of the lockdown, Hyderabad-based Biryani outlet owner Asif Qureshi had to fall in line too. In the initial phase of the lockdown people did not venture to eat outside food and he found his delicacy had no takers. The easing of the restrictions later where home delivery of food was granted didn't solve the problem either as his staff chose to leave for their native places since skeletal train services had been



Many started their own business venture of delivering food from home

resumed.

It was only after three months that he began to find his moorings when restrictions were eased further. He started items of daily needs from his food outlet. "Some of my relatives discouraged me believing that it was a climb down from my earlier business. My mother, however, motivated me and even sat with me at my new business to set it up," recalls Asif.

Ashirwad Bundake, working as a bank courier found himself out of job after the lockdown. "We stayed put for some time and when things began to open up my parents discouraged me from resuming since they found commuting risky," recalls Ashirwad. That left him with no option but to do something on his own. Sometime in July, Ashirwad and his brother-in-law Santosh Sagvekar decided they would sell eggs in the local market. A resident of Borivali, Santosh and his pregnant wife had to leave their Dombivali home following an alarming rise in COVID cases and stay at a relatively safer family home in South Mumbai. "The Prime Minister's speech on being self-reliant was an eye-opener. I said to myself, why not? It worked and today we earn enough to sustain," says Santosh.

Among those who could withstand the testing times was the Bhobu family. It owned a fast food joint. Opened 25 years ago by its patriarch Prakash Bhobu who also sold stoves until his son Rakesh diversified into Chinese food that continues till date. "After the lockdown workers left for their home in Nepal. The cook stayed back but he could do nothing on his own." So now, they sell items of daily and kitchen use and business isn't too bad," says Rakesh. With wife Pratibha Bhobu and 63-year-old moth-

er-in-law Sushma also help out in the shop where the latter would sell dried Bombil (Bombay Duck) to their clientele. New business meant newer tactics of enterprise, says Pratibha who is upbeat about her "side business". In the unlock period, Pratibha and her husband resumed work. "I have to go once a week and my husband twice a week. The rest of the time, we dedicate to the shop."

A feisty woman and a firm believer, Madhu Koli knew she had to do something to ensure a regular income for her family of five. She simply couldn't play the role of a 'non-earning' home-maker any longer. "What better than selling flowers? Yes, the temples were shut but that still didn't stop people from praying in their homes," she says. So what began as a purely limited business worked very well as there were no others who ventured to sell flowers," Madhu recalls. Her husband goes to the wholesale market at 4.30 am every day and gets flowers for his wife to sell at their new stall. And, Madhu Koli is thrilled with her entrepreneurial spirit.

"The profit margins are not much but I continue to sell flowers. Log bahut maante hai bhagwan ko (people firmly believe in God)." What brings solace is the lockdown opened up new avenues of business at a time when all seemed lost," she feels.

Tanya Sinha is a media researcher with The History and Heritage Project – A DraftCraft International Initiative to document details, analyze facts and plug lacunae generated by oversight or to further national or foreign agenda in History and Heritage Across India and Beyond Borders

Dormant talents came to the fore

The lockdown may have pinned people down to their homes but many put their anxiety and restive moments to creative use. Some learnt new craft, some took to art to express themselves and some rediscovered themselves through other pursuits, finds Mamta Gupta.



Shubha Khandekar, journalist and author-illustrator of 'ArchaeoGiri - The Bridge Between the Archaeologist and the Common Man' literally picked up the threads to follow an old hobby - embroidery, to beat the lockdown stress (inset-Shubha)

Glancing out of the balcony of her cosy two-bedroom apartment in Mumbai, 25-year-old management consultant Meenakshi Prabhu nervously paced the breadth of her bedroom. The restlessness clearly visible on her face, countless cups of coffee, dollops of her favourite ice cream, even the company of her six-month old indie pup didn't seem to comfort 'Meenu', as she's known among her friends. She knew she had to put her mind to "some use", even if it meant reviving her long lost love for painting.

Even thinking of that time makes Meenakshi depressed. "I just don't want to go back to that time, ever again. It was probably the lowest day of my life. Two weeks into the lockdown ... the silence, the confinement and solitude drove me crazy. I couldn't handle it anymore and reached out to my brother" who advised her "to engage in something creative". And, since that day "I haven't stopped painting. It's like I am trying to make up for all the time I couldn't paint sometimes due to my studies, exams or career choices." Meenakshi still hates that day but is grateful too as it "pushed" her into what she always wanted to do in her life.

The anxiety people experienced, sitting idle, during the lockdown has been 'nothing short of a pandemic itself'

as an increasing number of individuals complained of panic attacks and insomnia during the period. The trend was particularly common in individuals staying alone, away from their families.

Lockdown affected people psychologically

India's fight to battle the deadly COVID-19 outbreak is ongoing. While the lockdown restrictions have eased down, the sheer nature of the infection is keeping everyone on tenterhooks. A few months into the lockdown, the debate and confusion over 'restarting' the economic machinery in the country was closely watched by members of the public who were now craving for the simplest of things - a cup of coffee in one's favourite cafeteria, a stroll in the park, a long drive, a late night out with friends.

The lockdown tweaked the 'normal' for millions of Indians. Cornered and quarantined, people took to new hobbies and skills to stay occupied, re-invent themselves, build their skillset even distract themselves from the associated stress.

It's never too late to learn

During the lockdown, many people got a chance to

'upgrade' themselves. Learning new languages, exploring culinary skills, learning new crafts, exploring photography, blogging, learning to do make-up and hair-styling, participating in online dance classes, learning computer programming, etc., were some of the myriad options that opened during the lockdown.

"I realised how I had taken my freedom for granted. The most obvious of things such as hopping onto my Activa and driving down to the Sabarmati Riverfront for a kulfi seemed like an event from a past life. I just kept thinking when I will be able to do that again?" feels Ahmedabad-based real-estate agent Jigyasa Trivedi. That's when she decided to make optimum use of "the time God has granted" to her and enrolled in online foreign language classes. "It's been a boon in disguise. I am now exploring other career options that may utilise my foreign language skills."

Noida-based freelance writer Kritika Sharma was at her in-laws' place in Gurgaon, when the lockdown was announced. During the lockdown, she decided to fine-tune her cooking skills under her mother-in-law. "I have never really cooked a proper meal because of paucity of time owing to my professional commitments. I didn't know to cook many dishes." Now, with all the time at hand, Kritika has been learning to cook traditional dishes and is open to exploring "catering as a part-time business." Not only did she get to spend time with and know her mother-in-law better, she realised her love for cooking too!

Building professional skillset

An increasing number of people used using the home-confinement to enhance their professional and soft skills. "Many of my friends registered for online courses and programmes and are seriously considering changing careers," says Chennai-based software engineer Anitha S. Millions of users the world over are signing up for free and paid courses in an area of interest.

Panjim-based history teacher Clarinda Dias was always interested in learning music. "My parents never wanted me to pursue music as it was not as respectable as a teaching job. So I settled for a career of their choice but always felt incomplete," offers Clarinda. She finally got a chance to pursue her hidden desire to learn music during the lockdown. She registered for online music classes and has been excited ever since to show off her talent to her people.

Like Clarinda, millions enrolled for online courses, webinars and seminars to create additional work profiles that opened up new career prospects.

"This is just the right time to upgrade, professionally or academically otherwise with personal and work commitments, it's almost impossible to think of something new," feels Mumbai-based law student Alpa Raut, who is undertaking an international human rights course online and wishes to pursue a career in international law.

Many set new goals for life

Many people, sitting idle at home during the lockdown, set creative and fitness goals such as losing weight, building stamina for a marathon, trying out kitchen gardening, exploring yoga and meditation, etc. With everything available online during the lockdown, it became very easy for people to set new goals for their lives and following them through. Some even discovered a knack for things they didn't even know they possessed.

Hardiwar-based government accounts personnel Geeta Patnaik discovered a new side to her personality. At work, Mamta never got a chance to explore her 'creative' side as she dealt with numbers throughout her life. It was peer pressure that led her to discover a new side of her. Geeta started sketching for the first time during the lockdown. "I was sitting idle, not knowing how to spend my time. I started surfing social media sites to understand how people were spending their time and realised many had taken to sketching...that's when I thought, why not!" feels Geeta showing off her sketches that surprised her too.

Internet became a saviour

For many who undertook new hobbies during the lockdown, internet was probably the most useful tool at hand. People made ample use of the internet, particularly YouTube through its 'Do It Yourself' or 'DIY' video tutorials explaining the most interesting and creative things you can do 'on your own'.

Many young mothers learned new things themselves first and then taught their children. "It was unfortunate that children had to stay indoors for so long during the lockdown. As a parent, I knew I had to engage my child creatively," says Mumbai-based homemaker Lalita Joshi. "My five-year-old son would get restless and crib a lot during the day as days progressed during the lockdown. So, I started surfing YouTube videos for things to do with children. It was probably one of the best decisions I took and the internet really helped. We built blocks, did a lot of craft work, even some kitchen gardening."

The lockdown drove people to reintroduce old hobbies to the newer self or acquire new ones in the process. It was probably the best utilisation of time during the lockdown that not only helped people keep their sanity intact but also provided an opportunity to diversify their skill set, upgrade professionally, explore their talents and be one with themselves.

Mamta Gupta is a Research Associate with Maverick – A DraftCraft International initiative to further reach, accountability and the law in Pre-Primary, Primary, Intermediary and Secondary Education.

Restoring familial bonds

The pandemic in its wake brought a plethora of problems – among other things deflating psychologies – but it had a proverbial silver lining to it too as people confined to their homes realised the negatives of their fragmented lives and found they could strengthen blood relations by spending quality time with each other, observes Sonal Aggarwal.



Prachi Rohit Sawalkar, a parenting coach based in Vancouver-British Columbia spends quality time with her three-year daughter Shriya, keeping her engaged in various fun and educative activities. Here Shriya is seen painting a lantern during the recent Diwali festival

The Covid-19 pandemic hit countries around the world, unexpectedly and brutally. It was no different with India where it swamped the lives of millions, disrupting everything and setting a 'new normal' along the way. The pandemic changed the way humans live life and socialise for now and, maybe, in future as well.

Although not discussed widely, Covid-19 had psychological effects too on adults and children, besides health effects. There were a few positive outcomes too as the lockdown allowed families to stay together, longer, and spend time with each other which they otherwise rarely got to.

And, the social and psychological impact of Covid-19 was felt across the socio-economic strata of society. It was the urban rich, the middle-class and the poor who braved the virus, battled the problems even welcomed the 'unexpected' good things that Covid-19 brought along.

Children faced Covid-19 bravely

Perhaps the most vulnerable section of the social structure, after the elderly, children fought the Covid-19 pandemic bravely across the country. It was a completely new situation for children. A survey conducted among parents by Child Rights and You (CRY) to understand the effects of the 'home quarantine' in effect due to the Covid-19

lockdown in India revealed: 88 per cent of the respondents said exposure of their children to screens had increased during the lockdown; 45 per cent reported their children's exposure to screens increased 'to a great extent' during the lockdown; while 43 per cent said they were constantly monitoring the child whenever he/she was 'online'.

The timely survey highlighted important facts that helped in understanding the impact of Covid-19 crisis on children. It further went on to report 'more agitation, a change in eating pattern and increase in the screen exposure time' among children among other 'changes observed' in children during the lockdown imposed in the country.

The parent-child bond strengthened

The lockdown also provided parents an opportunity to spend quality time with their children. This uninterrupted and stress-free time positively impacted the special bond between children and parents. Experts believe the lockdown proved to be extremely useful in developing and strengthening the bond between families, especially the parent-child relationship.

"Those were the most beautiful months I spent with my daughter. There were no other commitments. It was just the two of us and we would do everything together from cooking to watching TV. We would talk continuously for

hours, discussing everything under the sun. It really helped me know her better,” feels freelance writer and Mumbai-based single mother Madhu Joshi.

With all the time at hand, parents and children did assorted things like cleaning, household chores, watching movies, playing indoor games, reading together, eating together. It helped families come closer and strengthen bond with their younger ones.

Families got more closely knit

“Modern-day living in cities is very stressful and fast-paced with everything compartmentalised. Most families have both parents working, leaving little time to be spent with children.

The pandemic really changed that as parents got a chance to be with their children beyond the evenings and the weekends. Many of them realised what they were missing out on and are making amends to prioritise family time going forward,” offers Indore-based family counsellor Deepika Pradhan.

She further explains how children played an important role in keeping families together. “Many families on the verge of falling apart survived as they could introspect and focus on nurturing relationships even as children played an important role in it.”

Migrants stayed longer with families

The lockdown affected millions of lives and the impact transcended all boundaries. However, for a few from the lower economic strata of the society, the effects of the pandemic were far more serious and everlasting.

The migrant workers who form the backbone of big cities such as Mumbai, Delhi, and Ahmedabad faced the wrath of the Covid 19 the most. Not only did they lose jobs, they got stuck in cities away from their families. They had to struggle to make ends meet with little or no savings, mounting dues and shutting down of businesses and food outlets.

In time, the government stepped up efforts to transport migrant workers back to their villages enabling them to reunite them with their worried families. Men and women who spent decades living in cities, earning a living for their families, had to retreat to their homes not knowing what the future held out for them. Most of the work force belonged to the poverty-stricken states such as Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Odisha, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, etc., where distress migration is a commonplace occurrence.

“I was very worried when I left Mumbai for my village in Aurangabad in Bihar. I didn't know when and if I'll ever be able to go back. But I also got a lot of time to spend with my children who I would otherwise only meet once a year only for a few weeks,” says Ahmed Ansari, a watchman in Mumbai. Like Ahmed most migrant labourers were forced

to rush to their home towns to be reunited with their families. The lockdown helped them in spending quality time with their family and children who they used to be in touch with only over phones.

For some women, lockdown meant more violence

As India adjusted to the strict lockdown to prevent the spread of Covid-19 many women faced another kind of confinement. According to the National Commission for Women (NCW), cases of domestic violence, sexual abuse and sexual violence against women saw a sharp rise during the lockdown. The NCW received 315 complaints, only of domestic violence, in April 2020. These were received online and on a dedicated WhatsApp helpline / complaint number only and not by the commonly-used postal services owing to the lockdown restrictions. Still, the number was the highest since August 2019 as per NCW records.

Many countries around the world witnessed an increase in the number of cases of violence against women who are confined to homes with an abusive partner or husband or family member such as South Africa, China, Italy, Spain, UK, France, USA, etc. Organisations and women groups working closely on issues related to women rights, domestic violence and safety of women received complaints of abuse of women from across quarters, especially as their husbands or partners lost jobs or received salary cuts.

For this generation the Covid-19 crisis is in all probability, a once-in-a-lifetime event. It allowed people to appreciate what they have and also to learn to cherish relationships and value families. People also learned to make time for family and friends, bonding with them and realising the importance of a family unit.

When the lockdown was announced in India in March 2020 no one anticipated the period of home quarantine to be this long. So, initially, families prepared for a limited quarantine time and eventually adapted to the 'new normal'. However, moving forward, people want to take ahead the lessons learnt too and many are consciously deciding to be happy or working towards happiness even with limited means and under difficult circumstances.

Visit Prachi's personal blog : Mom-me (<https://www.facebook.com/yourmomfriend>) which gives an insight into how parents can make learning fun for their children.

Sonal Aggarwal is a dedicated volunteer and rural activist with www.thewomansurvivor.com – an initiative of DraftCraft International to protect and empower women by bringing on one platform the latest on rights and issues, strategic case studies, state initiatives and informed legal opinions

Key is to seize the moment

The Covid-19 threw the mankind in throes of uncertainty, cramped inside homes and making peace with expediencies. Shrugging off all despair, people showed exemplary crisis management to tide over and brave it out with smiles, appreciates Aarti Asthana.



Seizing the moment is the best way forward

If there's one thing that the year 2020 has taught the world, it's to live in the moment: Carpe Diem as in to seize the moment. It was the acute uncertainty of the Covid-19 situation that fetched India her first lockdown from March 25 kept millions within her borders home-bound, for days on end. And, it was then that the uncertainty of the days was felt the most.

All plans regarding work and pleasure went for a toss, the whole of 2020 as business suffered, professionals lost livelihoods, and workers lost jobs following an unprecedented job crisis across India. When banker Aditi Sartoskar heard about the lockdown, her heart "skipped a beat or two." After months of haggling and bargaining, she had managed to procure a fortnight-long deal with a motorcycle company to fund her trip across India for a vlog, she planned to start on Women Health.

"I had left my corporate job in December last and had started writing. I was due to start my first solo motorcycle trip in April 2020, funded and sponsored after days of bargaining and chasing corporates, when this happened," she recalls. "And, everything took a hit for the worse," she said. "The sponsors called me up and told me that all projects had

been put on the backburners and the payments for the trip were being suspended. "There was nothing I could do about it," she says, "the contingency of suspending the programme had been laid down in the contract itself."

So, Aditi put off all outdoor plans and started to work upon a fully virtual platform that could take off on a physical plane soon once the lockdown was called off. She even managed to get funding for the same from a financial institution backing women projects. "It wasn't exactly what I was looking for but surely covered my losses for the time," she said.

Breaking new ground

And then, there were thousands who lost their jobs owing to the financial crunch that followed the lockdown. "After 18 years of working for the travel firm that I had joined from its starting days, I was asked to leave office and work from home in the initial period," recalled Pune-based accountant Arun Joglekar. "But, when the lockdown was extended the second time, my employer asked me to leave, saying that he could not sustain the losses as the travel industry was hit directly," he added.

So, Arun instead of sitting back at home and doing nothing, decided to start a home-made food 'tiffin' service prepared by his wife and distributed to a network of friends and students who would be 'working from home'. Called 'Manshakti Dabba', the service grew from strength to strength over the months and when his employer contacted him in August to resume work albeit from home in the beginning, Arun politely declined the offer.

"Now, I have my own venture to work upon. I have realised the importance of the moment and the need to live fully in it. Come any catastrophe of this nature, I should not be dependent on a job or some other industry. I have learned to be free, the hard way and will never give it up," he says. And, like Arun and Aditi were thousands of others who managed to break the shackles of jobs and vocations that had been hit adversely by the lockdown.

The most essential of needs, food, turned out to be a savior for millions across India during the lockdown. And, in the days of Covid-19 and the importance of hygiene, it was home-made food cooked by homemakers that mattered the most. After all, it was clean, healthy and economical too. Little wonder then that most of the city's students, workers, even locals travelling far to work make a beeline for new-age entrepreneurs, mostly home-makers, who'd sell fresh food from homes for customers to takeaway and consume at their homes, offices or workplaces.

When the national lockdown was announced by PM Modi and restaurants forced to shut business, locals were left with little option but cook at home. If it weren't for the middle class homemakers, thousands of migrant workers and students - living in basic small rooms with no scope to cook - would have to grapple with hunger. Those days, the fear of hunger was real and palpable.

True to their wont, the residents worked around the lockdown even provided basic amenities like eggs, bread and snacks to 'outsiders' while keeping the mandatory 'safe distance' and wearing masks throughout. And the slow, opening up following the lockdown, led to a mushrooming of food providers - all home-makers with their husbands pitching in - cooking the choicest of wares - safe and economical to those without kitchens and viable food options.

"When I first saw more stalls opening up in the neighbourhood, I almost jumped with joy. Now, I could buy myself a decent breakfast before rushing to work," says Shilpa Sawant working as an administrative staff at a hospital at Bombay Central. "I have to work long hours at the hospital which got longer during the lockdown. So, there is no time for me to even make tea at home," she maintains.

Among the newer food providers, home-maker Lata Koli is, by far, hugely talented. Besides the fact that her cooking prowess is endorsed by all even her own competitors, it's the rush at her place that speaks volumes of her cuisine. "It's through word of mouth that my customer base has increased over the days," she says.

"Sitting idle at home was not agreeing with me. I

would give tuition to local school children and later stopped to focus on my son's and daughter's education. Now that they've grown up, I found myself having a lot of time at hand, especially during the lockdown. So I decided to start this mini-venture of making and selling dosas during the day and personally improvised chicken-based snacks during the evenings," says an excited Lata.

"Nischal Koli, my husband, spending more time at home during the lockdown makes it a point to help me with the cutting and chopping. It's a great way for us to get some money rolling," she maintains.

Lessons learnt

In a lot of areas across Mumbai as in Kolkata and Ahmedabad, there emerged a multitude of options for residents, passers-by, and the general working population. Locals began preparing and selling dosas, idli, wada, sambhar, chutney, puri-bhaji, keema-pav, sandwich, 'Frankie', etc., in a direct demonstration of Carpe Diem even in the midst of a crisis as menacing as the Covid-19 situation.

Why, most even worked shoulder to shoulder, dumping difference of religion and community, helping each other bide over the crisis that, they learnt, could only be fought together. The differences, they learnt, were only as imaginary as their fears of the future. They had to live for the moment, and they did.

There're lessons to be learnt in every crisis. Covid-19 ensured that everyone got fit, literally and figuratively, to survive and succeed. Seizing the moment was the best way to go ahead. So, dumping complacency and despondency, Indians worked on their innate skills and emerged successful in 2020. Yes, there were losses to be borne and hurdles to be overcome, but they did all of it with a smile and the grit that is unique to all Indians.

There're lessons to be learnt in every crisis. Covid-19 ensured that everyone got fit, literally and figuratively, to survive and succeed. Seizing the moment was the best way to go ahead.

Aarti Asthana is a media researcher volunteering with www.HealthAndTheLaw.com - A DraftCraft International Initiative to spread awareness among patients of legal rights and position in law, boost medico-legal awareness, initiate legislative change and enforce accountability among healthcare players

A healthier India sprints into the next year

*In a welcome change people are taking recourse to traditional streams and therapies of medicine to put up a stiff fight against the marauding Covid-19. Boosting immunity, quitting vices and adopting healthier lifestyles turned out to be trumps in this battle, points out **Vinita Pathak**.*

If it were not for the Covid-19 crisis, year 2020 would have culminated differently for India, just like the rest of the world. The pandemic scare shook the most advanced of nations and challenged human intelligence to the core. To control the spread of the 'highly-infectious' disease, people looked out for every possible option to not only prevent the spread of the disease but cure it, effectively and permanently.

When the entire world was failing with modern medicine to control the virus, it was India that tasted success with its traditional medicine system, Ayurveda, in helping people with the prevention and management of the Covid infection. The Covid-19 crisis not only made India stronger as a country but a healthier nation with more people now embracing traditional medicines and therapies.

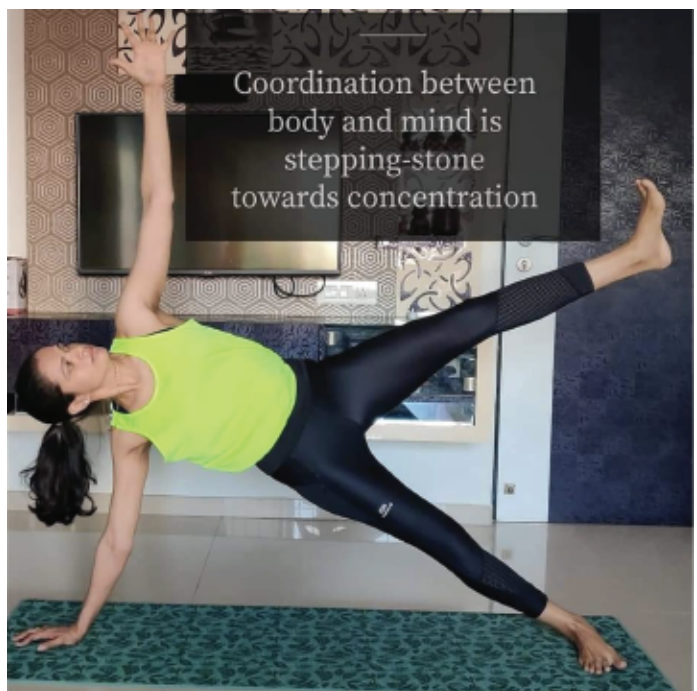
The health challenges

The novel coronavirus that originated in Wuhan, China perplexed the medical fraternity with its unpredictable nature. The infection, its rapidly-growing list of 'possible symptoms', no successful vaccine in sight and the recurrence of the infection in 'cured' patients caused fear psychosis among the people and the medical fraternity alike.

The prognosis of the Coronavirus infection was something the medical fraternity discovered alongside tackling the damage caused by the virus. Covid-19 can spread silently, rapidly and display worst symptoms suddenly. The fact that a 'normal person' can suddenly start displaying symptoms that worsen into life-threatening conditions within a span of a few hours was also a big cause of worry for doctors and posed challenges to the medical fraternity and civic health officials in the management of the disease.

Additionally, the virus affects the respiratory system to a great extent which is why urgent medical attention is needed in patients, particularly those with compromised lung function and other respiratory disorders such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), asthma, bronchitis and the elderly.

When the COVID-19 first hit India, the biggest concern with authorities was managing the disease in crowded areas, slums and among the migrant population. Soon



Many people took to yoga to keep mentally and physically fit (pic courtesy – Minni Anchan)

enough, there was an evident shortage of beds in medical facilities and designated Covid Care Centres across the country, particularly in COVID-hotspots such as Mumbai, Delhi, Bengaluru, Ahmedabad, etc. Even most far-flung areas such as Himachal Pradesh and several north-eastern states soon fell prey to the unpredictable nature and dangerous progression of the COVID-19 infection.

Embracing traditional health systems

Soon enough, there was a major shift in the country's approach towards medication and health management at the state policy level and within homes too. It was clear that the best way to tackle the virus was identifying and implementing preventive healthcare management that included immunity boosting measures, ayurvedic immunity boosters, yoga and pranayam for improved lung function.

"It was a learning curve for the entire country, the doctors as well as the common man. And, we as a country collectively looked inwards for a solution that was right in



Ayurvedic kadha (a decoction) became a favourite drink for boosting immunity

front of us,” offers Mumbai-based alternative health and wellness practitioner Geetha Prakash.

“I have been practising for two decades now. Earlier, I always found foreigners more open and embracing of India’s traditional medicine systems such as Ayurveda, yoga, etc. After the COVID-19 crisis, now more and more Indians are also adopting traditional ways for a better and healthy living. India has found a new health consciousness.”

Boosting immunity

In the wake of the unprecedented loss of life that the novel coronavirus caused in countries such as Italy, Spain, USA, UK and others, India tackled the situation by giving equal attention to preventive healthcare.

It was in June 2020 Baba Ramdev’s Patanjali Ayurved launched ‘Coronil’, an immunity-booster kit, as a preventive healthcare measure. Patanjali claimed that in Coronil, more than 100 ayurvedic compounds are used including ashwagandha, tulsi, giloy and other ayurvedic ingredients that ‘help in boosting internal immunity and fight other symptoms such as cough and cold, fever, etc.’

While Patanjali launched an immunity boosting kit, it’s a known fact that herbs and spices, integral to Ayurveda, have been part of traditional Indian households for centuries. Most home remedies used for fever, cough and cold, sore throat, weakness, body pain, joint pain, diabetes, infection, menstrual pain, migraine, arthritis, etc. are based on Ayurveda and are readily available in Indian homes.

Ayurveda uses natural herbs and spices with high medicinal values such as haldi (turmeric), tulsi, giloy, mulethi, cinnamon, ginger, etc. Medicinal properties of these herbs and spices are also used for strengthening immunity. It’s this immunity-boosting property of Ayurveda that has been helpful in managing the Covid-19 infection.

The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare that has been proactive in providing guidelines during the COVID-19 crisis also emphasised on ayurvedic intervention to manage post-COVID conditions and for immunity-boosting. The

ministry emphasised on the daily intake of immunity-boosting kaadha (medical concoction) to prevent the onset of the disease. Additionally, it stated that recovered patients should use chyawanprash and AYUSH medicines to alleviate post-Covid conditions. An advisory by the ministry read ‘In the clinical practice, chyawanprash is believed to be effective in the post-recovery period’ and also listed yoga, pranayama and daily walks among other suggestions.

Opting for healthier lifestyles

The crisis also jolted many out of the slumber of sedentary lifestyles in India. Modern-day living is a magnet for stress and Covid-19 pandemic aggravated in multi-fold. In urban settings where lifestyles are more sedentary and families are nuclear and members get lesser time to spend with each other, stress is a major health risk factor.

Also, the flexible work options provided by multinational companies and new start-ups such as work-from-home, flexible work hours and excessive travelling also posed serious challenges, both physical and mental, to the working population. Erratic schedules and independent living also often means improper and unhealthy food habits. Thankfully, the lockdown that lasted for most of 2020 provided an opportunity to many such people to taste the fruits of a healthy, disciplined living that includes sleeping and waking up on time, eating healthy food and on time and mainly consuming home-cooked meals.

“I was a workaholic before the lockdown but I really compromised on my health in the process. Increased stress levels and a bad diet soon culminated into PCOS that made my life really difficult. The lockdown came as a boon in disguise for me as I got a chance to work on myself and take care of my health. This year, that has been my biggest take-away,” maintains Pune-based marketing executive Sheetal Pandey. “I have promised myself that no matter what I’ll never ignore my health in the future. What’s the point of having a great salary when you don’t have the health to enjoy it!” she says.

It was probably the fear of the virus, the time many had for the first time in their lives to focus on themselves or perhaps the realisation of how precious family and life is but health became a priority for millions of Indians during the lockdown. With restaurant and eateries closed during the lockdown, many started cooking and eating at home, with their families. Many even quit bad habits like alcohol or binge eating and started practicing yoga, meditation, etc.

It’s a welcome change that is here to stay as India takes on challenges of the new year.

Vinita Pathak is an intern with www.HealthAndTheLaw.com – A DraftCraft International Initiative to spread awareness among patients of legal rights and position in law, boost medico-legal awareness, initiate legislative change and enforce accountability among healthcare players.



The Forts of India

The forts of India are architectural marvels that tell us the exploits of brave warriors who once ruled this land. These standing sentinels hold within them memories as solid as the stones they are made of. Today they are the guardians of history and legacy - the ghosts of a time gone by.

Text & Photographs: Akul Tripathi
(Part-1 of a three-part series on the Forts of India)

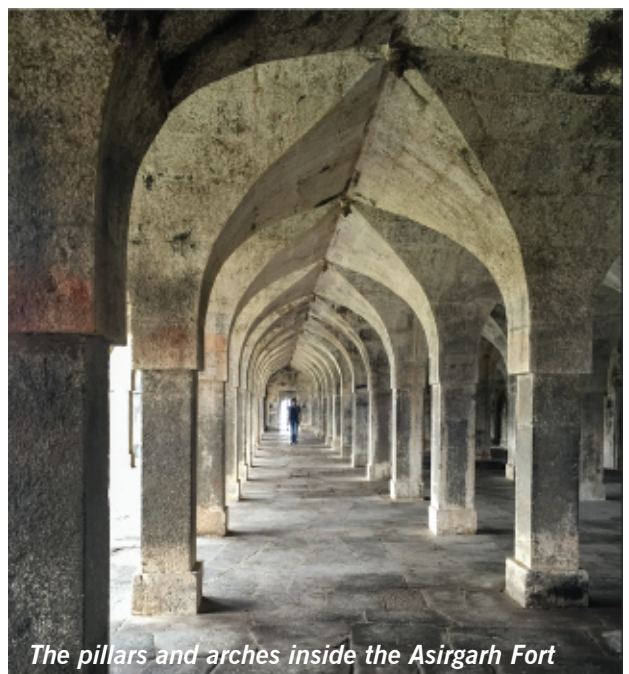


Asirgarh is located near Burhanpur in Madhya Pradesh

They stand atop mountains, or in the middle of dense jungles, and sometimes by the shore; forlorn, deserted, and often dilapidated...in ruins. Once upon a time, they were eulogised and paeans composed to celebrate them -- forts -- the heart of mighty empires, the refuge of the masses, the blanket of comfort to all within them. Set in stone, they stood proud against anyone who would dare try and enter to cause harm. Zealously they guarded those who considered them their own.

As border outposts, or even large walled cities encircled with all manners of ingenious fortifications and security measures they were the state-of-the-art when it came to safety and defence. Today they are the guardians of history and legacy - the ghosts of a time gone by.

It would be hard to find a tale from childhood that did not include a fort as a main setting or a place where the characters would eventually return. The princes and kings, ministers and warriors -- the protagonists of these fables that tell us the valour and heroism would go unsung without a good strong fort. From Hamlet to The Count of Monte Cristo, and



The pillars and arches inside the Asirgarh Fort

from Prithviraj Chauhan to Rani of Jhansi, the visuals of forts as backdrop is perhaps the most enduring of images in the mind's eye.

In several countries of the world where tourism and heritage are flaunted, cities still live within medieval fortifications. Castles and citadels hold pride of place in culture and daily conversations. Festivals are planned around them and the exploits of the heroes and sheroes are a part of numerous walking tours - both real and virtual.

Forts are architectural marvels. Their design, methods of construction, the materials that went into building them, even the site at which they were built, were given great thought. Extensive planning and sheer grit went into constructing them brick by brick as icons of reliability and strength. A more than cursory look at any fort will yield an understanding of the past of the area and its people as good, if not better, than any archive or written account. This still holds true, whether a fort is standing or lying in ruins...

Asirgarh - The Deccan's deception

If this fort was to have an emotion, it would be drama. Just on the approach to the fort, one can almost hear the buildup

music in the thumping of the heart. Situated in the heart of India, near Burhanpur in Madhya Pradesh, and constructed on a spur of the Satpuras, Asirgarh or Asirgadh overlooks a pass that connects the Narmada and Tapti river valleys, and once commanded and safeguarded the medieval trading route through the Deccan to South India, earning the epithet of 'Key to the Deccan'.

Encompassing around 60 acres, Asirgarh comprises three distinct lines of porch. The lowermost is Malaygarh, the middle one Kamargarh and the oldest on the top of the hill - Asirgarh. Ancient in its origins, it has been built, modified, strengthened and made impregnable with every dynasty that held it. With a reputation of never having been captured in a fair fight across, Asirgarh, in the world of forts is a legend in its own right.

According to some sources, the oldest accounts of Asirgarh in local tradition date back to the 2nd millennium BCE, when it was said to be in the charge of Rajput chieftains. The name Asirgarh is largely accredited to being styled after Asa, an Ahir king of the 15th century, who is believed to have held the fort before it was taken from him treacherously by the Farooqis. The Farooqis are credited with having substantially strengthened the fortifications of



Asirgarh was the last major fort won by Akbar before his death in 1605



The Portuguese built an entire city complete with a town hall, coin mint, hospital, churches, college, library, court, prison and a market place inside the Vasai Fort.

Asirgarh, and they held the fort till the Mughal Emperor Akbar arrived at its gates in his quest to conquer the Deccan and captured the fort --- again not in a fair fight. While there are many accounts of the unfair means through which Akbar conquered Asirgarh, a widely quoted one tells the story of how a local betrayed his homeland and showed the Mughals a path to get into Asirgarh. It was the last major fort won by Akbar before his death in 1605. An inscription of Akbar records the conquest of the fort in 1600 CE.

The fort passed on to the Marathas from the Mughals and from them to the British who are believed to have paid handsomely to buy it from the Marathas. This was the last major fort that had escaped British control, and after signing a treaty in 1819 at the end of the Third Anglo-Maratha War, a message was sent to the British headquarters that they had finally conquered India. Remains of structures from the Farooqi era to that of the British --- mosques, prison, cemetery, gallows, water tanks, and inscriptions, can still be found on the fort written in both Persian and Sanskrit.

Like it is with most things in our country, it is quite impossible to wander very far without stepping into the world of epics. Asirgarh is long believed to be the place where Ashwathama, the son of Guru Dronacharya, cursed by Lord Krishna after killing the sons of the Pandavas post the Mahabharata war, retreated. Some believe that before

the hill was called Asirgarh, it was known as Ashwathama-giri --- the mountain of Ashwathama. As per legend, Ashwathama is believed to take a ritual bath in the Tapti, perform puja at the Gupteshwar temple in nearby Burhanpur and then take a subterranean path to perform puja at the Shiva temple now located within the fort. Locals claim to have often seen a wild flower appear on the linga in the temple, mysteriously...

Vasai Fort

While Mumbai's scenic Bandra fort is a location that gets many visitors and is among the locations of choice for Bollywood love scenes, a fort massive in size and its contribution in history is often overlooked. In the suburb of Vasai lies the Vasai Fort, or the Fort of Bassein, as it was then known by the Portuguese who constructed it in 1536 in over 110 acres of land and used it as a base for over 200 years.

Used often by the Portuguese governor as a residence, the fort was veritably invincible as it was surrounded by water on three sides and the side facing the land had a very high and strong wall. Within this large safe zone, the Portuguese built an entire city complete with a town hall, coin mint, hospital, churches, college, library, court, prison and a market place.

As the Marathas rose to prominence in the 18th



Spectacular view of the Zorawar Fort with snow-capped peaks in the background

century, General Chimaji Appa, the younger brother of the Maratha Empire builder Peshwa Bajirao, captured the fort in 1739 after the Battle of Vasai. The Marathas used the capture of this fort to spread far and wide the story of their triumph and might. Bells from the churches were given as gifts to the warriors who then donated them to temples of their choice. Bells from the Vasai Fort are found in temples as far as Jalna and Kolhapur, and also in famous temples in Nashik, Jejuri and Bhimashankar -- one of the 12 venerated jyotirlings.

After the First Anglo-Maratha War, the British took over the Vasai Fort as part of the Treaty of Bassein in 1802. After a brief attempt at running a sugar factory which did not prove profitable to their expectations, they abandoned the enterprise, and their interest in the Vasai Fort faded and so did the glamour of its Portuguese hey-days.

Zorawar Fort

This mud fort built by the Dogra Zorawar Singh in 1836 does not visually inspire the kind of awe as the others on this list, but the story behind it is perhaps taller than the rest combined. A general in the army of Raja Gulab Singh of the Sikh Empire, Zorawar Singh executed a landmark event in Indian military history when in the 19th century he conquered Ladakh, Baltistan and extended the boundaries of the Sikh empire almost to the borders of Nepal through

the inhospitable terrain of Tibet after fierce battles with the Ladakhis and a combined army of the Tibetans and the Chinese Qin dynasty.

Not celebrated nearly enough in the annals of mainstream Indian history, a cenotaph to his valour lies in distant Tibet, and a symbol of the daring of the best high altitude fighting force the world has ever seen, is a small earthen defensive built on what was then the outskirts of Leh. Returning to quash a rebellion in Leh after he had conquered it through an unimaginable straight march through the high Himalayas in the winter, Zorawar built this fort in 1836 as a garrison for 300 men that he left behind as he eyed larger challenges in Tibet.

Situated well within the city of Leh, it remains off the radar of most tourists and is maintained by the Indian Army which also occupies a part of it. Bare and basic, even today it appears just as minimalistic as it was designed to be. Housed within the fort are two galleries that recount the life and times of Zorawar Singh.

Much of the modern map of Jammu and Kashmir as a part of the Union of India was shaped by the exploits of Zorawar Singh, and this structure built of the same earth he walked and annexed, is in its own right a symbol as powerful as the War Memorial built to honour the valiants who laid down their lives in the Kargil War of 1999.



Gagron now a World Heritage Site is a rare example of a hill and river fort



Gagron Fort

Located in the Jhalawar district of Rajasthan, this fort is surrounded by water from all sides. Gagron is a rare example of a hill and river fort and is afforded protection on three sides by the confluence of the Ahu and Kali Sindh rivers and by a dense forest on the other side. The fort itself is built on a low ridge at the confluence and does not have an underground foundation to it. The Mukundarraha range of hills behind it acts as a second line of defence. The construction of the fort began by many estimates in the 8th century, established by King Bijaldev of the Doda/Parmar empire, and there were alterations and enhancements right up to the 18th century. In 2013, the fort was included in the list of UNESCO World Heritage sites.

Ruled by Khinchi Rajputs for over three centuries, the fort has in its violent history witnessed 14 wars and 2 jauhars where women preferred to sacrifice their lives over the threat of facing capture. The possession of the fort passed from the Khinchis to Hoshangshah of the Malwa region in the 14th century following a bloody battle that saw the valiant Rajput clan fight to the death rather than surrender. The decision of Achaldas, the king of the Khinchis to fight despite overwhelming odds impressed Hoshangshah so greatly

that local tradition maintains that the room and personal items of Achaldas were not meddled with by Hoshangshah and the rulers to come; and it is oft quoted that the king's bed too remained in the same place till 1950.

Vijaydurg Fort

In ancient times, Vijaydurg Fort was also known as Gheria Fort, deriving its name from a nearby village in the Sindhurg district along the Konkan coast of Maharashtra. Also known as the 'Gibraltar of the Konkan', it withstood the attacks of the Europeans and Siddis for ninety-three years.

It is believed that Vijaydurg Fort was built by Bhojaraja of the Silahara dynasty between 1192 and 1205. In the 15th century, Adil Shah of Bijapur occupied the fort and made it one of the strongest in the Bijapur kingdom. After conquest and restoration, Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj named it Vijaydurg in 1653. He extended the area of fort by constructing three fort walls on the eastern side. There are claims to an underwater tunnel that connects the fort to the village on the mainland which is yet to be discovered.

As an astute measure of protection, the fort has a fencing compound wall built 8-10m undersea at a distance

of 300m from the fort. Not visible above the sea level, but high enough to break the hulls of attacking ships, many would have met a watery grave at the hands of this architectural wonder.

Sarkhel Kahhoji Angre, the admiral of the Maratha navy had a pivotal role in the supremacy of the Marathas on sea. Following his death and the infighting between his sons, a large British force under Admiral Watson captured Vijaydurg in 1756, putting an end to the Maratha might at sea.

With the British occupation of India, and as a necessity to maintain their hold over the subcontinent; forts of India, especially the more impregnable ones were systematically dismantled to prevent opposing forces from holding them as bastions of a possible revolt. The fortifications and key elements that gave them teeth were taken down, and eventually the heroes that once walked those ramparts and weaved the events that gave them character, started fading from public memory. Unfortunately, the fog of amnesia still persists.

Yet, these standing sentinels preserve within them memories as solid and unyielding as the stones they are



Vijaydurg Fort also known as the 'Gibraltar of the Konkan', withstood the attacks of the Europeans and Siddis for 93 years



An inside view of Vijaydurg Fort

made of. Their very aura pregnant with the stories of its valiant sons, yearning to sing with pride the accounts that transpired centuries ago. All it takes is a patient ear...



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“To create an unshakable brand; be honest to the profession and to the clients.”

The role of a wedding planner includes all aspects of the day - from clothing and flowers, to venues for ceremony and reception, to food, drink and entertainment, and can even include arranging accommodation, comforts and facilities for wedding guests.

Here **Deepak Mundada**, Operations Head, Bandhan Weddings, talks to **A. Radhakrishnan** about the business of planning Indian weddings.



Deepak Mundada

How did you end up in this business?

Born and raised in a business family, I had a knack for it since childhood. Academically though not a really bright student, I managed to complete my engineering from the esteemed College of Engineering, Pune.

But I always obsessed about all kinds of business ideas. I even used to joke about starting a Pan Stall, but never desired a corporate job. However, after graduation, I got placed with HSBC Software and worked with them for 4 ½ years. But as they say ‘Old habits die hard’; so I yearned to do business of some kind.

After weighing my dreams v/s my fears, I finally resigned, and trained with a relative who had a catering business. Six months into the training, a contract we acquired helped me set up my own catering business. Almost 1 1/2 years into it, I thought of going the next mile. That was the time when I met Darshan Somani, a good friend and one of the renowned personalities in the world of Wedding Management and Décor. Interacting with him, I realised what I wanted to explore. That’s how it all started in the month of November 2013.

How long has your company been in business?

Bandhan by Darshan Somani or ‘Bandhan Weddings’ has been in the business for the past 11 years. Started as a two-man show, we are now a team of 12. We rose from doing a couple of events in one year, to doing almost 30-40 big budget weddings. We are incidentally empanelled decorators with JW Marriott, RITZ Carlton, Sheraton Grand, Corinthians Resort and Spa, to name a few.

How many weddings have you planned so far?

We have planned more than 200 weddings in the past 11 years. We believe in adding personal touch to the event and that’s why we work only on maximum two weddings on any given day. Average size of the wedding is 300 to 400 guests, with an approximate budget of 30 to 40 lacs.

What are your different wedding packages?

We don’t work on package deals. We customise every bit of detail for every client, and that is our USP.

What challenges have you faced with weddings in the past and how did you deal with them?

Natural calamity like rain is one of the major challenges. Having a backup plan with a good team, ready to work under any circumstances helps us deal with these obstacles efficiently. Another challenge we face is vendors and artists not reaching on time or cancelling. To overcome that, we ensure a good rapport with our client and work with a good network of vendors.

Every time we are out on the field, it is like fire fighting, as lot of things are being done for the first time. Also, each venue is different in every aspect and keeps us on our toes and ready to fight.

Does it make sense to hire a professional wedding planner at an added cost?

Absolutely! As we always say, in India weddings are a big



deal, especially for parents. It happens once in a lifetime and couples weave beautiful dreams of their special day. With professional help, you can save a lot of time, reduce stress, and enjoy wholeheartedly, without running around behind people to get things done.

What was your most unique wedding?

Every wedding is unique in its own way. We were once doing a post wedding event in Bangkok. It was a good time handling the vendors, managing the artists flown in from India, co-ordinating with a local event company, and working with the hotel team who had a different style of working. It is always fun to work in such a diverse setup.

The first event experience is always special, and mine was filled with lot of surprises. Lot of rain, changing of venue, moving artists from one venue to another – and all of this happening in the course of one hour.

What sort of services do you offer? Do you have everything in-house?

The services we offer range from planning to executing the event, or as we call it Sagai to Bidai. While we do provide an a la carte option, we always try to conduct the whole process, as it helps the host relax and enjoy the wedding.

But we don't have everything in-house like light, sound, genset, etc., the reason being it requires a huge investment, maintenance and cannot be done single handedly. It is difficult to keep pace with constantly changing technical aspects and arduous to find and maintain the technical manpower required. All in all, it is good to do what we are best at and leave the rest in the hands of the best from the industry.

Do you do destination weddings?

We do specialise in destination weddings. We have done weddings pan India. To name a few, the prime cities we have covered are Chennai, Jaipur, Hyderabad, and Pune. Internationally, we have done a destination wedding in Bangkok, Thailand.

Are weddings the only main events you plan? Why not other events?

Yes, we specialise only in weddings. Every year, working for almost six to seven months for events, it becomes really difficult for us to balance our personal and work life and health. Also, we are a people's company. It's easy for us to connect and work efficiently with families more than corporates.

Do you create a timeline that tells everyone involved in the planning process what and when to do something?

Yes, once we are finalised as a planner, we create a schedule which covers all aspects of the wedding, right from invitation cards to caterers to trousseau. The regular meetings are to keep a track of what is happening and also to speed up the things.

Who to you is your ideal client? Your experiences?

There is no framework. In fact, the beauty of this whole process is that every client is unique. The experience with every client is what we cherish for a lifetime. One experience I can recall is where after the event, the entire family thanked our team for the work we did. In another instance, one of the



Deepak Mundada (standing in the centre) with his 'Bandhan Weddings' team

clients came down all the way to Pune after the wedding to meet the entire team with special gifts for every one and also treated us to a lovely dinner.

More than the couple, it is the feedback from their parents that makes our day. In fact, our business runs mostly on references rather than ads or any other social media promotions. It is the word of mouth which has helped us to grow into a respected company in the field of event management.

How do payments work? What is your fee?

We are very flexible in payments. We create a schedule for the payment and also give a timeframe; so the host has sufficient time to arrange for the funds. We mostly do it by cheque and a little bit by cash. Fee depends on the amount of work and the team required.

Can you help one stay on budget?

We respect everyone's budget and as we say, no budget is small or big. In fact, we try to reduce the budget wherever possible. It is more of how comfortable and confident the client is working with us.

What is your cancellation policy?

This is quite a rare instance. But if the situation arises, we are ready to give the entire amount back, excluding any amounts that we might have given in advance to any agency.

What's your secret for staying calm under pressure, and how do you deal with a day of disasters?

There's no secret as such; just experience which says that the

calmer we are, the easier it is to handle a situation.

Do you show examples from your portfolio of weddings with a similar style to the clients?

Yes, we always share our recent work with the client. But it is just to show the style of work. We try to create a new experience and style for every client.

What is your message to others wanting to take wedding planning as a profession?

It's a long walk up the hill. You will have to create a good trust for yourself to go up the path. To create an unshakable brand; be honest to the profession and to the clients.

Any other interesting details?

I always dreamed of reaching out to maximum people and also meeting new people. Answering these questions today makes me feel like I have been successful in achieving some of it.



A. Radhakrishnan is a Pune based freelance journalist, short story writer and poet.

Phenomenal woman

*Wing Commander (Retd.) Dr. Vijayalakshmi Ramanan, who passed away recently in Bengaluru, was a true Indian icon. Her niece **Prema Viswanathan** recounts how the first woman commissioned officer of the Indian Air Force was a woman of substance who excelled in everything she took up – from medicine to music and cooking to knitting.*



Wing Commander (retd) Dr. Vijayalakshmi Ramanan

When Dr Vijayalakshmi Ramanan (or Viji, as she is known in her family) was growing up, her role models were Sarojini Naidu and Dr Muthulakshmi Reddy. Not surprising, as both Naidu and Reddy were strongly independent women, much like Viji herself.

Sarojini Naidu, whose poetry earned her the sobriquet, 'Nightingale of India', was also a firebrand political activist and a

proponent of women's emancipation. And several decades before Viji became the first woman to be commissioned as an officer in the Indian Air Force, retiring as Wing Commander, Dr Reddy had broken a glass ceiling of her own by becoming the first woman surgeon to work in a government hospital in Tamil Nadu, braving social stigma. I am not elaborating on Viji's much-publicised achievements as an Air Force officer and gynaecologist, as they are

detailed in the documentary film, The Devi Project. <https://www.cuttingchaicontent.com/the-devi-project/>

An inspiration to the family

Viji was something of a legend in our family (she was my mother's cousin), and we were all inspired by her in one way or another. When her grand-daughter, Prianca Ramanan, decided to join medical school in Boston, Viji was thrilled beyond measure. Says Prianca, "During my childhood visits to Bangalore, Ammamma would tell me stories about her days as an OB/Gyn, and it was those stories that solidified my own ambitions of following in her footsteps. I admired her work ethic, her independence, and most of all, her warmth, qualities I hope to develop in myself some day."

Yet Viji had the prescience to not insist that her own children emulate her career choice and was proud of their accomplishments. Her daughter, Sukanya Narayan, took up counselling, later branching off into social service, while her son, Sukmar Ramanan, became an engineer and a successful professional in the US.

Viji instilled in her children a work ethic, service-mindedness and honesty that sometimes made her unpopular among her colleagues. Says Sukanya, "She didn't understand the need for diplomacy. She would not brook any mediocrity in patient care and was very blunt and forthright about it. Hence the only people who loved her at her workplace were her patients and their families. And they would do anything for her."

Sukmar speaks about his



A young Dr. Vijayalakshmi with her husband Dr. KV Ramanan and children, Sukanya and Sukmar

mother's uncompromising work ethic and drive for perfection. "Sleep was never a priority with her. She would have just returned from an emergency case early in the morning. She would promptly shower, get back into her uniform and report back to duty as if it were a normal day."

The lifestyle was sometimes quite hard on the children. Sukanya recalls how annoyed they would get when during the rare movie outings a message would flash on the screen asking their mum to leave immediately for the hospital...Or when war was declared in 1966 and they had to cut short their summer vacation in Hyderabad and rush back to Secunderabad where she was based.

Viji was a strict disciplinarian, at home as at work. When she found out that her 14-year-old son was giving the neighbourhood kids in Hyderabad rides on his grandfather's Suvega Moped, she promptly persuaded her

father-in-law to sell the vehicle.

Those who had close encounters with Viji during her early years recall the independence of spirit and clarity of mind that made her stand apart. "She was always very precise in her speech and knew what she wanted," says TM Mahadevan, a geologist and musician and Viji's nephew, who, at 94, is just two years younger than she was when she died this October. She excelled in everything she took up, whether it was medicine or music, he says. "For a woman from our community (in South India) to take up medicine during that time was not just unusual, it took a lot of courage. There were women doctors who had been ostracized earlier because they chose the profession."

Viji's father, TD Narayana Iyer, recognised the aptitude and potential in his daughter and encouraged her to join Madras Medical

College, where she was the only woman student in her class. But she took it in her stride and passed out with flying colours. It was at this college that she met her future partner, Dr KV Ramanan, who supported her in everything she did, including her entry in 1955 into the Indian Air Force, where he was also working at the time. Unfortunately, he died very young, in 1971, leaving Viji to take care of her teenage children. However, she received strong support from her father-in-law, a retired doctor himself, and her mother-in-law, with whom she shared, among other things, a passion for board games.

A Renaissance woman

Despite holding her own in a world dominated by male doctors, Viji was very much at home pursuing so-called 'feminine' interests such as cooking and knitting. She did not perceive any gender-bias in these



(Left) Graduating from Madras Medical College; (right) Dr. Vijayalakshmi on her 90th birthday

pursuits. Sukmar recalls learning to knit from his mum, even as his wife, Chitra, rhapsodises over her mother-in-law's culinary talents. And Viji's nephew, CM Venkatachalam, a scientist-turned-musician, talks of how she took him along when he was a child to the local store in Chennai to buy yarn and a pair of needles which he promptly put to use.

Music was another passion the nephew imbibed from his talented and beautiful aunt. "Viji was a perfect vocalist. Let us not forget she was the grand-daughter of Thodi Doraiswamy Iyer (a renowned lawyer and musician whose piece-de-resistance was his exposition of Thodi raga). I remember as a seven-year-old telling her, 'Viji, you sing like MS (Subbulakshmi) and NC Vasanthakokilam.' On Friday evenings, there would be bhajans at the home of Lalithadasar (a well-known composer) and Viji would take me along. So she was in a sense, my first music teacher." My sister, Radhika Viswanathan, who, along with Sukanya, learnt music from Viji, explains the alchemy behind her teaching style: "She was particular we didn't write down the lyrics or the swaras of the keerthanams. She was insistent that we memorise them so that we were not distracted but could let the music

flow through us. She would bring out the nuance of a raga and embed it within us."

Viji could easily have pursued music as a career, having been selected as an A-grade artiste at All India Radio – a rare honour for a 15-year-old. She tried hard to juggle her demanding day (and sometimes night) job with music broadcasts, but had to give it up eventually after she became the sole bread-winner for the family. Her younger sister, Bala Narasimhan, a music teacher based in Canada, remembers with awe how Viji would persuade their father to allow her to learn some krithis from acclaimed artistes such as Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer and GN Balasubramaniam (popularly known as GNB) when they would visit their home in Thanjavur. Mahadevan also marvels at Viji's capacity to sing a composition after just hearing it once or twice.

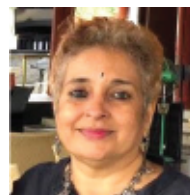
Viji once mentioned to me the immense joy she experienced when she was invited by Sarojini Naidu and Mahatma Gandhi to sing patriotic songs whenever they organised a gathering in Chennai.

Viji took vicarious pride in her grandson, Rohan's decision to

pursue music as a career. And he is just as appreciative of the role she played in kickstarting his musical journey, by narrating to him anecdotes from her experiences as a Carnatic vocalist when he was just a child. Viji had a great rapport with not just her four doting grandchildren but even the wives of Sukanya's two sons. Indeed, when Viji moved in with her daughter and son-in-law Narayan seven years ago because of health issues, their sons were forthcoming with their love and support. 'They were always more like sons to my mum than grandsons', says Sukanya. And not to be underestimated is the quiet but immense contribution of Narayan in making Viji's life comfortable and hassle-free.

It was always open house in Viji's home, I recall. But Viji's warmth and generosity extended beyond her near and dear to concerns that were close to her heart. Year after year, she quietly made contributions towards cancer treatment, cataract surgery, education of underprivileged children, e-learning initiatives in villages, among many others.

In a nutshell, Viji was a true Renaissance woman in an age dominated by patriarchy, an epitome of the ideals her idol, Sarojini Naidu, had spelt out: "deeper sincerity of motive, greater courage in speech, and earnestness in action."



Prema Viswanathan reported for leading Indian newspapers from Mumbai, Delhi and Singapore in the 80s

and 90s, later switching focus from mainstream journalism to market intelligence. She is currently a writer based in Bangalore. Her recent book 'Badri Narayan: Portrait of the Artist as Storyteller' has been co-published by Marg Foundation and Pundole Art Gallery.

US Elections 2020: How will it impact US-India relations?

The glow of Kamala Harris having made history is not expected to last much after January 20, 2021 when President-elect Joe Biden and Vice President-elect Harris formally take over because they will inherit a sharply irreconciled nation, opines Mayank Chhaya.



It is going to be a tough ride for Biden-Harris

The rise of Kamala Harris as the first ever woman and non-white vice president of America comes at a time when the country is in the throes of deep socio-cultural toxicity. Perhaps nothing exposes more powerfully the country's fault lines than the fact that notwithstanding his repeated and egregious transgressions over the last four years President Donald Trump received over 73.5 million votes, the second highest in US history. That number is second only to President-elect Joe Biden's historic number of over 79.4 million, the highest ever.

The idea that in a broad sense nearly as many people still voted for an avowedly divisive, often openly racist and vehemently lying incumbent president underscores how

toxic and unabashed America's electorate has become. At the time of writing this President Trump continued to refuse to concede his clear defeat over two weeks after the outcome became clear. In fact, he continued to triumphantly declare in all caps on his Twitter handle that he won despite both the popular vote as well as the electoral college number (306 to 232 in Biden's favour) show precisely the opposite. More than seventy percent within Trump's own Republican Party believe that somehow the election was "stolen" from his despite zero evidence to support that absurd claim.

Tough ride for Biden-Harris

California Senator Harris's rise comes in the midst of America

witnessing over 250,000 deaths as well as over 11.5 million COVID cases, which are a direct consequence of the failure of the Trump presidency. As a 55-year-old daughter of Indian Tamil mother, the late cancer specialist Dr. Shyamala Gopalan and Jamaican father, an economics professor, Donald Harris, she represents an extraordinary turn in America's polity. Barely four years after America bid farewell to its first mixed heritage president in Barack Obama (Father being Kenyan and mother a white American), a significant population of the country has chosen to vote for a woman of mixed heritage as vice president with a clear shot at the presidency.

(continued on page 35...)

Time for serious introspection

*We have to come to look at our planet as a resource for our species, which is funny when you think that the planet has been around for about five billion years, and Homo sapiens for perhaps one hundred thousand. But what we are witnessing is human species killing/destroying another human species for their own survival and selfish ends, argues **Manali Chowdhury**.*



Teacher and social activist Manali (in blue sweater) with her students. Together, they collected clothes and other items to be distributed to the poor in Jamsedpur

An evolutionary perspective of our place in the history of the earth reminds us that Homo sapiens have occupied the planet for the tiniest fraction of that planet's 4500 million years of existence. Ideally, their advent should have been a trigger point for the development of countless other species, but has the planet actually benefited? The answer is a resounding "No". The earth today stands ravaged with no end to human greed. Species are endangered, annihilated with economic tumult resulting from more factors than one.

It is strange that in a country where validated currency can be invalidated by demonetisation, we cannot amend laws to ensure the safety and well being of Homo sapiens. It is perplexing that the nation still grapples with adequate and strong laws as a deterrent

against rapes. As per 2017 data, 90 rapes were reported but the outrage was just about a whimper with the possible exception of the Nirbhaya case even where it took the government seven long years to serve justice. It is a telling commentary that in these seven years, 226800 rapes happened and the perpetrators of the crime still elusive from the arms of law.

The dynamics of this heinous crime has changes over the years. Even as the government fights shy of announcing capital punishment for rape, juveniles – these days found capable of committing adult crimes – are sent to correction homes. When cases drag on for years, not only people's faith in the cause of justice is shaken, there is also the societal fabric that remains torn asunder. Isn't there a quicker and effective way to mete out justice

to the wronged?

There is something fundamentally wrong with the way we perceive the equation between a cultured society and the administration of justice. Consumption of tobacco, for instance! It kills more than 10 million every year in India. More than 13.3% youth below the age of 15 are affected due to tobacco consumption. Despite leading it to the second

biggest cause resulting to deaths, its production isn't banned. A statutory warning "Smoking kills" on the cover of a cigarette packet makes little sense and impact to the huge population. Why can't it be banned and factories shut completely?

Prostitution is perhaps the oldest of the human vices. It is frowned upon although it is a stark symbol of male patriarchy. It is a hypocritical irony that there is no thought for the dignity of a woman when it is the males who look upon women as objects of their sexual desire. Ditto for pornography which is portrayed blatantly in films now!

The ostensible purpose behind feminism took roots in the early 70s was to ensure gender equality but it took a completely different hue to be perceived as a modern-day concept, repugnant to



Manali with a stray

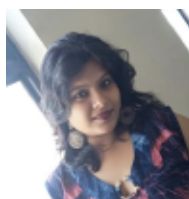
such a woman becomes vulnerable in a society that is so pre-disposed towards male superiority. Time to redefine modernity across all walks of life including racism, casteism, religious bias, gender discrimination and a plethora of other social evils!

Animal cruelty is a serious issue to which we seem to have blinded ourselves. The laws relating

to protection of animals are a farce. Imagine being fined Rs 50 if you run over a stray because of reckless driving! We kill dogs in the fear they will outnumber us one day. Aren't we flooded with Homo sapiens that have brought earth to a considerable harm? Animals are killed to satiate human hunger, make cosmetics, and derive sadistic pleasure like sacrifices on the one hand and are unethically bred on the other. Foreign breeds are promoted at the expense of the Indian breeds. Status symbol is the yardstick.

Look at the way pedigree dogs are bred and later left to fend for themselves at the hands of the callous. The Indian breeds have few takers and it is of little consolation that there are but a few good souls who are working for the welfare of animals. The question is, is that enough? Indians have always rejected what is essentially Indian. It is time for us that we must eschew all those things that in the longer run will only jeopardize human existence.

The list is long. In many ways we are a biological accident, the product of countless propitious circumstances. As we peer back through the fossil record, through layer upon layer of long-extinct species, many of which thrived far longer than the human species is ever likely to do, we are reminded of our mortality as a species. There is no law that declares the human animal to be different, as seen in this broad biological perspective, from any other animal. There is no law that declares the human species to be immortal.



Manali Chowdhury teaches English at a CBSE School, Jamshedpur. She is an animal and social welfare

activist who participates in social campaigns. She also writes poems and scripts plays.

WHO AM I?



Nitya, child of a lesser God

*The moving story of a poverty-stricken 12-year-old girl who loses her mother to Covid and is taken to care at a shelter home shows that humanity – though fledgling – still exists, discerns **Naisha Agarwal**.....*



(Pic for representational purpose only)

The sun shone softly as the day dawned with a pearly glow in the sky. Nitya, 12, sat nervously on the edge of the footpath in tattered clothes, staring at the deserted road ahead. She hadn't sold a single tissue roll in the entire week. She had jet black hair and piercing black eyes. Living in a small slum pocket in the heart of Mumbai, she had no clue what the world had come to because of the pandemic. She had no idea what corona virus was. All she could understand was food was becoming scarce. She and her mother wondered from where the next meal ticket would come with no source of income.

She had almost given up when she heard a car stopping at the nearby signal. She grabbed a few tissue rolls and ran up to the window of the car. A man in mask and black suit rolled down the window. As Nitya stared at him pleadingly he pulled out a twenty rupee note from his wallet and handed it to her. He refused the tissue roll and as the signal turned green, sped away.

Nitya stared at the note and

wondered how a piece of paper could be worth so much. She showed the note to her mother whose face lit up on seeing the money. She kissed Nitya's forehead and the little one was a little overwhelmed because she had hardly seen her mother smile of late. Her mother Meena was widowed and had jobs in two houses as a maid before the pandemic hit. Out most of the time, Nitya had learned to become independent in her absence.

Nitya's classes were held online but she did not have a phone. So every day at 11 a.m. she walked up to her neighbor's house. A family of seven lived there, the youngest daughter, Pooja, being Nitya's only friend. They shared a phone owned by Pooja's family for two hours of school but weren't able to grasp much because of poor network.

The twenty rupees had made Nitya's day. When she knocked on Pooja's door she was surprised that her otherwise jovial friend had a sullen, teary-eyed look on her face. Pooja was going back to her village as her parents

could not find a job and were terrified of the rapid spread of the virus. Hearing it, Nitya's heart sank. She thought she would never see her best friend again and that meant her classes would end too. With a heavy heart she bid Pooja goodbye and headed back home.

Nitya heard her mother's loud cough as she reached home. Her worst fears seemed to come true. Her mother sat huddled in a corner and beckoned her not to come close. Nitya's knowledge of the pandemic was limited to what her teachers had told her in the online classes. All she knew was that she must maintain social distance, wear masks and wash hands frequently. However, getting even one shower every day was a privilege. Even the mask donated in the slums was torn and had become dirty. Although her mother comforted her, Nitya felt she lost all hope.

Nitya's mother got a Covid test done at a nearby hospital for free. While they waited for the results, she stayed away from Nitya who wished they had an extra room. No one to talk

to and with nothing to do, she was bored but the hunger nagged her. Food was scarce as it were but the poor girl couldn't remember when she had her last proper meal. Whatever the earnings, they came from the mother who could manage to buy some rice and vegetables but now Nitya was at her wit's ends.

A week later her mother's condition worsened. She had fever and had trouble breathing. She had tested positive. Nitya panicked as her mother was taken to a government hospital, where she would be treated free. Left behind to fend for herself, Nitya was

terrified. Cut off from her mother she had no means to know if she (the mother) was recovering. She used up all the remaining food. A few days later, someone knocked on the door. She ran to it thinking her mother had returned. Instead she found looking at a smiling lady who told her she was from a shelter home where they took care of children whose parents had died.

Shocked, she realised her mother had died. Her world had come apart and she was inconsolable. The lady somehow consoled her and took her to the shelter home. For one last time she looked at the apology of the

place she lived from the taxi she boarded and knew her life had changed forever.



Naisha Agarwal is a Class X student from Mumbai. She has active interest in social issues pertaining to girl child education and women rights. She is an avid reader, loves listening to contemporary music and plays piano in her free time.

US Elections 2020: How will it impact US-India relations?

(continued from page 31...)

In the deeply dichotomous rejoinder, however, a nearly equal number of Americans has also rejected her.

The glow of her having made history is not expected to last much after January 20, 2021 when President-elect Biden and Vice President-elect Harris formally take over because they will inherit a sharply irreconciled nation. With Trump riding on his reinforced electoral base and unshackled from any semblance of decorum and presidential responsibilities—even though he displayed none while in office—he is expected to be a continuous problem for the Biden administration. Given the challenges Kamala Harris may not bask in her remarkable success from being the Attorney-General of California between 2011 and 2017 and then the first South Asian American Senator for too long.

There are expectations that President-elect Biden, who is already 78 and will be 82 by the end of his first term, will not seek a second term and in the process clear the way for Harris to seek the highest office in the land. If that comes to pass, it would be the most dramatic rise of a politician and that too a woman politician who is not white but of mixed heritage to have a genuine shot at the White House. By and large Harris has been

celebrated by the Indian American community but there have been significant voices against her and Biden, from the Hindu right within the community, for their stand on the human rights in Kashmir. For the sympathisers of the Bharatiya Janata Party here in America, that one position alone neutralises her history-making accomplishment. Add to that the fact she does not necessarily project her Indian heritage as much as her black identity to the chagrin of many wrapped up in such narrow definitions.

Impact on Indo-US ties

It is a fact that Dr. Gopalan raised her largely as an African American even while keeping up strong family and cultural connections to Tamil Nadu. She created quite a stir when she specifically referred to chittis, Tamil for aunts in one of her speeches, and often speaks of idlis and culinary professions fall short for many Indian Americans who want her to be much more insistently Indian in her bearing and utterances, which is quite a ludicrous expectation.

For Harris's detractors among the Indian American community, their icon, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's sanguine outreach and praise of the vice president-elect via Twitter has smoothened some of the rough edges. During a phone call with Biden

on November 17, the prime minister said he conveyed "warm congratulations" to Harris. In a tweet, Modi said, "Her success is a matter of great pride and inspiration for members of the vibrant Indian-American community, who are a tremendous source of strength for Indo-US relations."

With the pandemic raging, rampant joblessness and a shaky economy, not to mention deep societal divisions and serious problems of systemic racial injustices, the Biden-Harris administration will have no time to focus on India's human rights record in Kashmir in any substantive way. There are no expectations that her observations before the election will have any significant impact on the way the Modi government approaches the new administration. This is notwithstanding that the prime minister had openly declared his support for Trump's re-election in a diplomatic faux pas.



Mayank Chhaya has been a journalist for four decades with a reporting career out of India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and the United States. He has written three books so far and has another three coming up. He is currently Chief Editor of Bharat FM, an Indian American radio station.

HAVALDAR BHANUBHAGTA GURUNG VC

A born fighter (1921-2008)

Born in September 1921 in Phalpu in Western Nepal, Bhanubhagta Gurung joined the Indian Army in 1939 and was posted to 3rd Battalion 2nd Gorkha Rifles (3/2 GR, known as the Seymour Rifles). The Japanese Army captured Rangoon in March 1942 and the British decided to evacuate their forces from Burma. They managed to reach Imphal in Manipur by May 1942. An offensive operation by the British into Arakan was unsuccessful. Not equipped with adequate resources to carry out a major attack, they opted for deep penetration by Special Forces under Brigadier (later Major General) Wingate. 3/2 GR was part of this brigade. About 3000 men entered Burma in March 1943 to disrupt the lines of communications of the Japanese Army. Bhanubhagta was in column Number 4 and was promoted Lance Naik [L/Nk]. The unit ambushed by the Japanese, suffered heavy casualties. The force returned to India and all the units including 3/2 GR were brought up to full strength, trained and were ready for offensive operations in Burma. His unit was now part of 25 Indian Division and he was promoted to Naik.

The 14th Army had launched an offensive towards Mandalay in Central Burma and 25 Division was ordered to carry out a diversionary attack along the coastal sector in Arakan. 25 Division cleared the Myeben Peninsula, thus denying the use of waterways along the Arakan to the Japanese. 3/2 GR landed at Ru-Ywa. Bhanubhagta was demoted for going to a wrong hilltop and sent to another company. It was later found he was wrongly punished. He showed exemplary camaraderie by carrying a wounded soldier on his back three miles in jungle terrain and getting him treated. 'A' Company took up positions on the two hills on the dominating feature 582 by 4 March 1944.

The two hills were nicknamed Snowdon and Snowdon East. There was no enemy on the feature. The Japanese attacked Snowdon East during the night killing half the Gorkhas while the remaining soldiers, out of ammunition, made their way to B Company on Snowdon. B Company in which Bhanubhagta was serving was ordered to re-take Snowdon East regardless of costs.

Bhanubhagta's section was pinned down following heavy fire. A sniper was inflicting casualties on the section. Bhanubhagta shot down the sniper thus saving the section from more casualties. He led his section to a spot twenty yards short of the objective crest when the section was held up again by fierce enemy fire. Bhanubhagta charged to the top and lobbed two grenades killing two. He rushed on to clear the next trench with a bayonet charge. In a savage hand-to-hand fighting, Bhanubhagta cleared two more foxholes single-handed. For a fifth and last time, he rushed alone to tackle an enemy bunker, lobbing his last two smoke grenades. The feature had been

cleared but the Japanese were collecting for a counter-attack. He installed a Gorkha with a machine gun to repel the counter-attack with two other riflemen. He was awarded Victoria Cross [VC] and the unit was authorised the Battle Honour Tamandu where the battle took place.

His company commander persuaded him to continue in service but he opted for retirement in January 1946 to look after his frail widowed mother and his young wife.

He was given the rank of Honorary Havaldar. His three sons served in 2 GR. He suffered from asthma and spent the last four years of his life with his youngest son in Gorkha village where he passed away on 1 March 2008. He was cremated at the holy site of Devghat at Chitwan. The funeral was attended by family members, friends and representative from 2 GR. A piper played the last post as his body lay draped in a flag of 2 GR. He was awarded Star of Nepal, 3rd class and in 2000, the Gorkha training block at Catterick, UK was named after him.



- Brigadier Suresh Chandra Sharma (retd.)

JASWANT SINGH

A gentleman politician (1938-2020)

One of the founders of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Jaswant Singh was born on 3 January 1938 in Jasol in Barmer District of Rajasthan in a Rajput family. He was an alumnus of the Mayo College and later continued his education at the National Defence Academy (NDA) in Khadakvasla. After a ten year stint as army officer he plunged headlong into politics in the 1960s as member of the erstwhile Jan Sangh.

Jaswant Singh was also affiliated to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) from the 1960s. He was first elected to the Rajya Sabha in 1980 and was either a RS or LS member from 1980-2014 earning the distinction of being one of the longest serving parliamentarians. He was elected four times to the Lok Sabha from Barmer. Jaswant Singh served as the Leader of the Opposition in the Rajya Sabha from 2004-2009. Among the high watermarks during a long and eventful political career was the Best Parliamentarian Award that was conferred on him in 2001.

Jaswant Singh was among the closest associates of late Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and served as Finance Minister during his short-lived prime ministership. Later, when Vajpayee was the Prime Minister for a five year period, Singh handled the pivotal portfolios of Finance, Defence and External Affairs. He also served as the Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission for a year between 1998 and 1999. Singh was credited with the deft handling of the tensions across the border between India and Pakistan and after the Kargil war he was the chosen representative of PM Vajpayee to convince nations about India's bonafides. Singh essayed the role admirably earning encomiums from the PM and the cabinet. He had a similar role to play after India's nuclear test at Pokhran in 1998 and was again the PM's representative in long drawn talks with the US representative Strobe Talbott.

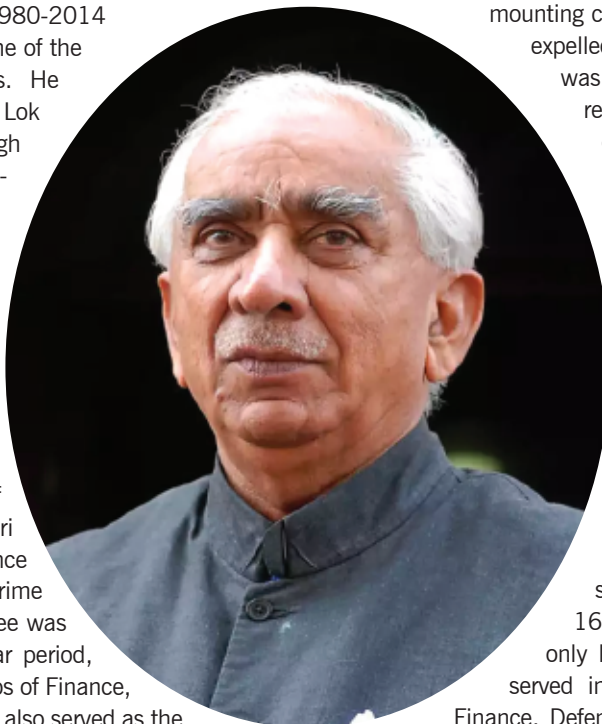
Singh's diplomatic skills came in for fulsome praise from Talbott. Singh did full justice to the portfolios he held. One of the thankless jobs was during his tenure as External Affairs minister when he had to escort three dreaded terrorists

to Kandahar in Afghanistan to secure the release of 180 passengers hijacked from an Indian Airlines flight. Singh braved opposition criticism that the government had bowed to the demands of the hijackers.

Jaswant Singh was National Democratic Alliance (NDA) choice for Vice President in 2012 but he eventually lost out to Hamid Ansari of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA). Singh was a scholar, orator and authored several books. Ironically, one of his books 'Jinnah – India, Partition, Independence' made laudatory references to Mohammed Ali Jinnah and earned him the party's wrath. Amidst

mounting criticism from within, Singh was expelled from the BJP. His expulsion was later revoked but by then the relations between him and those occupying the party's top echelons had soured. Singh, denied party ticket from Barmer in 2014, contested as an independent against the party's official candidate. Singh lost and was expelled yet again.

Jaswant Singh suffered a fall in his residence on 7 August 2014 and slipped into a coma thereafter for a period of six years and passed away on 16 September 2020 at 82. The only leader from Rajasthan to have served in the three vital ministries of Finance, Defence and External Affairs, Singh was regarded as a man of unimpeachable integrity and had friends cutting across party lines. Prime Minister Narendra Modi paid handsome tributes to the departed leader and observed that he served the nation diligently -- first as a soldier and later as people's leader.



- C.V. Aravind is a Bangalore-based freelance journalist.

RAHAT INDORI

The Sher of Sher-o-Shayari (1950-2020)

The story of Rahat Quraishi Indori born on 1 January 1950 has a typical tough-time-to-tinsel-town flavour to it. An accomplished commercial painter of film posters/banners, he earned name as professor, celebrated Urdu poet and a pedagogist of Urdu literature before being spotted by Bollywood and Urdu poetry connoisseurs.

Rahat actively performed in mushairas and kavi sammelans in the last four decades. Recipient of number of national and international awards for Urdu sher-o-shayari, his poetry was simple, lucid and very evocative. The fourth child of a mill-hand was raised in poverty. At 10, he was forced to eke out livelihood as sign-painter. Though sharp in studies and sports, he was not sure what to do after graduation in 1973 and spent 10 confused years. Egged on by friends he pursued his post-graduation in Urdu Literature from Barkatullah University and passed out with a Gold Medal in 1975.

In 1985 he was awarded a PhD in Urdu literature from Bhoj University, MP for his thesis *Urdu Main Mushaira*. He later taught Urdu literature at Devi Ahilya Vishwavidyalaya, Indore, for 16 years and was guide to students who did doctorates. His first collection of poetry *Dhoop Bahut Hai* in 1979, followed by *Rut* in 1983, *Mere Baad* in 1990, *Panchavan Darvesh* in 1992 and *Kun fa Yakun* in 2002 and others became popular. He also wrote lyrics for more than 11 films including 'M bole to' for *Munna Bhai MBBS*, and *Neend Churayee Meri* for the film *Ishq*.

Although a hit in mushairas, he remained un-acclaimed because he was neither beholden to an ideological camp nor part of any literary lobby. Indori struck chords by speaking about problems of life, political and social conditions and the hardships of the common man. Uncomplicated and bereft of mystery, his poetry could find an equation with masses. He was a people's poet to be experienced in poetic soirees that could hook audience by sheer delivery. Laced with pointed protests, people resonated with his ideas. As one of midnight's children, one of his following verses summed up the feelings of those who migrated to Pakistan

and created stir decades later in Karachi:
Ab ke jo faisla hoga voh sateen par hoga
Hum se ab doosri hijrat nahi hone vali

During the protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019, these lines from his ghazal, became viral:

Agar khilaaf hain to hone do
Jo aaj sahib-e-masnad hain, kal naheen honge
Kirayedaar hain, zaati makan thodi hai
Sabhi ka khoon hai shaamil yahaan ki mitti mein
Kisi ke baap ka Hindustan thodi hai

Or the ghazal changing its mood and freeing itself of love and romance:

Bethe hue hain qeemti sofon
pe bhediye
Jangal ke log shahr mein
abaad ho gaye

By deploying merely four run-of-the-mill words, namely sofas, wolf, jungle and city, Indori succinctly portrayed the class struggle, human exploitation and what he believed were the flaws of capitalism. The ghazal hit the nail on its head. His couplet *Bulati hai magar jaane ka nahi* became viral and started trending on social media during 2020 Valentines week and started being used as a meme.

Although gentleman to a fault, his poetic satire also brought him at the receiving end of trolls on social media, one of them was a couplet with political overtones against a former prime minister. Rahat passed away after suffering two cardiac arrests aged at a relatively young age of 70 and earlier testing Covid 19-positive.

So how anticipative was Indori even in death? What seemed to be an innocuous couplet suddenly assumed meaning after his death:

Ye hadasa tho kisi din gujarne wala tha, mai bach bhi jata
tho ek roz marne wala tha.

- A Radhakrishnan is a Pune based journalist, poet and short story writer.





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