THE HINDU

Magazine

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DELHI

Sunday, April 12, 2020



BIG SCREEN

As we mourn the loss of human touch during the pandemic, we turn to cinema for hope and escape p6



BOOKEND

How the gigantic leatherback turtle bounced back after the 2004 tsunami destroyed its nesting beaches p7



60 MINUTES

It's a myth that domestic violence happens only in low-income families, says victimologist Prasanna Gettu p8



LITERARY REVIEW

When reality becomes unpredictable, you turn to that unchanging rock of comfort: books p4

COVER

Coming home to roost

Nature seems to be tentatively reclaiming urban spaces, but whether there will be any lasting change is a moot question p3

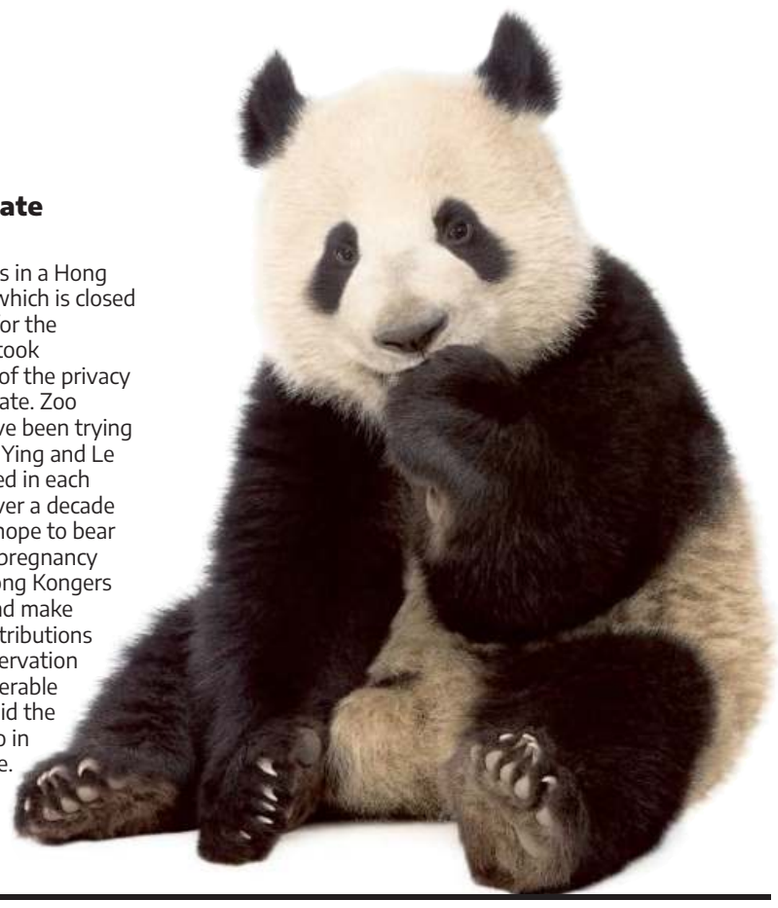
Resplendent A peacock perches on a rock amidst a concrete jungle in Hyderabad.
▪ SRIKANTH.AYYAGARI.1/ INSTAGRAM

last week



Tiger fever

A tiger in New York's Bronx Zoo tested positive for the coronavirus. The four-year-old Nadia, who developed a dry cough, and a few other big cats in the zoo that also showed symptoms, were infected by a zookeeper who was caring for them. "It's the first time, to our knowledge, that a [wild] animal has gotten sick from COVID-19 from a person," said the zoo.



Panda date

Two pandas in a Hong Kong zoo, which is closed to visitors for the lockdown, took advantage of the privacy to finally mate. Zoo officials have been trying to get Ying Ying and Le Le interested in each other for over a decade now. "We hope to bear wonderful pregnancy news to Hong Kongers this year and make further contributions to the conservation of this vulnerable species," said the relieved zoo in a press note.



Berned out

Senator Bernie Sanders suspended his bid to become the Democratic Party's candidate for the U.S. presidency, effectively confirming former Vice-President Joe Biden as the presumptive nominee. Sanders, who had led the race early on with some convincing victories, fell increasingly behind Biden, who racked up wins after his triumph in South Carolina.



Pay cuts

In a move to shore up finances to combat the pandemic, the salaries of the President, Vice-President, MPs and Governors are to be cut by 30% for one year, while the MPLADS fund — the ₹5 crore per annum each MP receives for constituency development — was suspended for two years, saving ₹7,900 crore for the Consolidated Fund of India to go towards pandemic relief.



Chinese pause

As Wuhan, the original epicentre of COVID-19, came out of its 76-day lockdown, there was an exodus with residents rushing to take trains bound for the countryside. Even as China saw its first day without a virus-caused death, the U.K. and New York State in the U.S. reported their deadliest days so far, with 786 and 731 deaths, respectively.



The Tokyo way

Japan announced a month-long emergency in Tokyo and six other prefectures that have been severely impacted by COVID-19. This grants more authority to regional governors but is not a lockdown. The measures are largely voluntary, and public transport will not be shut down. Tokyo governor Yuriko Koike criticised the measures as insufficient.



Rinse and repeat

As the number of COVID-19 cases in India neared 6,000 — and global cases passed 15 lakh — with almost 1,300 in Maharashtra alone, Prime Minister Narendra Modi indicated that he may extend the national lockdown beyond April 14. Several State governments too requested this. A final decision was awaited, to be taken after a meeting with all Chief Ministers.



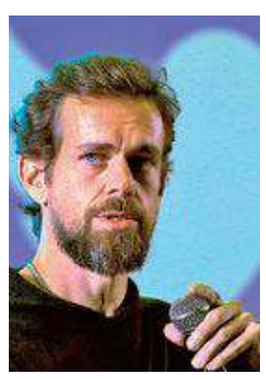
Patient No.10

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson was taken into intensive care at St Thomas' Hospital in London when he continued to show symptoms 10 days after testing positive for COVID-19. Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab is acting in his stead. Messages of support poured in from world leaders, including U.S. President Donald Trump, who added that he had asked pharmaceutical companies to get in touch and help.



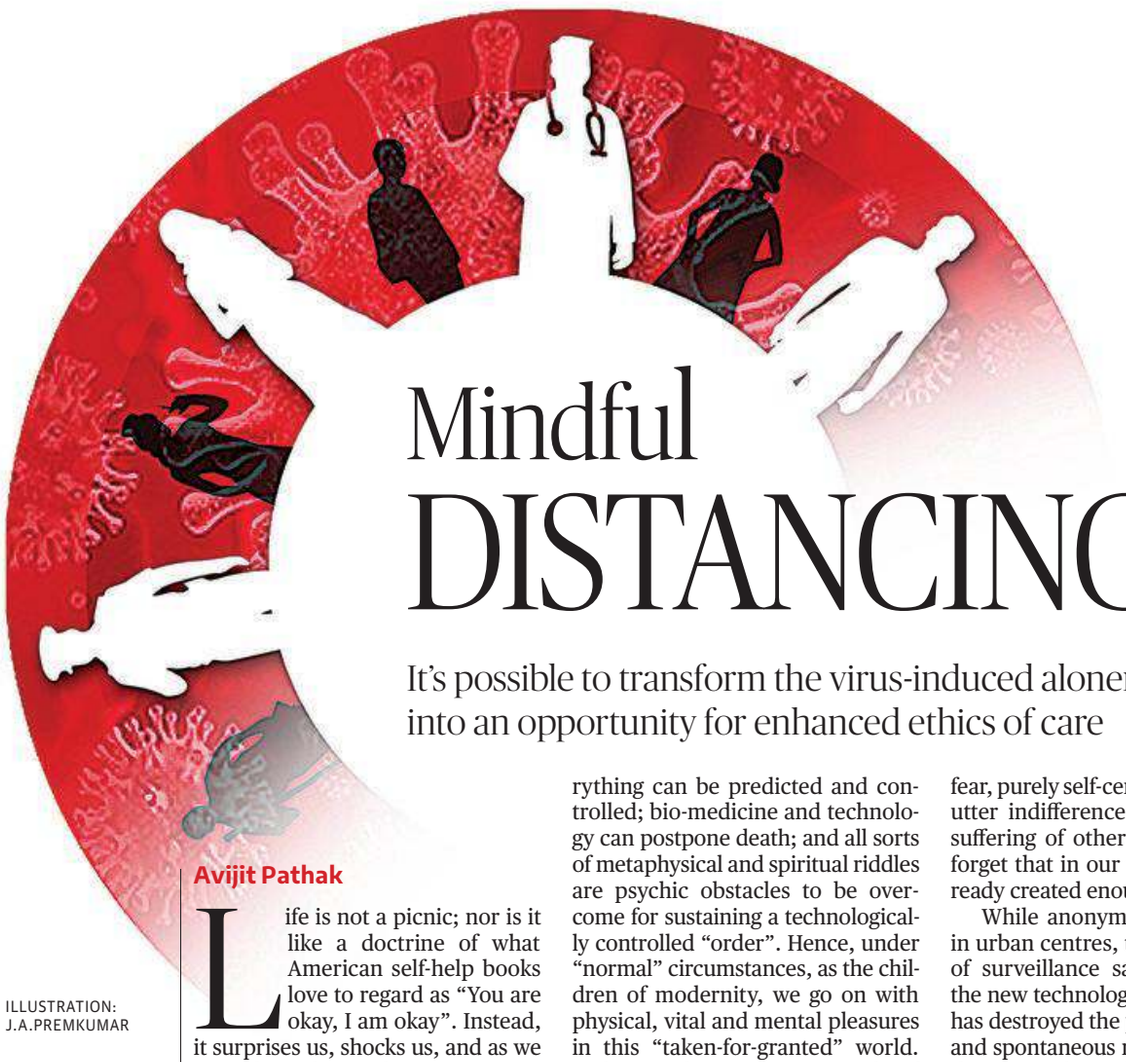
Slow forward

WhatsApp acted to curb pandemic-related misinformation by making it harder to forward messages. If a message has already been forwarded five times or more, you can now only forward it to one contact at a time. This comes amid panics caused by fake messages going viral, including some that triggered panic buying and a recent one purporting to be from WHO that claimed the lockdown in India would be extended till June.



Billion-dollar tweet

Among the host of billionaires pledging support for the fight against the pandemic, Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey made the biggest commitment by promising to donate $1 billion — roughly 28% of his wealth. Meanwhile, the Rajasthan High Court stayed an FIR filed against Dorsey in 2018 for hurting the sentiments of Brahmins by holding up a placard saying, 'Smash Brahminical Patriarchy'.



Mindful DISTANCING

It's possible to transform the virus-induced aloneness into an opportunity for enhanced ethics of care

Avijit Pathak

ILLUSTRATION: J.A.PREMKUMAR

Life is not a picnic; nor is it like a doctrine of what American self-help books love to regard as "You are okay, I am okay". Instead, it surprises us, shocks us, and as we pass through puzzling curves, we realise that the "taken-for-granted world" can crumble. And then, we experience "shock". Yes, as the novel coronavirus haunts our collective consciousness, we find ourselves in a world where fear is normal, surveillance is legitimate, human interactions are prohibited, and "distancing" becomes the new discourse. While every moment we hear how coronavirus is spreading and shattering the self-perception of modernity's triumphant agenda, we are forced to ask a difficult question. What then is the meaning of existence? Is it only about chronic fear, isolation and stigmatisation of the victims? Is it only about the desperate urge to be biologically alive (with masks and sanitisers), yet aesthetically and spiritually dead?

We find ourselves in a world where fear is normal, surveillance is legitimate, distancing is the discourse

To begin with, it is important to acknowledge that modernity has not necessarily prepared us to derive a meaning of dignified existence – particularly, amid existential uncertainty. Instead, it has made us believe that life is an express highway – a smooth road to "progress"; everything can be predicted and controlled; bio-medicine and technology can postpone death; and all sorts of metaphysical and spiritual riddles are psychic obstacles to be overcome for sustaining a technologically controlled "order". Hence, under "normal" circumstances, as the children of modernity, we go on with physical, vital and mental pleasures in this "taken-for-granted" world. Today as the modernist myth of "certainty" is over; we seem to be at a loss. We really do not know how to live meaningfully even amid this uncertainty: when any time the virus can enter our residential societies, we may find ourselves coughing and breathing with great difficulty, and local hospitals may refuse to admit us.

Ethics of care

In the absence of a meaningful education to engage with the inherent uncertainty of life, we are reducing existence into yet another self-centric strategy for mere survival. It is in this context that I wish to reflect on "social distancing". Well, since there is a possibility of community transmission of the virus, doctors are not entirely wrong in advising us to remain in isolation, and reduce travelling, gathering and other social transactions. There is a positive meaning attached to it. However, what is equally important to realise is that without the aesthetics of living, "distancing" might degenerate into a mode of living filled with chronic fear, purely self-centric pursuits, and utter indifference to the pain and suffering of others. We should not forget that in our times we have already created enough "distancing".

While anonymity has increased in urban centres, the normalisation of surveillance sanctified through the new technologies of "discipline" has destroyed the possibility of trust and spontaneous relationships. Furthermore, the techno-hallucination that the virtual world with all its media simulations has created is not really conducive to the growth of a real and physically embedded social space. Again, as the market colonises every domain of life, instrumental and strategic rationality kills the possibility of therapeutic and dialogic communication. The paradox is that many of us, despite social media "followers" and "subscribers", remain lonely. Under these circumstances, the question arises: is the spread of the virus giving us yet another excuse for this self-centric/instrumental living? Be a clever and strategic "winner", but never a "loser". Is it like feeling proud that "I have survived; but they could not"? Is it what living is all about?

However, it is not impossible to transform this occasion into an opportunity for enhanced ethics of care. True, we need not travel much; we need not entertain meetings and gatherings. But then, in the name of "distancing", we need not forget others. Instead, we can use – and this time humanely and creatively – our gadgets for a sustained social intimacy. Instead of neurotically striving for Facebook "likes" and "selfie" perfection, we can truly connect to our friends and neighbours, and overcome all sorts of "otherness". Is it not the time to have a long conversation with a friend who cannot avoid travelling as his wife is undergoing chemotherapy in a hospital? Is it not the occasion when you and I ought to write a long letter to a friend who is worried about his daughter – a doctor dealing with COVID-19 patients?

Or is it not the time to have a telephonic conversation with your domestic help, and enquire whether she is safe in the overcrowded slum she lives in? Or is it not the time not to look at the clock, and have a long chat (over Skype) with your maternal uncle – a widower living alone in Rome, and invoke Mulla Nasruddin, crack jokes, and realise the joy of boundless laughter? Yes, it is possible. And then, we will be able to say that this is not "social distancing"; instead, this is yet another form of social intimacy. We would be able to realise that technology is not for self-indulgence; it is bridge capable of connecting human souls.

It is also important to learn to make a distinction between alertness and obsessive fear. Yes, coronavirus is real; and the continual dissemination of headlines like "Days after partying, visiting malls, Andhra man tests positive", or "Govt. investigating COVID-19 patient in Tamil Nadu without foreign travel history" causes fear. Yet, this is also the time to realise that obsessive fear is essentially counter-productive; it paralyses, and makes us incapable of handling any emergency. Instead, every second we allow ourselves to die – ethically and spiritually. While alertness or appropriate medical care is important, we often tend to fall into the trap of fear, particularly in an age when WhatsApp messages, far from generating strength, spread negativity. Possibly, as I wish to state, we can transcend the psychology of obsessive fear not through the denial of the crisis, but through intense inner churning.

True, the virus can kill us. But then, this very moment when you and I are alive is the only moment available to us. Can we live this moment with mindfulness, intensity and care? This is the real education.

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Undying frenzy amid lockdown

Nitasha Devasar

On Day One of the lockdown, I woke up early and rushed to my terrace to view the world around me. The first thing I see is two vegetable carts down the empty road, their owners hidden behind big handkerchiefs. A minute later a familiar young woman appears. Then a couple of teenage boys saunter by. As a DTC cluster bus roars into the bus stop in a cloud of dust and these people clamber in, I think how do you stop a billion-plus people from leaving their homes? How do you convince them that there is a rapidly growing menace that will soon engulf us, if we don't comply?

As soon as the lockdown was announced, people rushed out and crowded their neighbourhood groceries – social distance be damned. The hoarding instinct, the crowding mentality and the complete disregard of the message of physical distancing was frightening. It would have been amusing, in a cynical sort of way, if it wasn't for the fact that that we are more connected to each other than ever before in deadly viral networks. This behaviour is personal, and it endangered each one of us, our elderly parents and children.

Is it some middle class anxiety of a post-Partition generation grown up on tales of material loss and scarcity? Or is it something more recent, more selfish and insular, a creeping disconnection from the real world and real people that has permeated our society in the past decade or so?

Whatever the cause and whether we choose to acknowledge it or not, this is an unprecedented, unknown and overwhelming crises in which apathy, elitism and callousness will harm each individual, family, city, state, nation and the whole world. Could we in our wildest dreams imagine it would be so hard to stay at home. Human interaction will never be the same again.

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A de-cluttering emptiness

The lockdown has brought back the peace and quiet that we had lost somewhere

Jogendra Suryadevara



For many days now, all of us have been inundated with information on COVID-19. News from around the world is devastating and forecasts are grim. I have ventured out of home only once in the past four days and that too for just 15 minutes adhering to the physical distancing norms. Receiving this barrage of depressive information and predictions while staying home, wondering if we are taking the right precautions and if our friends and families are safe and thinking of all the work getting postponed, is playing tricks on my mind.

Reaching the point of "information saturation", I decided on Ugadi morning to just greet my family and friends and stay away from all viral news and updates for a while. The Telugu New Year celebration in our house was curtailed to just sending and receiving greetings. No Ugadi chutney, vada, tamarind rice or payasam. I decided to start off the New Year on a better note, not with more disturbing news. So, I went to the balcony and stared at the roads for a few minutes. Not a single soul nor a polluting vehicle went by. No calls from the vegetable hawkers or the sofa repair guys with their blaring messages on speakers. Absolute quiet. Just the cawing of crows and cooing of pigeons and an occasional eagle in the skies.

Calm as ever

I then went over to our living room with a hot cup of lemon tea that they say is good for your throat. Sat down and watched the hazy skies and mountains afar from the comfort of my sofa, and they seemed to be calm just as they have been for ever. But today, the city too has joined them in their stillness and silence.

Not a sound from anywhere. Just eerily quiet. Visakhapatnam, known as the "Steel City", has transformed into a "still city". Determined to stay away from electronic, print and social media, I then went over to our rooftop garden and walked amid the flowers and fruits my wife has been growing. Didn't realise she had grown such a variety. I discovered the soothing fragrances of the flowers and their pleasing colours. I sat in the shade with a gentle cool morning breeze. No sounds from anywhere except from the wind chimes swaying in the garden. I should spend more time in the garden, I thought.

The natural surroundings are soothing, but the silence is "deafening". I kept thinking how much we have got used to the noise and chaos we create and how far we have got from peace and tranquillity that once surrounded us, and how this new experience of lockdown of just a few days is choking us

. But I am glad that this has been thrust upon us; else we would never have been able to experience this.

And I hope this experience will be frozen in our minds and that every once in a while, we will long for and practice this "emptiness" to cleanse our cluttered lifestyles, minds and souls.

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When prevention takes a back seat

Despite the medical advances, we have failed to adopt preventive health care

Tiny Nair

It was a high-level meeting of a committee comprising top cardiologists, administrators and officials, discussing strategies to improve care of patients with major heart disease in the country. The meeting ended up with plans to have more cardiac cath labs, intensive care units, hi-tech interventions and staff training; sadly no one talked about prevention of a disease that can be kept at bay if measures are adopted early – on an average, a decade before it manifests. I feebly suggested a few preventive strategies, with hardly any impact. People, awe-struck with advances in technology, big data and balance sheets, were already packing their files, closing laptops and putting left-over peppermints into their pockets. I prayed that the policy-makers answer my prayers – maybe, some day.

Vaccines, hand sanitation, nutritious food, regular exercise, all are meant for the same result: maintaining good health and prevent diseases.

But the high-level meeting discussing "preventive medical strategy for 2020" strangely ended up with handshakes (now *namaste* courtesy corona) and dates for the next meeting; and nobody believes that we are doing anything worthwhile. The first thing in a preventive strategy is the belief that the strategy will work.

A society that doesn't believe in a strategy (for instance, vaccination) is unlikely



to benefit from it. The main challenge in preventive medical strategy is its acceptance. A person suffering from a splitting headache or an unbearable chest pain is likely to land up in the hospital emergency room, even if he hates a hospital (most of us do) or doesn't believe in modern medicine. But decision to vaccinate a child, check blood cholesterol or following a healthy lifestyle needs acceptance; a conscious and voluntary decision. A sick patient, with no belief in modern medicine, has a high chance of ending up in hospital, often resulting from the collective decision of more informed neighbours or relatives to rush him or her there.

But for a healthy man to adopt preventive steps, the stock answer will be "I am so busy", "I don't have time", or "I would think about it".

With all the hi-tech medical advances, scans and biomarkers at our disposal, we have failed to impress the people at large on our commitment to impart preventive health care. It is our fault; you and me included.

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FEEDBACK

Letters to the *Magazine* can be e-mailed separately to mag.letters@thehindu.co.in

Cover story



Humanity spends more on ice cream every year than on ensuring that the technologies we develop don't destroy us. ('Pandemics and prejudice'; Apr. 5) Either humanity takes control of its destiny and reduces the risk to a sustainable level, or all human life will be destroyed. Pandemics were Stephen Hawking's biggest fear. He recalled how the Black Death wiped out as many as half of all Europeans during the 14th century. Or the earlier Plague of Justinian that swept through the Byzantine Empire in 541 CE, reducing humanity's headcount by 3%. By comparison, today's coronavirus outbreak is mild, although it provides a taste of the massive disruption a more lethal strain might bring.

K.M.K. MURTHY

■ The cover story made sad reading. Just as Mary Mallon was nicknamed 'Typhoid Mary', the barrage of similar stories – from Jews being wrongly persecuted for spreading the plague to U.S. President Trump using the term 'Chinese virus' – speaks of how quick society is to accuse someone. Science has miserably failed to convince the human race that pathogens are without prejudice.

E.S. CHANDRASEKARAN

■ The cover feature drives home the painful fact that we have different yardsticks for different people. It is a grim irony that in our country, people have directed their anger against all those with a slight facial resemblance to the Chinese. People from the Northeast are as Indian as any of us and stigmatising them is a crime. Let us shed these petty prejudices and acquire the broad-mindedness needed to treat all human beings alike.

C.V. ARAVIND

■ I must thank Mr. Amitansghu for the insightful cover story that clearly details 'epidemic orientalism'. It is true that diseases such as cholera and flu were named after their places of origin, but this is also a fact of the evolution of the infection. Mr. Trump seems to have 'named' COVID-19 with the same logic. While stigmatisation is unacceptable, I believe China should have responded to the accusation with its own justifications, especially against the backdrop of the Chinese book, *Unrestricted Warfare*, by Colonels Liang and Xiangsui, which highlights a virus warfare tactic. Second, with people not self-disclosing, people defying prohibitory orders and endangering the lives of others, sometimes stricter measures are not necessarily implemented out of 'prejudice' but out of the government's compulsion in the larger interest of the nation. Just as the WHO has christened this pandemic on the basis of the pathogen, if only Ms. Mary Mallon could have explained her reasons for continuing to cook despite being a typhoid carrier, I would have begun my classes on 'Typhoid Fever' for medical students with a different anecdote.

DR. AJITH VIJAYAN

■ What pandemics bring is not just infection but racism and hate-mongering as well. These are times when there is a need to come together and realise if nature doesn't obey social categorisations, who are we to do so?

PARIDHI KHANNA

Reading epidemic

Reading last week's Reprise ('La Peste by Albert Camus' ; Apr. 5), I remembered *Inferno* by Dan Brown. It is a must-read book during this pandemic. Books on epidemics, like Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, Saramago's *Blindness*, Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*, Shelley's *The Last Man* etc. portray well the fear and helplessness of mankind in the face of disease.

SHIBLI SADDAM

More on the Web

thehindu.com/opinion/open-page

Humanity in the grip of corona

While deadlier virus types have wreaked havoc, none has achieved superstardom as COVID-19

ARTHUR SANIOTIS

The war against a virus

Survival can't be construed as a victory, as we have to change our ways to prevent such infections

SUKUMARAN C.V.

Guarding against COVID-19

Surely many must have become a watchman like me in the ongoing fearful times

RAMESHINDER SINGH SANDHU

This page consists of reader submissions. Contributions of up to a length of 700 words may be e-mailed to openpage@thehindu.co.in. Please provide a postal address and a brief background of the writer. The mail must certify that it is original writing, exclusive to this page. The Hindu views plagiarism as a serious offence. Given the large volume of submissions, we regret that we are unable to acknowledge receipt or entertain queries about submissions. If a piece is not published for eight weeks please consider that it is not being used. The publication of a piece on this page is not to be considered an endorsement by The Hindu of the views contained therein.





A walk to remember (Clockwise from left) This old photograph of sika deer in Japan was wrongly circulated as deer sighting in Tamil Nadu; but fallow deer did come to graze on the lawns of a housing estate in London; moored gondolas reflected in the now-clear waters of Venice's canals; Jalandhar got a view of the Himalayas hundreds of kilometres away in the now clear air; a gull on a perch in Venice; the video of this common small civet cat in Kozhikode went viral as the endangered Malabar civet; and a herd of Cashmere goats sauntered out into a small town in North Wales. ▪ TWITTER.COM, AFP, AP, PTI & CREATIVE COMMONS





ENVIRONMENT

In our wildest dreams

Is the earth 'healing'? Nature 'reclaiming' the planet? Well... Yes, no and maybe

Harini Nagendra



It is after sunset, and I can hear sounds I haven't heard in years: the chorus of chirping crickets, serenading frogs and screeching owls. By day, the squabbling squirrels that hang out on the Bauhinea trees that line the footpath, and the brahminy kite perched on the electric wire, let me come up closer than they used to before. My backyard, frequented by a couple of red-vented bulbuls and a coucal, now has new visitors – sunbirds flitting from corner to corner, hovering around the pomegranate flowers, checking out the dried leaves. And the green bee-eaters I hadn't seen in years are back! Some 15 years ago, when we first moved into this neck of the woods in Bengaluru, bee-eaters kept us company, perched in large groups on the electricity lines; and now here they are again, hanging out on an African tulip tree near our neighbour's house. My mother reports that the crows seem bolder, swooping closer to her when she ventures outside.

The world is certainly a quieter place in these days of the lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. With cars off the streets, seismologists investigating earthquakes in London, Brussels and Los Angeles report that the ambient noise levels are so low they are now better able to detect even smaller seismic events in these cities.

Naturalists across India, stuck at home, are reporting wildlife sightings in their backyards. Twitter, Facebook and Instagram videos show us exciting scenes of wild animals walking down urban streets. Newspapers report that the air is so clean you can see the snow-capped Himalayas from Jalandhar, hundreds of kilometres away – something not seen in decades. Delhi's air quality this March was the best it'd had in five years for that month.

So is the earth really 'healing'? Are animals 'reclaiming the planet'? Has nature 'triumphed'? The answer is yes and no: sifting truth from fake news depends on what you are looking at, the angle you are looking at it from, and how long a look you are prepared to take.

Greenhouse gas emissions are down, but the excessive volumes of CO_2 that we have pumped into the air for decades will not disappear in a few days or weeks or even months

True or false

There have been some clear hoaxes. No, scores of deer did not occupy a road in Coimbatore or Ooty; those were actually a herd of sika deer in Japan's Nara Park shot several years ago. Another video claiming to be the first sighting since the 1990s of the critically endangered Malabar civet, in Kozhikode, turned out to be of the more common small Indian civet cat, one that scientists said could have been sick and disoriented. And no, the canals of Venice do not now have dolphins, even though the waters indeed run clearer and it's just as exciting that ducks, cormorants, crabs and fish have reclaimed the canals. Venetians are now beginning to talk of possibly reducing motorised boat traffic so that some of this returning biodiversity can be preserved.

Other stories are true. Coyotes and foxes are now being spotted across American cities; raccoons were seen in Panama; wild boars infiltrated Barcelona's city centre; a puma was spotted in Santiago, the Chilean capital; and deer explored subway stations in Japan – heaven knows what they made of it.

Other animals, less wild, are also beginning to explore the now-quiet streets. Cashmere goats have taken to walking the streets of the Welsh seaside town of Llandudno. Imported during Queen Victoria's reign to supply wool, these goats normally graze on the rocky outcrops outside the town, but now, in the absence of traffic, they are drawn to the inviting hedges and gardens of the town. In another Welsh county, Monmouthshire, an adorable video shows a herd of sheep taking over a deserted children's playground, trotting on a roundabout, clearly having the time of their lives.



Back home, a nilgai was spotted in Noida, a sambar in Chandigarh, a rhinoceros in Sonapur near Guwahati, and peacocks on the streets of Coimbatore. Olive Ridley turtles are nesting undisturbed in large numbers on the beaches of Odisha, benefiting from the rare lack of human predators.

Taking advantage of this rare opportunity, several citizen science groups have begun to gather data. Macau's annual City Nature Challenge has scaled down its objectives, asking participants to look at whatever they can spot within their apartment – a cockroach under the sink or a potted plant in the balcony. At the University of Washington, scientists have launched a community science programme, asking volunteers to monitor birds using the eBird app for 10 minutes, either in their backyard or in any local green space. Bird Count India has launched a Lockdown Birding Challenge, asking people to observe birds in their backyard for 15 minutes, twice a day, using eBird to upload the data.

Backyard science

The objectives of many of these citizen science programmes are threefold. Most obviously, they seek to gather data about the impact of the lockdown and the reduced human disturbance on bird, insect and animal activity. Second, they hope to educate people about nature in their backyard, helping parents and children come together for "wow" moments as they spot a brilliantly coloured butterfly or watch a potter wasp building a neat mud nest. Finally, it is about mental health. In these stressful times, watching and listening to nature can help: a moment of fleeting magic can make all the difference. Waking up to the delightfully mismatched orchestra of squirrels, crows and bulbuls, and going to bed with the hum of crickets vibrating through your window are little things that melt away the stress.

But there has been a downside for wildlife too. Conservationists and wildlife researchers worry that an unfounded fear of wild creatures like bats can lead to people trying to eliminate them in these times of fake news and social media misinformation. Two trees with large bat roosts, for instance, were felled in Mysuru recently, because local people were afraid of picking up viruses from them. But this will not succeed in keeping people safe – it will only drive the bats to other habitats, possibly even closer to human residences.

Brief reprieve

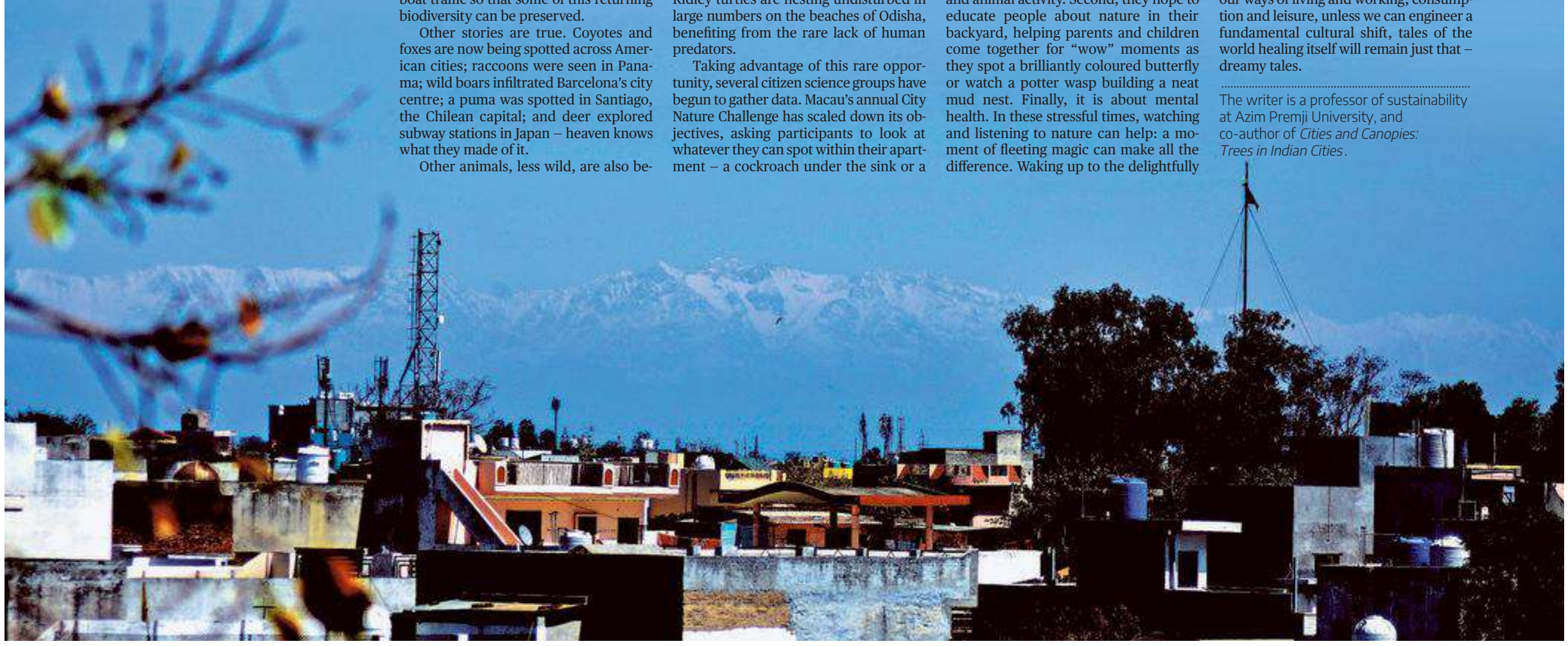
Perhaps saddest of all is the realisation that any breather the world may be getting now is only temporary, a brief reprieve. Our reckless tendency to overconsume has unmistakably been the cause for the swift global spread of the virus from Wuhan to the farthest and most distant corners of the world. Greenhouse gas emissions are down, but the excessive volumes of CO_2 that we have pumped into the air for decades will not disappear in a few days or weeks or even months of lockdown. This is an ever-expanding spiral of environmental degradation that we have brought upon ourselves. This short respite only serves to show us how poorly we have lived our lives so far, and to give a brief taste of how it could have been had we lived life differently.

When the crisis winds its way out, and we return to the chaos and frenzy of urban living, will we remember that we have the right to see blue skies and faraway mountains, breathe clean air and listen to the chorus of birds? Or will we push these thoughts away, diving back into our computer screens, headphones plugged in?

If there is hope, it lies in the possibility that social distancing and lockdowns can lead to shifts in imagination. Can we – those of us fortunate enough to live under a roof, with food in our bellies and cash in our bank accounts – understand that daily life needs to slow down, that we need to spend more time looking at flowers that blossom and the butterflies that drink their nectar? Will businesses and employers allow us to return to a quieter, more harmonious way of life?

Unless this period of social distancing leads to a fundamental requestioning of our ways of living and working, consumption and leisure, unless we can engineer a fundamental cultural shift, tales of the world healing itself will remain just that – dreamy tales.

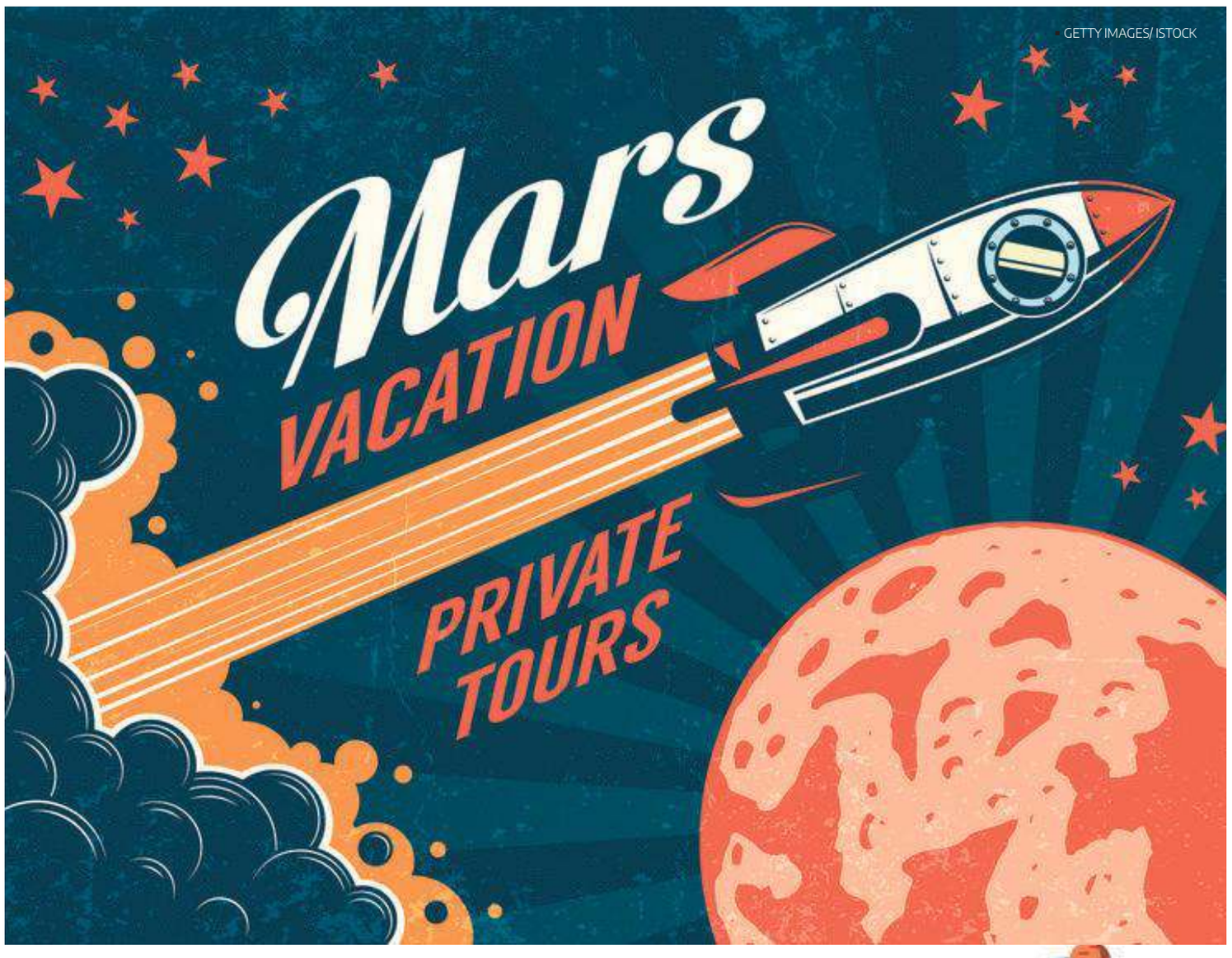
The writer is a professor of sustainability at Azim Premji University, and co-author of *Cities and Canopies: Trees in Indian Cities*.



ESSAY

Hop in and shut out

This is the time when you want to read yourself out of the moment. Fortunately, the shelves that surround me in my apartment are designed for one and only one thing: escape



GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK

Jaideep Unudurti

The first thought that crossed my mind when the lockdown was announced was: finally I'll have time to read all those books, swiftly chased by: what if I don't have enough? As a freelancer, living off Maggi noodles and black coffee, unyoked from the calendar of night and day, social distancing is a lifestyle choice, not an imposition. But the thought of being stuck at home and not having anything to read was claustrophobic.

Binge watching is intolerable, given that I already spend so much of my professional life in front of a screen. The same goes for e-books; only the printed page will do. As critic Joe Queenan said, "My philosophy is simple: Certain things are perfect the way they are. The sky, the Pacific Ocean, procreation and the Goldberg Variations all fit this bill, and so do books."

Gateway drugs

The lockdown came at a point when I didn't want to read a single word any more about pandemics, pathogens or pneumonia. At the first sign of the approaching storm, I behaved like the usual news junkie, scouring the underside of the web for conspiracy theories, or looking up fiction about outbreaks.

As the storm hit, one moved from the abstract to the practical – does drinking Assam tea help (it's the theaflavins you see), for how many hours does the virus survive on different surfaces, ranked, and so on. Now that we are in the ominous silence of the storm's eye, you want to stop scrolling Twitter, shut down the newsfeeds, rather like King John who said, "Do not seek to stuff my head with more ill news, for it is full." This is the time when you want to read yourself out of the moment. Fortunately, the shelves that surround me in my apartment are designed for one and only one thing: escape.

Now that we are in the ominous silence of the storm's eye, you want to stop scrolling Twitter and shut down the newsfeeds, rather like King John who said, 'Do not seek to stuff my head with more ill news, for it is full'

I grew up in a boarding school, located on an enormous island of basalt upraised into the sky, isolated and remote. At an early point in my scholastic career, it was found that my appendix was planning to kill me and had to be dispensed with. During a long spell in the school hospital I discovered piles of luridly covered American sci-fi magazines. Even in those pre-Internet days I knew that the model of the solar system these magazines conjured up had been hopelessly overtaken by science, but I didn't care.

The image of Mercury with one side broiling under a sky-filling sun, the other in frozen darkness, and a thin strip of inhabitable twilight in between; the ancient ruins of Mars built by a master race now long extinct; the sinister denizens of the swamps of cloud-shrouded Venus – all these burnt like liquid fire in the brain, far superior to the world of class politics, slip tests and athletic bravado.

Once out of the hospital, my search for the fix led me to the senior library, with its soaring ceilings and wonderfully comfortable chairs next to wall-high windows. There, arrayed like archaeological strata, were rows of vintage sci-fi, filled with strange names like Asimov and Heinlein, Kuttner and Kornbluth, Le Guin and Williamson. Adventures featuring dashing spacemen on far-flung planets, quests that usually had whole galaxies at stake, impossible machiner and sleek-finned ships that cleaved the stars. This was the gateway drug that led me to fantasy, horror, pulp thrillers and other genre intoxicants.

Grow up?

Even then, there was always the unasked question that persisted through college and the decades beyond – when will you start reading something serious? When will you finally 'grow up'? When will you put behind escapism and confront reality. As C.S. Lewis said, only jailors are opposed to escapism.

Only, in the immediate here and now, escape means not from tedious jobs or bad marriages but from rooms the size of our skulls. Nobody said it was easy – as long ago as in the 17th century, philosopher Blaise Pascal had declaimed "The sole cause of man's unhappiness is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his room." Indeed, being confined led the desperately bored 18th century writer Xavier de Maistre (he was under house arrest for unauthorised duelling) to write the inspired *A Journey Round My Room*, a parody of conventional travelogues (for example, Chapter V is 'The Bed').

Like other solitary workers from home, I know well this strange geography. How many times I've woken up at 2 a.m., having slept through the day, to start working. The days blur and bleed into one another. Sam Lipsyte advises in his novel *Homeland*: "When you work at home, fellow alums, discipline is the supreme virtue. Suicidal self-loathing lurks behind every coffee break. Activities must be expertly scheduled, from shopping to showers to panic attacks."

Fatal inversion

By some fatal inversion, the inside has now become the outside, the hermeticism practised by the solitary worker suddenly replicated on a planetary scale. For me, the only change is that now I am woken by birdsong instead of traffic noise.

As panic-stricken citizens were ransacking supermarkets, I have no doubt that others like me were casting a critical eye over their book supply – would it last three weeks? The first estimate is invariably wrong: we grossly overestimate our reading speed – even at one book a day, we should have enough – but there are



▪ GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK

fears. Fears of being trapped in tedious narratives, starting on trilogies with missing entries and so on. However, a decade of collecting and even outright book-hoarding means I'm reasonably safe from such a fate.

The poet Frank Bidart is supposed to have boasted that were a cataclysm to end the world and only his cramped Brooklyn flat were recovered, it would still be possible to reconstruct the entirety of Western civilisation from its contents.

All bibliophiles secretly feel that their own collections will stand this supreme test, recreating whatever their obsessions were; in my case it would be literature of the imagination. By the end of the first week my apartment floor was littered with piles of books. I had decided to categorise them, make reading lists on a thematic basis, the daydream of every reader. For example, I could choose to read only those novels where chess provides motive power to the plot, say Zweig's *Schachnovelle* or Pérez-Reverte's *The Flanders Panel*.

Metaphysical mayhem

Another taxonomical method is size; as Stalin is supposed to have said, "Quantity has a Quality of its own". One shelf buckles under the weight of a row of giant tomes, such as the *Zones of Thought* series by Vernor Vinge, a massive trilogy spanning millions of years and thousands of alien races that I've been too daunted to confront. Or *Perlmann's Silence* by Pascal Mercier, featuring metaphysical mayhem at a conference of philosophers.

Another mode of organisation is picking an author and burning through their oeuvre. This immediately draws me to a shelf which holds the Fandorin series by Boris Akunin. Set in *fin de siècle* Russia, the thrillers have been described as what would happen if Tolstoy and Conan Doyle collaborated on a Russian equivalent of Sherlock Holmes. Akunin uses a literary mechanism that I always appreciate – the character ages as the books progress over two decades – making a sequential reading even more appealing.

In this manner more and more piles are now accumulating, but I haven't actually started reading anything. In the face of the formless panic that stalks the air, the atavistic urge is to retreat into the cave and pull the blanket over your head. In short, abandon the new, and turn back to what once gave you joy. Re-reading gives a feeling of control, because you know exactly what the characters are going to do, their fates predetermined.

In Richmal Crompton's *Just William* series, William Brown and the Outlaws will always save the day. Or go back to *Billy Bunter and* its repetitive but effective formula.

I know that the years I spent hoarding these treasures have not been wasted.

Meanwhile, news sites now have blinking icons showing infection counters. Over the vacant streets there hangs a silence. A silence that smells like an aftermath. Now I think of my home as a spaceship. Grocery runs means cycling the airlock and stepping into the uncaring void. Supermarkets are alien planets where you forage while thinking all the while, who is infected? Who isn't? Paranoia is as essential for survival as a spacesuit.

It is not a coincidence that in fantasy and sci-fi the space ships always have escape hatches, wardrobes conceal portals, there are magical doorways drawn in the air, and wormholes to transport you away. Sometimes escape is the only option.

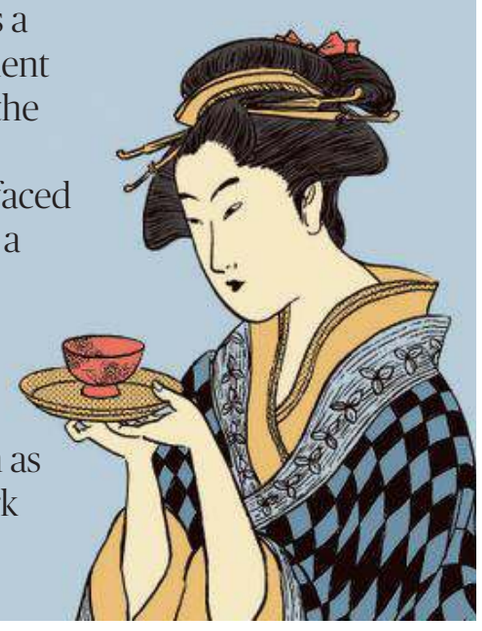
The writer is a freelance journalist and graphic novelist.

REVIEW

▪ GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK

Everywoman's narrative

Impressive as a social document that records the everyday oppressions faced by women in a patriarchal society, the book doesn't quite pack a punch as a literary work



Anusua Mukherjee

This novel, first published in South Korea in 2016, led to a minor upheaval there. While feminists lauded it for bringing to light the lifelong discriminations faced by South Korean women in a largely patriarchal society, detractors alleged that it made sexist generalisations against men and distorted reality. One can imagine a similar book stoking similar reactions in India: happy societies are all alike, aren't they?

Little rules

Middle-class, 30-something Kim Jiyoung, whose mind starts unravelling suddenly, is an everywoman. When she is born, her paternal grandmother is disappointed because she had hoped for a boy; growing up, she and her elder sister share a room while their brother gets one of his own; when she is stalked, her father blames her; although she works hard, she never gets a promotion while undeserving male employees go places; her looks are commented upon by random men she meets at work; once she becomes a mother, she has to give up her career and independence to look after the child – if none of this sounds startling to us, it is because most women in Asia are in the same situation. Not surprisingly, the novel became a bestseller in Japan, China and Taiwan. And why just Asia. As the Metoo revelations proved, even in seemingly privileged nations, the 'second sex' remains under-privileged oftener than not.



Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982
Cho Nam-Joo, trs Jamie Chang
Simon & Schuster India
₹450

Kim's story is told in a flat monotone, indicative of the banality of the endemic evil of gender discrimination. Cho Nam-Joo can hardly be accused of bending reality to suit her narrative – she backs up her presentation of the hurdles women are confronted with at every stage of their lives with hard data, which are cited in the footnotes. So, abortion of female foetuses, daughters supporting male siblings' career to their own detriment, the glass ceiling in workplaces, women earning less than men in the same position – all this is supported by statistics and reports, lest they be mistaken as fiction. And Cho Nam-Joo doesn't spare women either – many of them, even presumably enlightened ones like Kim's teachers, are shown as having internalised patriarchal diktats and weaponising them against their own sex.

When the crisis comes – Kim starts speaking in the voices of other women, like that other much-abused woman, Grace, does under hypnosis in Atwood's *Alias Grace* – you see it almost as an inevitability, the figurative made literal. Kim is one in the long line of women whose life is predetermined before her birth and whose minor resistances can create no ripple. "The world had changed a great deal, but the little rules, contracts and customs had not, which meant the world hadn't *actually* changed at all." Denied her own voice, the voices of other women in her unconscious come to the surface, scaring everybody around her.

When the crisis comes — Kim starts speaking in the voices of other women — you see it almost as an inevitability

Last seen, she is recovering with the help of therapy and medicines. But when the doctor treating her says, "while her symptoms have decreased in frequency, they have yet to disappear," you fear what Kim will turn into once her symptoms do disappear under the male psychiatrist's ministrations. A model 'normal' citizen, like her mother, mother-in-law, her sister-in law, grandmother, who are deemed normal only because they have successfully taught themselves not to rock the boat?

Forever passive

Here, a spoiler alert is in order: Kim's story is narrated by the psychiatrist based on her and her husband's account of her life. He appears to be a woke man who has been made aware of a reality other than that of the average Korean male's by following his wife's career trajectory – a promising medical student, she ends up as a stay-at-home mommy.

He is sympathetic, of course, but so is Kim's husband. Yet neither of them actively helps their respective wives to choose differently. And the final remark the doctor makes about his female colleague who is quitting because of her pregnancy – "Even the best female employees can cause many problems if they don't have the childcare issue taken care of. I'll have to make sure her replacement is unmarried" – makes him, at one fell stroke, one of 'them', the Korean males and institutionalised females in positions of power who must screen a female applicant's personal life before considering her for the job. Given this, how reliable a narrator has he been all through?

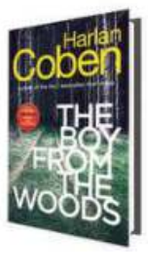
Considering *Kim Jiyoung* as a work of literature rather than a social document, I wish this aspect of the narrative was explored further. Kim is forever passive – whenever something goes wrong, she is shown crying, rushing out, outraged, mortified – and that's that. Didn't she hit back, ever? She could have chosen not to become a mother – facts show that South Korea's fertility rate has been decreasing down the years – why did she do what her husband wanted of her despite knowing that motherhood might mean the end of her career? Is the novel the doctor's subjective interpretation of her story or is it Kim herself who is doggedly naïve throughout? Reading *Kim Jiyoung* it seems women are fated to be victims. Surely that's not true?

BROWSER

The Magnificent Conman of Cairo
Adel Kamel, trs Waleed Almusharaf
Hoopoe Fiction
£10.99
With a foreword by Naguib Mahfouz, this is the story of two men from two ends of the social spectrum whose lives cross in unexpected ways. Kamel's satirical voice packs in social commentary, riveting drama and subtle humour.



The Boy from the Woods
Harlan Coben
Penguin Random House
₹599
Wilde was found in the New Jersey backwoods as a child. Now a security expert, he lives off the grid, shunned by community. Till a girl goes missing and Wilde must race against time to save her life and expose the town's dark secrets in the process.



The Secret Hours
Santa Montefiore
Simon & Schuster
₹399
When her mother dies, Faye realises that she knows nothing about her. Determined to fulfil her mother's last wish, Faye travels to the picturesque village of Ballinakelly to scatter her ashes on the hills overlooking the sea in a remote corner of Ireland. Does her mother's past hold the key to Faye's future?



Mum & Dad
Joanna Trollope
Macmillan
$7.57 (Kindle price)
Gus and Monica have created a vineyard and wine business in Spain from the ground up. When Gus suffers a stroke, their three grown-up children in London must relocate and step in. As long-simmering resentments and tensions rise to the surface, can family ties hold them together?



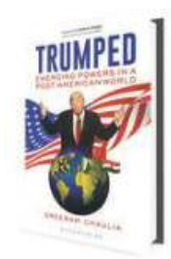
POLITICS

Trump and the decline of America

What is stopping emerging powers like Brazil, Turkey, India and Nigeria from seizing the moment to provide some leadership in a post-U.S. world?

Stanly Johny

"Empires are complex structures and cannot be dismantled solely by the whims of a single ruler," writes Sreeram Chaulia in his book, *Trumped: Emerging Powers in a Post-American World*. But actions by rulers at critical historical junctures could trigger the unravelling of empires. Chaulia gives several examples to buttress his theory.



Trumped: Emerging Powers in a Post-American World
Sreeram Chaulia
Bloomsbury
₹799

Emperor Ashoka's decision to switch to pacifism after the bloody conquest of Kalinga would lead to the decline of the Maurya Empire. Dom Pedro II's decision to loosen his monarchical grip was a pivotal moment in the collapse of the Brazilian empire in the 19th century.

In late 20th century, Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms would weaken the Soviet Union's grip over the republics, leading to the eventual disintegration of the USSR. The U.S., according to Chaulia, is facing its moment of reckoning like other empires did with President Donald Trump's 'offbeat individualism' taking centrestage.

The stronger side of the book is that Chaulia doesn't extricate the leader from history. He doesn't look at the decline of the U.S. as a Trump problem. Rather, Trump is a product of that decline whose economic nationalism and isolationist policies could precipitate the fall of the American empire bringing in radical changes in the global system.

The U.S.'s relative decline, Chaulia writes, is a secular trend, which was visible even during the stints of Trump's predecessors. The difference with Trump is that he doesn't share the American establishment's liberal internationalist worldview. Since World War II, American Presidents have played a key role in shaping the liberal international global order, which during the Cold War acted as a bulwark against the Communist bloc and thereafter as a U.S.-centric unipolar system. Trump sees the liberal international global order as a "conspiracy concocted by liberal American elites to impoverish and suppress ordinary American people." So he's adopted a neo-mercantilist, transactional capitalist policy that's rooted in American nationalism. This is Trump's America First doctrine, which practically precipitates America's decline as a global power.

Bipolar contest again?

So what comes next? Russia and China have already established themselves as big powers in their immediate regions. Does the American decline mean that the world will again slip into a bipolar contest? Or a tri-polar one? It doesn't have to, according to Chaulia.

There are emerging countries which could seize the moment. "The path to a multipolar world never seemed less imminent than when Trump arrived on the scene," he writes. In the book, he identifies four such emerging powers – India, Turkey, Brazil and Nigeria.

Next in line

The central message of *Trumped* is that emerging powers can seize this moment only if they have the apt political leadership. Brazil's far-right President Jair Bolsonaro, who has pulled the country back from the South-South cooperation approach adopted by his leftist predecessors and moved closer towards a declining U.S., doesn't tick all the columns. Nor does Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, whose short-sighted adventurism in West Asia is not helping Turkey's strategic path to greatness. But Narendra Modi of India and Muhammadu Buhari of Nigeria are 'safer bets' for their respective countries, writes Chaulia.

When Trump assumed presidency, India wanted the special partnership to continue. But there was a problem. Trump's predecessors saw India as a democratic bulwark against a rising communist China.

They saw China as a threat to the liberal international order. Here Trump himself doesn't subscribe to this liberal internationalism. His problem with China is its trade practices. And Trump sees India's trade practices also in the same light.

Chaulia believes that the India-China standoff at Doklam was a historic opportunity for the U.S. to make sure where it stands. But the Trump administration remained ambivalent, much to the surprise of the Indians. Trump's decision to hold talks with the Taliban seeking an exit from Afghanistan also undermines India's interests in the region. A disappointed Modi decided to reassert India's strategic autonomy. Chaulia gives the examples of India's S-400 missile system deal with Russia and Modi's outreach to China through the Wuhan summit after the Doklam standoff.

Strategic autonomy, or previously non-alignment, has been the bedrock of India's foreign policy. India has shifted its foreign policy directions in accordance with changes in the global order, but has always been wary of surrendering its strategic autonomy. Unlike Bolsonaro, Modi followed suit, reasserting the historical trend. But to shift its emerging power status into a big power one, India needs to do more, especially in the neighbourhood. Its ties with Pakistan is immensely hostile.

China has made steady inroads to most of its neighbouring countries. Ties with Bangladesh, an all-weather friend, have also strained after the citizenship row in India. How can India become a stable big regional power if it fails to maintain its benign influence on its neighbours? Therefore, while Chaulia's assessment about the decline of the U.S. and the Trump opportunity holds true for our times, it's to be seen whether emerging powers, including India, is ready for the moment.



Lone force A protester holds up a sign in Atlanta, Georgia. ▪ AP

SOCIETY

A difference in the classroom

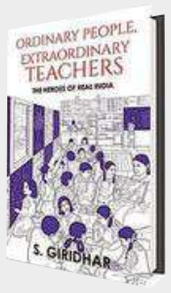
Taking stock of public education in India, and the improvement in government schools

R. Krithika

Ask an average person about government schools and the first reaction would most likely be 'ill equipped' followed by 'teachers don't turn up'. But that's not true of all government schools. And that's what S. Giridhar sets out to document in *Ordinary People, Extraordinary Teachers: The Heroes of Real India*. From the outset, the author makes it clear where his sympathies lie.

The first registrar and COO of the Azim Premji University, Giridhar was also one of the earliest members of the Azim Premji Foundation and has spent over 20 years documenting public education in India.

In this book, he writes about teachers who have changed the way people look at government schools. The opening chapter is about improvements: getting books and uniforms on time, decline in caning and fights among children and a major reduction in teacher absenteeism. This is only the beginning. Giridhar goes on to show his readers that government school teachers don't really deserve the bad press they get.



Ordinary People, Extraordinary Teachers: The Heroes of Real India
S. Giridhar
Westland
₹499

He writes about headmasters and teachers who have worked to get the community involved in the school; who encourage parents to educate their children instead of sending them to work. And ensure – by letting children of migrant labourers stay in school – that they don't drop out. For children to get food and school supplies even if they have to pay for it, coping with bureaucracy and red tape, the teachers ensure that schools get better infrastructure – whether as classrooms, toilets, drinking water or playgrounds, teaching aids and training and so forth.

Several challenges

Giridhar also points out the challenges are different in each place. "In Uttarkashi, the terrain and climate are a logistical trial for children and teachers alike; in the plains of Udham Singh Nagar, the pupil-teacher ratio is inimical to a conducive learning environment; Yadgir in northeast Karnataka grapples with the problem of irregular livelihoods because of the migration of parents...; and Sirohi in southern Rajasthan which has a significant tribal population (Garasias, Bhils and others) who speak their own dialects, needs teachers who can use a mix of Marwari, the local dialect and Hindi to initiate any interaction in the classroom."

What kind of a school do you want? This was the question Harish Chandra Singh Rawat of Government Model Primary School in Shivlalpur, Uttarakhand, took to the community.

At the other end of the country in Gedhalamari, Karnataka, Sangaiah is waging a battle to ensure that the boy:girl ratio of the school remains at 50:50. "I don't want the girls to drop out of school at any cost," he says.

All this is stated in a lucid and simple manner. In fact the matter-of-fact writing makes one wonder if we've gotten ourselves mixed up. Yes, there are over a million government schools and Giridhar has visited only 110. But are we taking into account our urban privileged view? Why cannot a government school have the same facilities as an urban private school without having to fight for it? Are we focusing too much on the few bad apples and not considering the roomful of untainted good ones?

DEFENCE

Fiery Himalayan encounters at Nathu La and Cho La

A former infantryman with the Gorka Regiment traces the battles between India and China on the Sikkim border in 1967

Arjun Subramaniam

Subsumed by the prominent discourse that attributes the current restrained texture of the India-China deterrence model to deft politico-diplomatic manoeuvring, the military dimension has often been consigned to the background. Among other reasons for the lack of awareness of the many face-offs and skirmishes along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), and the border with China across the state of Sikkim, is the lack of archival data and official narratives that are available in the public domain.

While there is still some reporting in recent times, the period between 1962 and 1971 continues to lie in the 'grey zone' of public consciousness with regards to the military dimension of the India-China relationship.

Probal Dasgupta, an ex-Indian Army officer who served in the Gorkha Regiment for several years before embarking on a career in consultancy, has written a detailed account of two fierce encounters between the Indian Army and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) across two 15,000-feet mountain passes in Sikkim in *Watershed 1967: India's Forgotten Victory Over China*.

Two fire fights

Sandwiched between the two India-Pakistan wars of 1965 and 1971, the Nathu La and Cho La fire fights of September 1967 have surprisingly been underplayed even in the Indian military with war colleges rarely discussing their impact and relevance.

The narrative explains the strategic landscape in the sub-continent during the tumultuous days of the 1965 India-Pakistan War; the twists, turns and intrigue in the progressive amalgamation of the kingdom of Sikkim into the Union of India; and the constant Chinese attempts to prevent the accession.

Even as Lt Gen Harbaksh Singh was orchestrating India's military revival in the 1965 war with Pakistan, the Chinese played their cards carefully and commenced applying pressure on the Sikkim and Bhutan fronts, something that surely played on the Indian leadership as they negotiated a ceasefire.

The constant jostling for ground across the Tibet-Sikkim border including on the desolate Giagong Plateau in north Sikkim at 18,000 feet comes out vividly, and not many know that several Indian soldiers from the Assam Rifles were killed there in an attack by the Chinese in December 1965. This alerted Major General (later Lieutenant General) Sagat Singh, the divisional commander of the Gangtok-based 17th Mountain Division, that something was cooking. Sagat Singh and two battalions of the Indian Army, 2 Grenadiers and 7/11 Gorkha Rifles, are at the heart of the narrative. While the former showcased his initiative and aggression by going against the diffident posture demonstrated by his corps commander, and advocated a tough posture against the Chinese along the Sikkim watershed, the latter were more than a match when the guns boomed. Dasgupta does not hold back any punches when he writes that the Indian battalions at Nathu La and Cho La almost wilted in the face of the initial Chinese artillery barrage and withering machine gun fire.

However, it was excellent leadership at all levels that helped the Grenadier battalion fight back with extremely effective artillery support. The fight at Cho La a few days later was equally fierce, with close quarter combat seeing the Gorkhas get the better of the Chinese who retreated after suffering heavy casualties. While individual acts of gallantry get their due weightage, Dasgupta highlights the larger strategic landscape in which India chose to downplay the impact of the Nathu La and Chola skirmishes. He argues forcefully that it was the Nathu La and Cho La experiences that set the stage for India's robust responses at Sumdorong Chu in 1986/87, and then again at Doklam in 2017.

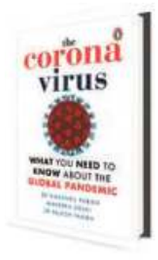
The book is well-researched, and has impactful photographs and maps. It follows an easy-to-read crossover style of writing that would appeal to a wide cross-section of readers. Dasgupta does yeoman service to the broader discipline of military history by bringing into focus a turning point in India-China relations.

The reviewer is a military historian and author of *India's Wars: A Military History 1947-1971*.



Watershed 1967: India's Forgotten Victory over China
Probal Dasgupta
Juggernaut
₹595

The Coronavirus: What you Need to Know about the Global Pandemic
Swapneil Parikh, Maherra Desai, Rajesh Parikh
Ebury Press/PRH
₹188
What is the novel coronavirus that has caused the global infection rate to cross a million and led to many deaths? Three professionals help readers understand the disease, and how they can protect themselves.



God is Neither a Khomeini nor a Mohan Bhagwat
Shajahan Madampat
The Book People
₹350
The pieces in this volume argue against zealotry and exclusivism of all hues. Quoting from experience, Madampat says, "...my engagement with the textual and lived worlds of religious faiths convinced me that all of them contain rich inner resources..."



Transformative Law and Public Policy
Edited by Sony Pelliserry
Routledge India
₹995
Case studies from Asia, Europe and Australia, examine how judicial and political institutions are closely linked to socio-economic concerns of citizens. They seek the utilisation of legislative and executive, private and public spheres of society.

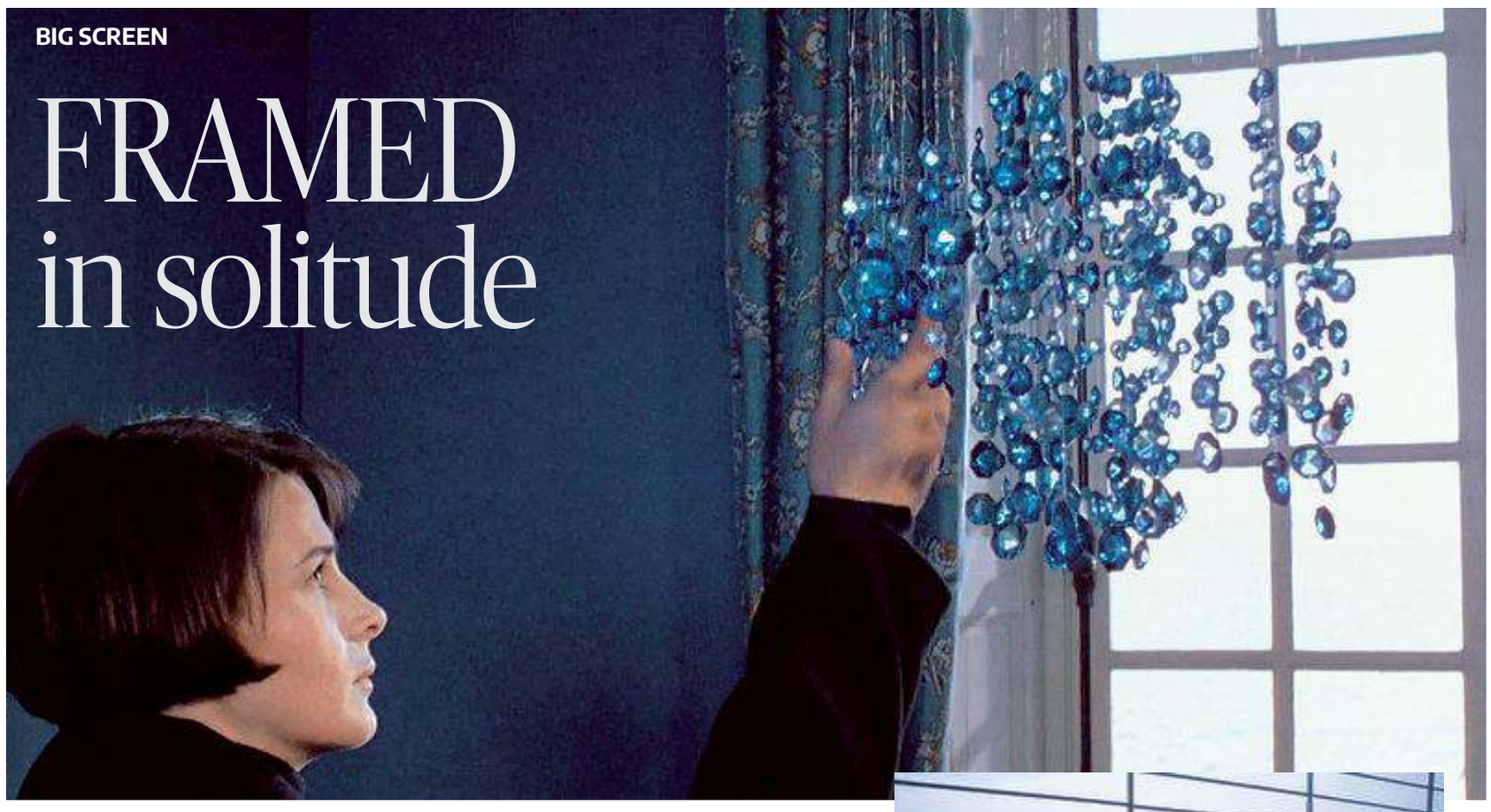


Pharma: Greed, Lies and the Poisoning of America
Gerald Posner
Simon & Schuster
₹899
A writer traces the heroes and villains of the trillion-dollar-a-year pharmaceutical industry in America and uncovers how those once entrusted with improving life have often betrayed that ideal to corruption and reckless profiteering.



BIG SCREEN

FRAMED in solitude





Haunting (Clockwise from left) Scenes from *Three Colours Blue*, *Pandemic* and *Trapped*. ▪ SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



During this pandemic, we have turned to cinema for comfort, or for eerily prescient visions of our new reality

Namrata Joshi

Patrice, the famous composer, is dead in a car accident. His crowded public funeral service, lush with flowers, music and media persons, is screening on the television set, with the tentative hand of his wife Julie (Juliette Binoche) gently stroking the two lonely coffins on screen – those of Patrice and their only child – as though this desperate, fleeting caressing of the image would somehow compensate for the farewell she could not say in person. It's one of the most devastating sequences in Krzysztof Kieslowski's *Three Colours Blue*, an ode to unforeseen and unfathomable loss and grief and the frantic quest for closure and reconciliation.

The recollection of this haunting scene is particularly heart-wrenching in the time of lockdown, when one has been reading one painful account after another, of video chats replacing last goodbyes; of quick, curtailed funerals by strangers rather than by family. It is as though Kieslowski, through his mise-en-scène back in 1993, envisioned the gargantuan existential crisis that would befall us in 2020.

Yet, even as we mourn the loss of human touch during the pandemic, it's to the world of images I've been turning for comfort and escape, for answers and hope, often for that fellow feeling, of being in it together, sometimes just for the thrill of it.

You see Spanish film *The Platform* with a new perspective when you view it in conjunction with the hoarding of food and goods and the verticality of privileges

Too familiar

Contagion, Steven Soderbergh's sci-fi film, eerily foresaw, almost a decade ago, what infected meat ("Somewhere in the world, the wrong pig met up with the wrong bat") and not washing hands properly can lead to. The references to sanitisers and not touching one's face sound way too familiar – "Our best defence has been social distancing. No handshaking, staying home when you're sick, washing your hands frequently," says Dr. Ellis Cheever (Laurence Fishburne).

There is Dr. Erin Mears (Kate Winslet) talking about how the average person "... touches their face two-three thousand times a day. Three to five times every waking minute. In between, we're touching doorknobs, water fountains, elevator buttons and each other."

Adding to the foreboding, the film shows how a lack of understanding of the gravity of the situation leads to a wider global spread of both disease and panic. We seem to be actually living in *Contagion's* script.

Referring to blogger and conspiracy theorist Krumwiede (Jude Law), Dr. Cheever says, "In order to get scared, all you have to do is to come in contact with a rumour or the television or the Internet. I think what Mr. Krumwiede is spreading is far more dangerous than the disease." Replace Krumwiede with, well, we have several candidates for that slot today.

Human dimension

Another much-watched film today is Aashiq Abu's *Virus* (2019), about the Nipah epidemic in Kerala in 2018 and the medical, governmental and bureaucratic efforts that went into its containment. Its story of the bravery of several unknown people who helped manage the disease resonates in 2020 – Kerala's health minister K.K. Shailaja, played by Revathy in the film, is again leading from the front.

The plague in the South Korean series *Kingdom*, set in the 16th century, holds telling parallels with the outbreak today. You see Spanish film *The Platform* with a whole new perspective when you view it in conjunction with the hoarding of food and goods and the verticality of privileges that have become ignominious sideshows in the battle today.

Besides the nitty-gritty and details in "virus" films or even serials like *Pandemic* or *Outbreak*, there are movies that underline the other significant aspect – the immense human toll. The pandemic has altered all aspects of our lives in the blink of an eye.

It's the exploration of this human dimension, the many paradoxes and dilemmas – not necessarily explored in films about disease and disaster alone – that has been the most compelling for me.

Little banal things

Take the identical rhythm of each day spent in isolation, summed up best in Munshi Ameerullah Tasleem's *sher* (couplet): *Subah hoti hai shaam hoti hai, umr yun hi tamaam hoti hai* (A lifetime gets spent seeing morning lead on to evening.) From morning chai with rusk to evening coffee with a handful of dried fruits, except for minor, work-related changes of pattern in the middle, life these days often feels like Phil's (Bill Murray) in Harold Ramis' *Groundhog Day* (1993).

As he says, it's all about déjà vu; of yesterday, today and tomorrow becoming no different from each other. It's as though one is living in a never-ending time loop. The newness of the first few days of work from home aside, many of us, after nearly a fortnight of solitary confinement, are nearing a point of mental exhaustion if not breakdown.

At times it feels like one is Shaurya (Rajkummar Rao) in Vikramaditya Motwane's survivor thriller *Trapped* (2016), marooned in the safety of one's own home. It can make one feel like an island, craving human company and connection, valuing the little banal things we have always taken for granted and which are now out of reach, like a humble vada-pav.

I barely saw my neighbours' faces this past month, only exchanging WhatsApp messages about grocery stores and quarantined buildings. I have video-consulted with my GP on an emergency health issue, even though it's only a five-minute walk to her clinic. In such a situation there's every likelihood of some of us turning into lonely Theodore (Joaquin Phoenix) of Spike Jonze's *Her*, who bonds with an artificial intelligence programme, the OS called Samantha (voice of Scarlett Johansson).

In contrast to that, coming back to *Three Colours Blue*, is Julie, deliberately withdrawing from the world: "Now I have only one thing left to do: nothing. I don't want any belongings, any memories. No friends, no love. Those are all traps."

Cast away at home, bereft of family ties and bonds of friendship, can we, like her, cut ourselves off from everyone and everything, even dissociate from our memories? Self-isolation and social distancing notwithstanding, can we free ourselves ever from vital human connections? Sitting by my computer, with no one around me, staring at a still street from my window, I believe the answer is a resounding no.

GREEN HUMOUR BY ROHAN CHAKRAVARTY



ALLEGEDLY

Karuna-0, India-1

As per data released by the Icy Yama, 9 billion Karuna Viruses went insane during the 9-minute blitzkrieg of April 5



▪ GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK

Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week there is only one *shloka* constantly vibrating in my head: 'Go Karuna, Karuna Go; Karuna Go, Go Karuna'. I've been playing an EDM remix of this mantra non-stop and at full volume on my 2,000-watt home theatre system. Needless to say, it is working brilliantly. The wall of sound I've erected around my house is so strong, so high and so thick that not a single Karuna Virus can break in.

I am aware that I'm just one among India's 130 crore soldiers fighting a historic battle. The fact that the whole world is now looking at India as a shining example of how to beat back the Karuna Virus is a proud moment for the nation. Therefore, my dear fellow Indians, do accept my congratulations for doing a fantastic job of executing Phase I and Phase II of India's unique strategy against Karuna Virus.

Shock of its life

In Phase I, by banging pots and pans at high decibels – a WHO-approved torture technique – we not only weakened the Karuna Virus by making it deaf, we also gave it the shock of its life. According to the health ministry website, as a result of the collective pandemonium produced by 130 crore patriots, 56 billion Karuna Viruses in India have so far tested positive for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This is the reason COVID-19 has been spreading more slowly in India than in countries like Italy and Spain. Just put yourself in the virus's shoes: would you feel like jumping into strangers' mouths and swimming into their lungs if you were suffering from PTSD?

But it is Phase II that truly embodies the genius of India's strategy against Karuna Virus. We all know how viruses think, how they organise their defences. They are always changing their genes, mutating this way and that way to arm themselves against potential new vaccines. But they were unprepared for the magnificent ambush that India unleashed on April 5.

Pincer movement

Devised by our beloved leader, it was a cunning pincer movement that caught the Karuna Virus unawares. First we confused the virus by suddenly turning off all the lights. The Karuna Virus, unable to see, was *thenerifying* in panic. Then came the second blow from the opposite direction: tiny bursts of pure, disinfected, organic light from candles. First plunged into darkness, then blinded by light, the virus was so disoriented it couldn't tell its RNA from its elbow. While it was still reeling from this onslaught, thousands of Indians delivered the knockout punch: firecrackers and disco music.

As per data released by the Icy Yama, 9 billion Karuna Viruses went insane during the 9-minute blitzkrieg of April 5. More significantly for India, especially from a geo-political perspective, another 12 billion Karunas decided to leave India and go – to Pakistan. As the health ministry has pointed out, "Our strategy is, instead of virus chasing us, we chase the virus".

It is also why this whole obsession with PPEs, testing kits, etc. is misplaced – these are all reactive and defensive measures. They entail responding to the terms set by the virus – playing on its turf, as it were. Thankfully, unlike other countries, India did not fall into this trap.

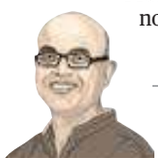
Instead of taking action in the realm of public health, we are attacking the virus where it least expects to be attacked – in the spiritual and cosmic realm

Rather, India's strategy has been to go on the offensive. To make the virus react to our moves. So, instead of taking action in the realm of public health, we are attacking the virus where it least expects to be attacked - in the spiritual and cosmic realm. The Karuna Virus has no defence against the vibrations produced by the 'Go Karuna Go' mantra or the photons released by the *agni* in every *diya* or the collective willpower of 130 crore Indians.

Having pushed the Karuna Virus on the defensive, we now have to deliver one last blow to neutralise the threat once and for all. Yes, I'm talking about Phase III of the battle against the virus. It's simple: you donate your next 10 months' salary to PM CARE, a fund set up specifically to enable every Indian to demonstrate how much they care for the PM. In case you are unemployed and therefore unable to donate salary, don't panic. You can donate one finger a month for 10 months. This collective show of love and loyalty to the PM, modelled on the highly effective practices of the Yakuza – Japan, by the way, has done a terrific job of containing the virus – will inflict lasting psychological damage on the Karuna Virus, incapacitating it permanently.

Being the world's sole spiritual superpower, this is India's special gift to humanity: a psycho-spiritual vaccine against Karuna Virus. While the conventional vaccine contains physically weakened specimens of the virus being targeted, India's innovation is to create psychologically and spiritually weakened specimens of the organism.

Simply put, this is the beginning of the end for Karuna Virus worldwide. From 'Karuna Go', it's now Karuna-0, India-1.



G. Sampath is Social Affairs Editor, *The Hindu*.

BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE

Return of the native

Leatherback populations worldwide declined when people stole their eggs and built hotels and villas on their nesting beaches

Janaki Lenin

Adhith Swaminathan and his team witness a prehistoric phenomenon on remote Little Andaman Island every year. After nightfall, six-foot-long leatherback sea turtles haul their half-ton hulks onto sandy beaches and lay their eggs. The research group has monitored their reproductive efforts for a decade to assess their fortunes.

Each December, Swaminathan and his team of six set up camps on the uninhabited stretches of South and West Bays under a collaborative project of the Dakshin Foundation and the Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru. There they remain for the next three months, walking the coast under the stars on the lookout for any turtle that emerges from the waves.



Homecoming A leatherback sea turtle returns to the sea after nesting. ▪ ADHITH SWAMINATHAN

Just for a signal

If the West Bay team members need a mobile phone signal, they walk 20 km to South Bay, wading across a creek with crocodiles, and climb up a lighthouse to snatch a conversation with friends and family. The physical and social distancing means no television, internet, or restaurants. A tiny solar panel provides a trickle of electricity to charge phones and torchlights. They live in such basic splendour for the honour of checking out egg-laden female sea turtles, the patterns of whose backs resemble the starry sky above.

If the expectant mother sports tags on her flippers, she already has a place in the record sheets that details when she was marked and how often she has nested. If she has no identification, the men punch a metal strip with a unique number to each hind flipper. And she gets a datasheet of her own.

Leatherback populations worldwide declined when people stole their eggs and built hotels and villas on their nesting beaches. In India, between 200 and 250 turtles nest every year on the few undisturbed shores of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The 2004 tsunami dealt a blow to the species by dramatically changing the islands' coastlines and obliterating some beaches. For some years after the disaster, few of these giant reptiles visited. As sandy shores formed, the largest turtles in the world returned to dig holes in which to drop their billiard ball-sized leathery round eggs. Today they come ashore in the same numbers as before the tsunami.

"At a time when many species are struggling, it's astonishing that a creature so huge has bounced back," says Swaminathan. "It shows the leatherbacks can adapt and are resilient."

Thoughtful swimming

But the giants are particular about where they nest. Not any beach will do. Unlike other turtles that have a hard shell, leatherbacks are encased in rubbery skin. For this reason, they avoid beaches with offshore coral reefs and rocks that may rip their fragile bellies. But they don't scout high and low for ideal nesting sites. They tend to return to the same spots where they were born a decade or more earlier, locations their fore-mothers chose several generations ago. Their unerring navigational skills ensure the females who nest on West Bay rarely show up on South Bay or vice versa.

If that sounds easy, consider that these leatherbacks travel for almost

The patterns on the backs of egg-laden female sea turtles resemble the starry sky above

a year from halfway across the world, eating little for the duration, to lay their eggs. After covering up their nest pits, the worn-out mothers head back into the ocean, drawing on their reserves to power the return journey.

The 10 turtles that Swaminathan and his crew tagged with satellite transmitters in the early 2010s departed in two directions. One lot went southeast towards Cocos (Keeling) Islands while a female reached Western Australia, and the other group made a beeline for Madagascar and the Mozambican coast.

At these feeding waters in the Southern Hemisphere, the female leatherbacks gorge on gelatinous jellyfish. When they hit peak condition two or three years later, they make a 10,000-km voyage across the Indian Ocean to a tiny speck of an island where six men await them.



The writer is not a conservationista but many creatures share her home for reasons she is yet to discover.

LETTER FROM A CONCERNED READER

Couple's cleaning time

Respected Madam/ Sir,

Sometimes something will happen in life and you will think *kadavuley*, what *karumam* this is full peace of mind is gone. But then what is the true story? True story is totally different. True story is that so much peace of mind is coming that Guinness Book is also checking, hello Mr. Mathrubootham this is too much peace of mind.

What happened? No more suspenses. I will explain.

Tuesday morning itself Mrs. Mathrubootham came and said, "Old man, please do some housework. Whole day sitting and reading novel and watching news and cinema on DVD means house will clean itself?" I said, "Kamalam, breakfast idli has not even reached the stomach, before that itself you will start eating head for lunch?"



▪ GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK

She came back with bucket and mug and said, "You please put water in all the plants in house. People are dying means plants should also die?"

Madam/ Sir, this is the beginning of the whole story. Like that, like that I went to balcony. Put water in plants. I went to kitchen. Put water in plants. I went to bedroom. Put water in plants. Then I went to front door. Nearby the lift two-three plants are there. Alive or dead nobody knows. There also I put off water. Then I told Kamalam all watering is complete. She said, "Don't forget to put water in cactus on top of TV stand." I said, "Every day you have to give water means it is cactus or buffalo? Better to get buffalo."

Just then my mobile started making sound. I put the mug down and did some two minutes talk with dear friend Mohammed Usman. He said, "Mathrubootham, you want to watch some film on TV and talk on WhatsApp at the same time?" I said, "Of course any time ready, have you seen *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*?" He said, "Never, I will purchase online." I said, "Usman, dance means this only is dance. It is superhit."

We set appointment for 4 p.m. Then Madam/ Sir, as I am turning to put phone down, my hand is hitting mug of water. Mug fell behind TV stand, one *kaja-buja* sound came, then *boom-beem-boom*. Kamalam came running like Ashwini Nachappa. What happened, she asked!

"Means what? Water falling on plug. TV gone. DVD gone. Optic fibre colour-changing table lamp gone. Internet router also gone. Nothing is working." She grabbed bucket and mug and said, "Please sit quietly somewhere. Better you do nothing only. Hopeless fellow."

Madam/ Sir, how to sit quietly in one corner? No TV. No DVD. Nothing. I tried to watch some internet items on phone. But Kamalam said, old man don't use all internet, what if some emergency is there? I said, "Ok, ok." Then I put phone call to electrician. But he cannot come immediately because of lockdown. "Sir, I will try for tomorrow," he said.

Kamalam said, never mind please help me clean storeroom. After store cleaning, I said, "Kamalam, come to bookshelf, let us arrange novels properly in alphabetical order." Then like that, like that we cleaned both Godrej almaris, changed sitting room sofa position, changed two-three fused bulbs, put new painting on wall near washbasin, cleaned pressure cooker washer in boiling water, then tried recipe for Punjabi lassi. Enjoyment means too much couple's enjoyment.

Suddenly phone call came. It was electrician asking if urgent means he can get permission. I said, "Kamalam, leave it. Tell him to come tomorrow. No hurry is there." One big smile came on Mrs. Mathrubootham face. As if Poornima Jayaram. Then we started to clean freezer.

Yours in domestic satisfaction,
J. Mathrubootham

GOREN BRIDGE

Calm and confident

North-South vulnerable, South deals

Bob Jones



NORTH
♠ 10 8 4 3
♡ A 9 8 2
◇ K Q 7
♣ 5 4

WEST
♠ Q 5
♡ K 7 6 5 4
◇ A 9 3
♣ Q J 9

EAST
♠ A 9 7 2
♡ J 10 3
◇ 5 4 2
♣ 10 6 2

SOUTH
♠ K J 6
♡ Q
◇ J 10 8 6
♣ A K 8 7 3

The bidding:

SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
1♣	1♡	DBL*	2♡
2♠	Pass	3♠	Pass
4♠	All pass		

*Negative

Opening lead: Five of ♡

Kerri Sanborn, of Delray Beach, Florida, has been one of America's leading players for more than four decades. She was South in today's deal.

Sanborn has declared many hands in her long career with only a 4-3 trump fit. Very few, however, have seen her as the player with only three trumps. She accepted North's invitation with an air of great confidence. She let the opening heart lead run to her queen and calmly led the king of spades from her hand. East ducked his ace, thinking it a routine move defending against declarer's "known" four-card trump holding.

Sanborn led a diamond to dummy's king, winning the trick, and a diamond back to her jack, losing to West's ace. West, who thought Sanborn's trumps were headed by the ace and king and maybe the jack, put dummy in with the queen of diamonds hoping Sanborn would take a trump finesse. Sanborn cashed the ace of hearts and ruffed a heart. The ace - king of clubs and a club ruff brought Sanborn up to nine tricks. She led a heart from dummy, and when East ruffed with the seven, Sanborn over-ruffed with the jack and had 10 tricks. East might have ruffed with the ace and led a spade to West's queen, but then the 10 of spades in dummy would be the tenth trick. There might have been a little egg on the defenders' faces, but it was very well played by Sanborn!

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

Some historic firsts!

Berty Ashley

1 April 12 is celebrated as International Day of Human Space Flight since 2011, which was the 50th anniversary of a particular mission. That mission lasted 108 minutes and was a single orbit around Earth. The person handling this mission was an Air Force pilot who had earlier been a foundryman in a steel plant. Who was this person who, 59 years ago, made this historic ascent?

2 This explorer was originally a bee-keeper by profession. He led the first mechanised expedition to the South Pole and led other expeditions to remote corners of the earth. Later in life, he became an active environmentalist and also devoted his energies to humanitarian efforts on behalf of the Nepalese. He wrote an autobiography titled *Nothing Venture, Nothing Win*. Who is this person who we know better, for having reached heights no one else had, with a friend?

3 This gentleman was appointed the first National Professor by the new government of Independent India. He went on to become the first non-Caucasian individual to win a Nobel Prize in science. A keen lover of music he also investigated the harmonic nature of the sound of the tabla and mridangam. He started a company which manufactured potassium chlorate for the match industry. Who was he who had such fascination with light?

4 Born in present day Patna in 475 CE, this person is regarded as the first mathematician-astronomer from ancient India. His major work covers arithmetic, algebra, plane trigonometry, and spherical trigonometry. It also contains continued fractions, quadratic equations, sums-of-power series, and a table of *sines*. In it he talks about how *pi* is irrational, a theory which was only proved in Europe in 1761. The Inter-University Centre for Astronomy and Astrophysics in Pune has a statue of him in its courtyard. Who was this pioneer physicist?



Way back in 1901 Henry Dunant (left) and Frédéric Passy were the first to win this prize. ▪ WIKI COMMONS

5 This king suffered from chronic bronchitis and was close to death. His lead physician knew that the end was near but realised if he passed away after midnight the news would not be printed in the morning newspaper but in the less respected evening journals, which could embarrass the family. So, the king was injected with morphine and cocaine after which he died at 11:55 p.m. and the news made it to the morning papers. Which king was this who was the first monarch of the currently reigning House of Windsor?

6 Henry Dunant was a Swiss businessman who, on a business trip in 1859 to Italy, witnessed the aftermath of the Battle of Solferino. This inspired him to create the International Committee of the Red Cross to care for wounded soldiers. This led to him and Frédéric Passy, a French pacifist, becoming the first people to win a certain award in 1901. What award did they win which, according to the founder's will, is administered in Norway?

7 The Joshee Crater is named after Anandibai Joshi, who was the first Indian-origin woman to earn a medical degree in the U.S. The Jhirad Crater is named after Jerusha Jhirad, who was the first woman to be awarded a government of India scholarship to study in the U.K. and her efforts to improve medical education, especially for women, in India earned her the Member of the British Empire (MBE) title in the U.K. and the Padma Shri in India. These women were trailblazers and are honoured by these craters named after them. Where in the universe are these three craters located?

8 Frank Whittle was an English Royal Air Force officer. On April 12, 1937, he successfully ran an experimental engine. It had four parts, a single stage centrifugal compressor, a combustion chamber, an axial flow turbine and a convergent propelling nozzle. Although he showed the functionality of this engine, the first operational version of this was shown by Hans von Ohain years later. What did Whittle run for the first time on that date which is now a common feature on aircraft?

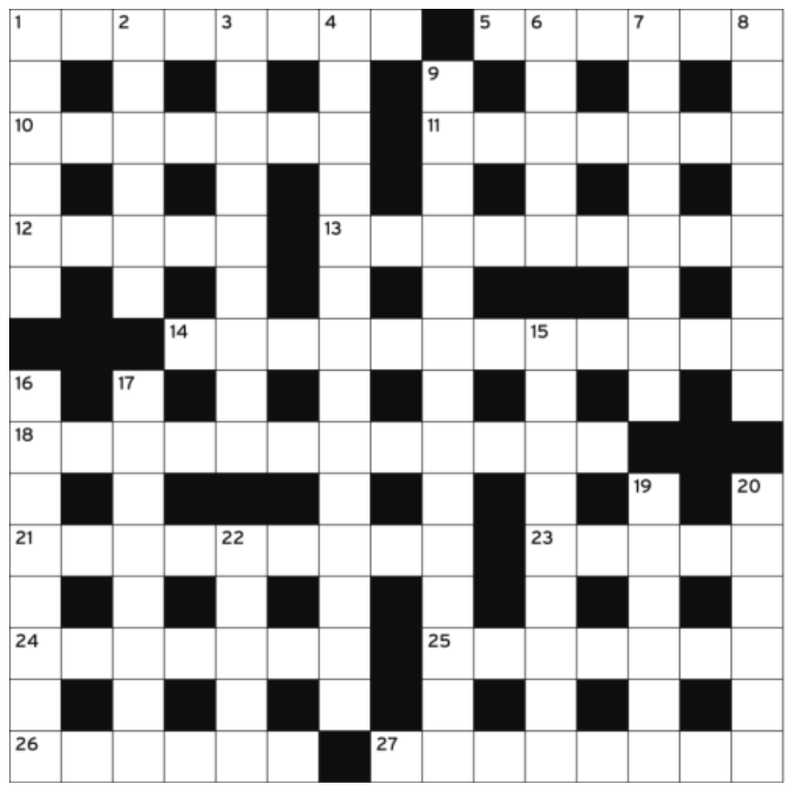
9 On April 12, 1907, a new flag was created on the orders of King James VI of Scotland. He had inherited the English and Irish thrones, thereby uniting the crowns of England, Scotland and Ireland. What is the name of this flag which we would see in many other flags as well?

10 Armalcolite is a titanium-rich mineral ((Mg,Fe2+)Ti2O5). It was first discovered in 1969 and named after the three men who were closest to it at that time. The synthesis of Armalcolite requires low pressures, high temperatures and rapid quenching from about 1,000 °C to the ambient temperature. Who are the three people it is named after?

A molecular biologist from Madurai, our quizmaster enjoys trivia and music, and is working on a rock ballad called 'Coffee is a Drink, Kaapi is an Emotion'. @bertyashley

Answers
1. Yuri Gagarin
2. Sir Edmund Hillary
3. Sir C.V. Raman
4. Aryabhata
5. King George V
6. The Nobel Peace Prize
7. The surface of Venus
8. Jet engines
9. The Union Jack
10. Armstrong (Neil), Aldrin (Buzz) and Collins (Michael) — the first men on the moon.

THE SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 3095



Across

1 A U-boat, to begin with, has never exploded in German transport lanes (8)
5 Ancient vessel emptied, filled with fizzy wine (4,2)
10 Horrible baby's malodorous sample (7)
11 You finally admitting dead pager's broken? Perhaps get a new phone (7)
12 Piece of cloth on goolies? (5)
13 Tired, I cry about trendy street food (5,4)
14 Dean's address is, surprisingly, never ever dry (4,8)
18 'Quakerism' ... not 'quaking' ... ? (8,4) 21 If parties needing animation, drinks served beforehand (9)
23 Hellish character, government by the wealthy? Not half (5)
24 Country song *I Eat Bananas* lacking gravity (7)
25 Country dancing rodeo mostly welcoming cougar, oddly (7)
26 Knock off turbulent priest beforehand (6)
27 Rovers maybe making itinerant crusades (4,4)

Down

1 Set up in first pad, adolescent achieves accommodation (6)
2 Beckett character turns up, carrying finally, finally a tiny pooch (3,3)
3 In audition, smile I supposed to be welcoming expression (2,2,5)
4 Foal had idly relaxed in hay for time off (4-3,7)
6 Primarily, annoyed, narked, getting extremely ratty? (5)
7 'Where to drink, Everyman?' (Everyman, at last, answers.) 'When to drink?' (8)
8 To start with, Nicomachus died in his home with painful sickness (3,5)
9 Army officers diverted stream in regions (14)
15 Poet represented azure pond (4,5)
16 Prepare for fight ... or settle (6,2)
17 Merit given by the Queen to traitor (8)
19 Cockney bruiser returns to wasteland (6)
20 Dates and locations for actions (6)
22 Nooky after pub: do you agree? (5)

Solution No. 3094



60 MINUTES WITH PRASANNA GETTU

‘Not all survivors of violence can stitch bags for a living’

The important thing is to listen to them and support them in whatever they do, says the pioneering victimologist



▪ ILLUSTRATION: R. RAJESH

Pragati K.B.

- Postgraduate diploma in Victimology and Victim Assistance from Tokiwa University, Japan
- One of the few practising victimologists in the world
- Professionally trained in domestic violence and crisis intervention
- PCVC operates a toll-free domestic violence helpline called Dhwani that provides emergency interventions

Prasanna Gettu is co-founder of the Chennai-based International Foundation for Crime Prevention and Victim Care (PCVC) that works to support and rehabilitate women and LGBTQIA+ persons affected by domestic and interpersonal violence.

PCVC operates a 24x7 helpline, and works with the Tamil Nadu government to offer assistance to burn survivors. They also run shelter homes, coordinate with the police to establish a first line of defence, support children from families that have seen domestic violence, and conduct intervention programmes in schools, colleges and workplaces.

Last month, Gettu was conferred the Anne Klein Women’s Award 2020 by the Germany-based Heinrich Boell Foundation that aims to celebrate pioneers of feminist causes. Excerpts from an interview:

PCVC began as an assistance centre for victims of all crimes. How and why did the focus shift to domestic violence?

■ PCVC was started in 2001 by three of us who had gone to Tokiwa University, Japan, for a postgraduate diploma in Victimology and Victim Assistance. We were impressed with the victim assistance centres there and wanted to start something similar here. That’s how PCVC began, in a one-room office in Parry’s Corner, provided to us by the father of one of the co-founders.

In one year, we noticed that 99% of our clients were women, especially women affected by domestic violence. And they came from all strata of society. It is a myth that domestic violence happens only in low-income, uneducated families. The upper strata simply have the means to keep the violence hidden. The first question they asked was where they could stay if they walked out of their abusive homes.

Victims from the middle and upper classes preferred returning home to staying in government-run shelters. This realisation made PCVC open an undisclosed free shelter where women and children, including boys up to the age of 16, could take refuge.

In 2002, two of us received professional training in domestic violence and crisis intervention from the U.S. We stayed in shelter homes to learn how they were managed. We have lately ventured into providing services for the LGBTQIA+ community. The violence they face from their families is interpersonal violence. In that regard, it’s not different, but the services required are very different.

What trends have you noticed during the lockdown?

■ We received fewer domestic violence calls on our helpline. This, however, is no indication that instances of domestic violence have reduced. With abusers in close proximity all day, accessibility to phones has decreased. Survivors also probably thought that during a lockdown, they cannot complain or leave home. We are widely publicising that our call and chat facilities, and shelter homes, are available. We are bracing ourselves for increased distress calls once the lockdown ends or if it’s extended.

How has your work evolved?

■ In 2001, we did not have a vision. If a victim came to us, we supported her in a manner we thought right. We don’t do that now, we don’t madly do anything. We are more structured and practical.

For instance, we operate with the understanding that it is always safer to involve the police. Our Udhayam programme is a coordinated response project with the local All Women Police Stations in Chennai, to establish a first line of defence.

We have learnt to avoid a confrontational approach with the perpetrators. This serves two purposes. One, it ensures our safety. There’s a constant threat to us and our families, mostly from the victim’s family and the perpetrators.

When my children were growing up, I would drop and pick them up from school. I’d double-lock our house. I have now accepted this challenge as a part of my work but I like to stay safe. Two, it has become the value system within which PCVC operates. It is difficult for our staff to keep calm sometimes, but I push for it.

Earlier, we provided solutions. We now realise that just makes the victim more dependent on us. The solution needs to come from them. We continue to keep the victim at the centre but we let her define her trauma and work as per her schedule. We focus on her strengths – everybody has strengths. We cannot ask all survivors to stitch bags and make a living. Women have returned to studying, learnt driving and baking. Whatever they want to do, we support them.

We now understand that emotional abuse, financial control, gaslighting, intimidation, physical abuse, coercion, threatening and blaming, sexual abuse, stalking and dating violence – these are all forms of interpersonal violence, none smaller than the other.

It’s been a learning for me too. My courses did not teach me that criminology is skewed and not women-centric. What I have learnt over these 20 years is perhaps worth a dozen Ph.Ds.

My courses did not teach me that criminology is skewed and not women-centric. What I have learnt over these 20 years is perhaps worth a dozen Ph.Ds

What has been the biggest hurdle for PCVC?

■ Getting our stakeholders to understand how serious and all-pervasive domestic violence is has been the biggest hurdle. We have been asked why we work only with survivors of interpersonal violence, when there are so many other types of victims, like those of war, HIV/ AIDS, etc. In this scheme of things, they think of domestic violence as very minor.

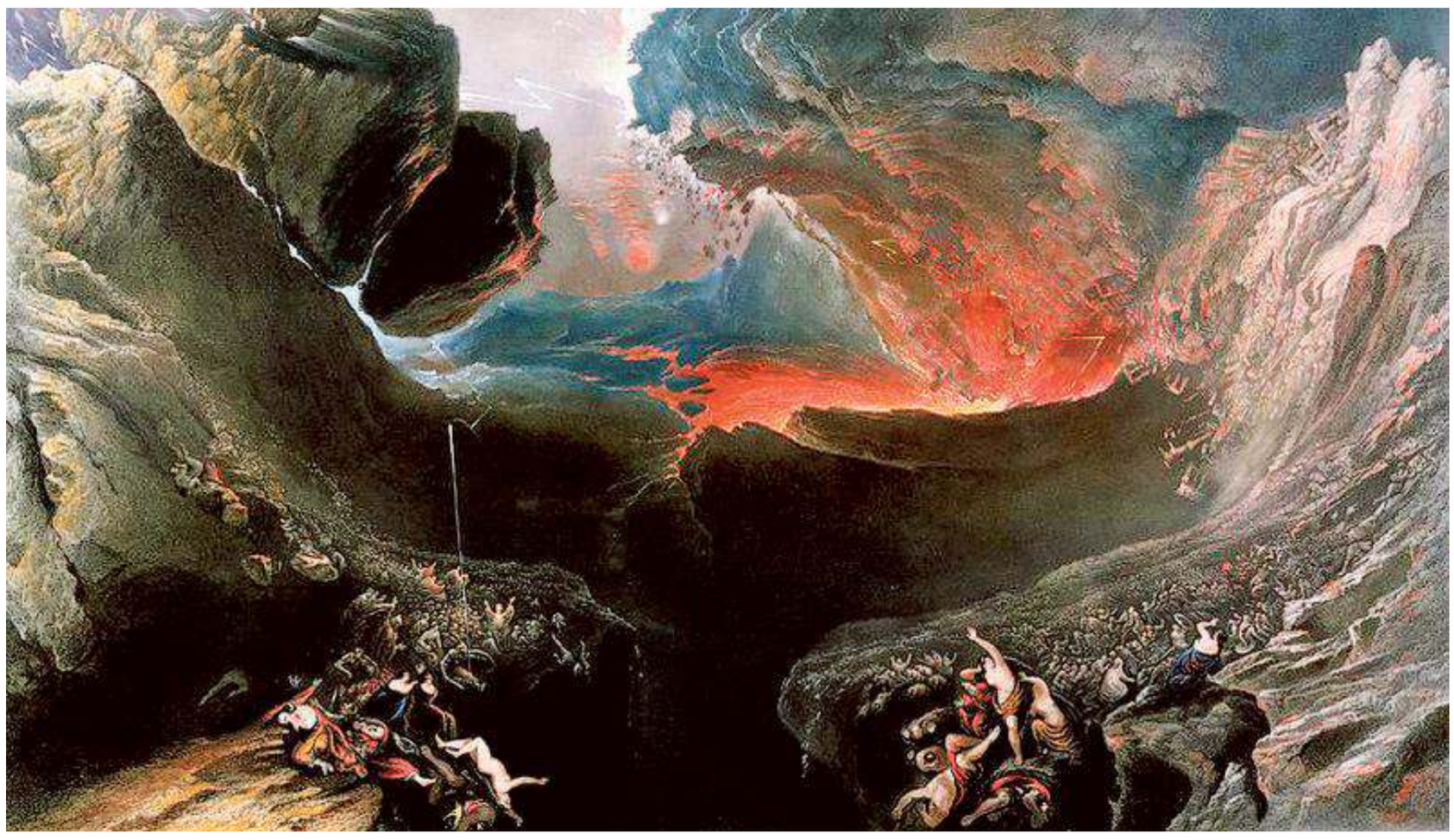
Openly talking about violence in personal spaces is still considered taboo and makes people uncomfortable.

I see a change in the younger generation. There’s awareness. They recognise that they don’t have to tolerate any form of violence any more. This can only mean that women are now beginning to value themselves. It is my job to tell the woman that she is valuable.

With a formal law in place, things are looking up. There is more media coverage. In my experience, working closely with the government, for the Chennai Safe City project and otherwise, I have seen a sea change in attitude. Senior officers are now focused on increased action for social change.

What else can aid this social change?

■ A country that starts investing in families, instead of investing so much in detection and prevention of crimes, will be on the path to a violence-free, crime-free society. Every home should realise that they are responsible for bringing up their sons well. Men want happiness, women want happiness – that is gender equality. Abusive behaviour is always learnt behaviour. It is simply a manifestation of what the abuser has learnt all their life.



Armageddon ‘The Great Day of His Wrath’, an 1851–53 oil painting by John Martin. ▪ WIKI COMMONS

OFF-CENTRE

Did god just roll the dice?

... or did nature, like a mathematical equation, simply balance itself?

G.R. Gopinath

When a man kills a fellow being, he does so for many reasons. It could be because he is overcome by hatred or because he wants revenge or maybe he kills for greed. Sometimes he does it in a fit of passion. And when he belongs to a religious order or fringe group, he is so radicalised by a political or revolutionary ideology that he slaughters others swayed by bigotry. Then there are the wars fought over misplaced nationalism, unleashed by leaders intoxicated with power, which take thousands of innocent lives.

In contrast, animals kill for hunger. But when god kills – through pandemics, pestilence, earthquakes and floods – you wonder, can god be so evil? Is it a cruel sport? Or is there method to his mad fury?

No religious leader or mystic has been able to satisfactorily explain the problem of evil – the death of countless innocents at the hands of an omnipotent, all-merciful god. When Tagore was asked why there was evil, he said it was the same as asking why there was good. Now, we are visited by the coronavirus. To what purpose and design? Is nature acting in accordance with predetermined laws of the universe? Was Einstein wrong when he said “God does not play dice with the universe?”

The many misfortunes that befall mankind are explained away variously. Many believe the Old Testament that says the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children. A Hindu might explain that the tragedy is your karma for past misdeeds. A philosopher may blame it on the hubris of man. A scientist might say that ‘new man’, intoxicated with pride and greed, cocksure about his knowledge and power, is destroying the planet. And that the pandemic is a punishment by nature for upsetting natural harmony.

Fine balance

When the forests, soil, rivers, oceans, ice caps and the atmosphere as well as the flora and fauna on earth are depleted and in many cases wiped out, there is an impact on human beings, who play a minuscule part in the larger ecological web but have a symbiotic relationship with it. When this fine ecological balance is disturbed, humans cannot stay untouched. There is cause and effect. And a price is always paid.

Bertrand Russell in his celebrated essay ‘Men Versus Insects’, written 87 years ago, prophetically wrote that the threat to the human race may be as much from insects and micro-organisms as from wars. “...we no longer have occasion, like the cavemen, to fear lions and tigers, mammoths and wild boars. Except against each other, we feel ourselves safe... safe, except from the little creatures – the insects and the micro-organisms. Insects have an initial advantage in their numbers. A small wood may easily contain as many ants as there are human beings in the whole world. They have another advantage in the fact that they eat our food before it is ripe for us. If human beings, in their rage against each other, invoke the aid of insects and micro-organisms, as they certainly will do if there is another big war, it is by no means unlikely that the insects will remain the sole ultimate victors. Perhaps, from a cosmic point of view, this is not to be regretted; but as a human being I cannot help heaving a sigh over my own species.” But Russell could not imagine that man was racing towards self-annihilation by means other than war. He did not foresee that man, blinded by avarice and pride, would simply axe off the base of the ecological tree atop which he was perched.

In nature, no excess goes unpunished; there’s retribution for every trespass. And nature always has ways of compensation. I remember as a child going along with my father, a teacher in the local village school, to our rice fields in the mornings during planting season in the monsoons. He would point to the Dalits, the men and women covered with conical rain coats made of straw and reeds, planting the saplings and singing in the rain. My father would show me the two sacks they carried under each arm. Into one they stuffed the wild greens and spinach they plucked as they worked, and into the other they tossed the crabs that scurried in the shallow waters. My father used to say that god was compensating the poor with free food. That message stayed with me – that there was an underlying law of compensation bestowed one way or another in this very life. Nature compensates in strange ways when someone is robbed or defrauded. It unfailingly acts as a leveller.

No religious leader or mystic has been able to satisfactorily explain the problem of evil — the death of countless innocents at the hands of an omnipotent, all-merciful god

Life and maths

Speaking of this self-correcting and compensating nature of the universe, Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “If the government is cruel, the governor’s life is not safe. If you tax too high, the revenue will yield nothing. If you make the criminal code sanguinary, juries will not convict. If the law is too mild, private vengeance comes in. Justice is not postponed. A perfect equity adjusts its balance in all parts of life. The dice of god are always loaded.”

The world is a bit like a mathematical equation – turn it how you will, it will balance itself. Cause and effect, means and ends, seed and fruit cannot be separated. For the effect already blooms in the cause, the end preexists in the means, the fruit in the seed.

There used to be a belief that there was a scientific, provable mathematical law of the universe, determined by these immutable laws. But the quantum mechanics of Heisenberg, Schrödinger and Dirac proved that the motion of atoms and electrons was indeterminate and random, that the ways of the universe were unpredictable. Stephen Hawking said, “Thus it seems that even god is bound by the Uncertainty Principle, and cannot know both the position and the speed of a particle. So god does play dice with the universe... He still has a few tricks up his sleeve.”

And so you ask in amazement, is this pandemic a prank by god? Or is it nature’s retribution for our pettiness, hatred, violence, bigotry, greed, arrogance and excess? Or is it just a random roll of the dice?

The founder of Air Deccan reads, ruminates and often writes.