

Magazine



WIDE ANGLE
With liquor shops closed and unaware of withdrawal treatments, alcohol dependent people struggle to cope **p6**



LITERARY REVIEW
What we have to think about, above all, is how to slow down, says author Amitav Ghosh **p4**



ART
To see the late artist Mehli Gobhai's works is to enter a sphere of images that alter the way we relate to the world **p8**



QUIZ
On this day, 456 years ago, William Shakespeare was baptised. How much do you know about the Bard of Avon? **p7**

COVER

Sparking change

New route A Southern Railway train gets converted into an isolation ward at Chennai's Integral Coach Factory.

B. JOTHI RAMALINGAM

How the Indian Railways is working to repurpose its immense infrastructural framework to respond to COVID-19 **p3**

last week



Mind your language

The Indian government went into damage control mode as several Indians living and working in the U.A.E. landed in trouble for Islamophobic comments on social media. Meanwhile, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation issued a warning about the growing anti-Muslim prejudice in India. Prime Minister Modi responded by tweeting that "COVID-19 does not see race, religion..." etc., while India's ambassador to the U.A.E. warned expat Indians against hate speech.

Free or dead

Right-wing groups across 18 U.S. States organised demonstrations against stay-at-home orders, and many violated social distancing norms. While President Trump expressed his support for the protesters in a series of all-caps tweets saying "Liberate Michigan" etc., healthcare workers staged counter-protests. Meanwhile, in what was derided as a publicity stunt, the State of Missouri sued China in a U.S. Federal Court over its handling of COVID-19.



Green Goa

Goa became the country's first 'green' State as its seven positive COVID-19 cases tested negative. There have been no new cases since April 3. Of over 800 people tested in Goa, seven tested positive. "They will now be quarantined at a government facility and later at home," Chief Minister Pramod Sawant said. Goa was followed by Manipur, whose two patients also tested negative.



Entering Prez Estate

As many as 115 families at Rashtrapati Bhavan have gone into quarantine after a relative of one of the housekeeping staff tested positive for COVID-19. Hundreds of families live on the premises and work towards the upkeep of the rooms and gardens of the sprawling 330-acre estate. No employee of the President's secretariat has tested positive.



Another brick in the wall

U.S. President Donald Trump signed an executive order that bans immigration for 60 days, focusing on those seeking green cards to live and work permanently in the U.S., but with numerous exemptions. Framing the measure as a way to put unemployed Americans "first in line for jobs" and conserve medical resources, he said it could be extended later.



On trial

Oxford University began trials on humans for a COVID-19 vaccine it has been developing called ChAdOx1 nCoV-19, with 510 volunteers aged between 18 and 55 set to take part over the next couple of weeks. This is the fourth vaccine globally to reach the human trial stage, and production is being scaled up to vaccinate thousands of volunteers in later phases.



Mixed doubles

With the governing bodies of men's and women's tennis — ATP and WTA — working closely together to get through the pandemic and support players who depend on tournament income, Roger Federer called for the two bodies to merge and finally streamline the game's fractured governance. His suggestion drew support from players as well as ATP chairman Andrea Gaudenzi, who called it a "big opportunity".



Theron's donation

With reports of gender-based violence increasingly surfacing during the pandemic, Hollywood actor Charlize Theron launched a campaign to fight the troubling trend. 'Together for Her', an initiative under the Charlize Theron Africa Outreach Project, in partnership with CARE and the Entertainment Industry Foundation, will donate half a million dollars towards domestic violence shelters and community-based programmes.



Ode to joy

Looking to spread cheer as well as information during the pandemic, Beninese singer-lyricist and UNICEF goodwill ambassador Angélique Kidjo re-recorded a 1967 hit single by the late Miriam Makeba, once called "the world's most defiantly joyful song". It's titled 'Pata Pata' — Xhosa for 'touch touch' — but Kidjo's version, released globally by UNICEF, changed the lyrics to 'No Pata Pata'.



Slips below zero

U.S. oil prices fell below zero for the first time in history on April 20, with West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude dipping as far as -\$40.32 a barrel for deliveries in May, as traders reacted to excess supply and sold off futures before their contracts expired. WTI for June deliveries also suffered but recovered with a surge a couple of days later, while Brent crude for June fell to a 21-year low.



Adjutant’s last stand

Chasing the stork by that name to Guwahati, one of the last havens of these birds in India

Soumitra Das

Sometimes, beautiful and ugly are two sides of the same coin. Victorian high fashion accessories came from one of the most “disgusting-looking animals” that wear a white collar ruff at the base of their necks which, along with their inflatable neck pouch, turn bright orange in the breeding season. Tippets, boas and victorines, the rage of France and England once and displayed at the Great Exhibition of 1851, were sourced from the adjutant stork, a byword for ugliness, that stalked the streets and rooftops of Calcutta till 1900. They disappeared thereafter. This endangered species were named for the “military” quality of their awkward stride.

The brand name of the ruff was Commercolly, after Kumarkhali, an *upazila* in the Shilaidaha area, now in Bangladesh, where Tagore wrote some memorable verse. In Bengali, the adjutant stork is known as *hargila* – literally “bone swallower”, a word used to describe a tall, gaunt person.

I saw the birds for the first time in old illustrations of Calcutta, their stomping grounds being Fort Wil-

liam, Government House (today’s Raj Bhavan) and other landmarks of Dalhousie Square such as the Town Hall and Writers’ Buildings. Silhouetted against the skyline like grotesque statues, they stood on the terraces of the Government House and Spence’s Hotel, the city’s first luxury hotel, winged around like pterodactyls.

Flying high
Sarah Amherst, daughter of Governor-General William Pitt Amherst (1823-1828), had left behind drawings of her Calcutta residence and comical pen pictures of these birds.

“They are so useful as scavengers that there is a fine for killing them,” she writes. “However in the Fort where they abound, the young cadets play them sad tricks, such as throwing out a leg of mutton tied to a large stone, so that when the adjutant has gobbled it up, he finds himself anchored... and there is a story that to satisfy Lord Hastings’ own eyes, a calf’s leg with an iron shoe on the hoof was thrown out and immediately swallowed whole by an adjutant, they are so greedy...”

Sometimes, they exploded when they swallowed whole marrow bones stuffed with gunpowder by raw cadets.

Two adjutant storks with giant bills facing each other figure prominently in what was once the coat of arms of the Calcutta Municipal Corporation. The date of award of the coat of arms was 1896. The Latin words on it read: *Per ardua stabilis* est (“Be firm through difficulties”).

It is recently that I caught sight of the logo above one of the many entrances of the New Market (Stuart Hogg Market of yore), but a couple of years ago, I had heard from artist Sanat Kar that the Corporation’s adjutant birds had survived on Alimuddin Street. Sure enough, the cast iron logos were there – double discs with the mirror-image storks in both – a simple but smart design.

In 2018, I had the good fortune of sighting the storks in Guwahati. I knew that Assam was one of the last havens of the adjutant stork in India. Luckily, the local guide, Prabin Kutum, was an enthusiastic young man, and when I told him I was interested in the birds, he drove me to a huge garbage dump which shares its boundaries with a freshwater lake named Dipor Bil, listed as a Ramsar site for conservation in November 2002.

It was close to sunset, and a distant railway bridge spanned the wa-

Battle for survival Adjutant storks at a huge garbage dump near the Dipor Bil lake in Guwahati. THE HINDU

ter body. Our jeep passed a couple of humongous sheds and, at last, we faced the garbage dump encircled by green hills. It emanated a deeply earthy, not unpleasant, odour. Cows grazed and flocks of snow-white cattle egrets flitted around. A couple of kites were trying to boss around. Then I noticed a huge bird flapping its wings as it soared on thermals. It had something distinctly Jurassic about its appearance, and what with the orange sac hanging from its orange neck, it looked quite obscene, like some avian yahoo that Jonathan Swift could have created.

Indeed, it was the greater adjutant stork and they thrived here, on the dump, on offal and carrion, performing their scavenger role. There was an entire colony of them and they stood about stock still, fluttered their wings, or raised their huge bills clattering them almost like castanets. In these dire times, I can’t help but recall the storks and the Latin tag associated with them: *Per ardua stabilis esto*.

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Then I noticed a huge bird flapping its wings as it soared. It had something distinctly Jurassic about its appearance



Rejuvenating spring

Latha Menon

The yellow-coloured Indian laburnum, commonly known as golden shower, bloomed a week ago, brightening up the road I live on. There is also a profusion of the copper pod flowers like a tapestry of gold on the road. The *haldi* gulmohar, as it is also known as, was considered a good luck charm in your studies, if it fell on your textbook. The pink and white flowers of the rain trees are vying for attention in this burst of golden-flowered mornings in April. It suddenly dawns on me that Vishu, a festival in Kerala, marks the beginning of spring.

These past couple of weeks have seen you play out a part from *Groundhog Day* caught in a time warp, reliving the same day. I shake the thought off, dress for my morning walk. The time is 7.15 a.m. Zuma, our 18-month-old retriever is excited, happy, looking forward to setting out for his walk every morning. Our eight-year-old Messi, is excited too but will walk at his own pace.

They step on the *haldi* gulmohar flowers, with a spring in their step. In the U.S., U.K., Europe, Asia and many parts of the world, it is spring. A time of coming out of hibernation, opening the windows to inhale fresh air, gathering together in parks and beaches, celebrating this flowering time. Now all this in COVID-19 times seems distant.

“It would have been so pleasant now in Kent,” said my younger daughter who is in her final year of college. She was forced to abruptly return home in Chennai. The deep orange flowers of the African tulip tree are distracting me, so does the frangipani trees.

In Buddhism, the frangipani flower is seen as a symbol of renewal, of new life. Well, new life is surely the sign around, of tender new leaves, of fresh foliage, letting the dried-up leaves and branches disappear. The birds are around now, silence can be heard, the air is breathing freely, happy that people have paused in their homes. I remember the lines of a William Blake poem, *Spring*: ‘Birds delight, Day and night, Nightingale, In the dale, Lark in sky, Merrily, Merrily, merrily to welcome in the year...’

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No gully game, it’s grove cricket

It’s how many in Kerala started playing

Hormis Tharakan

There is a great sports concept that can be nurtured in the context of Kerala and its unique landscape, a State that has derived its name from *keram*, a Malayalam word for coconut palm.

When we were growing up in our village, Olavipe, full of coconut groves and surrounded on three sides by the backwaters, my cousins and I played cricket and other games. However, the rest of the village did not play the gentleman’s game, but was into football.

The chief reason was that coconut trees covered all the grounds. The playground adjacent to the only high school those days was reserved for football, which was far more popular all over Kerala. The remaining grounds had sandy, beach-like soil where not even a tennis ball, leave alone the red cherry, would bounce.

We played cricket among the coconut trees wherever the ground was firm and covered with buffalo grass, imagining the tall palms to be fielders who could stop a drive but would never take a catch. We used tennis balls or plain rubber balls and bats fashioned out of the wood of fallen palms. Sometimes, stumps were chiselled out of coconut trunks, but often, sticks broken off

from the neighbouring fences would suffice.

We enjoyed our game thoroughly, with our own improvised rules. Some of us became accomplished batsmen, bowlers and even all-rounders. Then we formed a regular team, armed ourselves with proper bat and ball and played a few matches on proper cricket grounds against college teams in Alleppey (now Alappuzha) and Changanasserry, besides Swantons CC, a club team in Enakulam which, in later years, produced a Test cricketer in Sreesanth. We did not do too badly.

To the big arena
So it is possible to graduate from cricket played in coconut groves to cricket played in regular stadia. The exponential expansion of electronic media and the consequent increase in coverage of Test and One Day Cricket led to a spike in the popularity of cricket in our State. Kerala cricket has, by now, produced a few international cricketers and State teams do well in domestic competitions, even the Ranji Trophy.

But my feeling is that there would have been even more success stories in cricket from Kerala had “cocoricket”, the game played in coconut groves, got more encouragement. In land-starved Kerala, it is not realistic to expect to be



able to discover and develop more cricket grounds. It is possible to lay down innovative rules for “cocoricket” without following the diktats of the ICC and the BCCI.

Look at the natural advantages that “cocoricket” will have in Kerala. Coconut trees are planted at a distance of 20 feet from each other, enough space to lay a pitch. Coconut cultivation and “cocoricket” can coexist without any problem. Byproducts from the coconut tree or its parts can be used for making bats, stumps and bails. Matting can be made from coir, another byproduct of the coconut tree. Coir nets can be used for covering the ponds to stop a lustily hit ball from landing in the water. Balls made from rubber, another product of Kerala, can be used instead of cricket balls made of cork and leather. Thus various natural products of the State can be given a boost by promoting “cocoricket”. With players running across the length and breadth of the groves, weeds would wilt in the fields.

If Test matches attract meagre crowds as they do of late, we may consider converting some Test venues to coconut groves. Let the game go on!

(The author is former Secretary, RAW)

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The period drama on the idiot box

Television once brought together total strangers in a neighbourhood

Alka Varma

In the mid-1960s, Doordarshan was the only television channel in India, with barely an hour of transmission a day. Our neighbour’s son brought a TV set from the U.S. some time then, creating excitement not only in his family but in the entire neighbourhood.

We had only heard of the box which when switched on would open up a whole new world.

The family sat around the sofa and watched very animatedly the black-and-white visuals. Next evening, five of us children mustered up the courage and rang their door bell.

When the man of the house opened the door, we rushed in without saying a word and made ourselves comfortable on their carpet. He was kind enough to smile despite the fact that we were intruding into their privacy. We sat



watching till the end of the transmission. This then became our daily ritual. And what did we watch each day with such rapt attention – Krishi Darshan. We would watch experts conversing with farmers and villagers, explaining how to grow better and more crops. All through this, we would be glued to the screen in silence. It was the magic of the box.

In the following decades, TV was spreading its tentacles. I vividly re-

member a Sunday morning in 1987, returning to India after living abroad, we found the Delhi roads deserted when the Ramayana series was being telecast. Had never ever seen the idiot box grip people of all ages and classes.

Now, we have hundreds of channels at our fingertips. So much to choose from and yet we complain – nothing to watch while restlessly surfing channels.

With TV sets in every home, 24-hour transmission and Internet apps, some of us are glued to the screen. You rarely get a gentle knock at the door these days from your neighbour who wants to drop in and chat. I can’t help but yearn for those days when TV brought together total strangers in a neighbourhood rather than make strangers out of neighbours.

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FEEDBACK

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

Cover story

The cover story (‘Masks of a lockdown’; Apr. 19) shows that the purchasing power of the rich and the salaried remains unaffected, while the marginalised fight for even basic needs. It’s a cue for policy-makers to find safety measures for everyone.

Let the quote ‘all are equal, but some are more equal’ not come true.

E.S. CHANDRASEKARAN

■ India’s inadequate social security systems have multiplied the woes of the poor. The virus is no doubt non-discriminatory, but the suffering is discriminatory.

D. MANOHARA RAO

■ Minimising the transmission of infectious diseases is a core function of public health law. The legal powers used will vary according to the seriousness of the disease, the means of transmission, and how easily it is transmitted. Public health laws may authorise isolation as well as the closure of businesses. Coercion must be exercised if there’s a demonstrable threat to public health.

K.M.K. MURTHY

■ Ms. Srinivasan correctly argues that much of the poor’s suffering is due to incompetent government planning. But liberal compassion also often removes agency from the poor. Yet they are part of the electorate. They voted this incompetent government in by an overwhelming majority. The irony is they will probably continue to vote for more bad governance. They’ll fall for the communal rhetoric and spread bizarre conspiracy theories, they’ll be thankful for sops and blame fate, not leaders. The situation is not unlike domestic abuse, where the victim often resists fixing the problem. This isn’t about victim-blaming. The idea is to end the cycle of abuse by recognising the roles of all participants. The otherwise thoughtful article elides over this point.

ANIL MENON

Unknown terror
The headline (‘No new year’s day to celebrate’;



Apr. 19) had me humming the Stevie Wonder song, but instead of the fuzzy feeling I usually get, it made me uneasy. Being in Kerala, in Ernakulam, I feel safe. But articles like these awaken an unknown terror. The fact that festivals are being halted gives an eerie feeling. When we come out of this, maybe I’ll again sing ‘I just called’ with that same carefree heart as before.

OAJASWINI S. PRABHU

Draconian acts
Ruchir Joshi’s column (‘An epidemic of lies’; Apr. 19) was a poignant reminder of the activists languishing in custody for two years now. As faith in the judiciary crumbles by the day, the nation anxiously waits to see when their ordeal will end.

K. NATARAJAN

Extending brotherhood
The piece (‘Please, sir, I want more space’; Apr. 19) was thought-provoking. Is the religion of humanity not enough to bring us together?

PARIDHI KHANNA

■ The article brought tears to my eyes. How is it possible to follow social distancing in such little space?

CHANDRA KUMAR

Bun times
The article (‘A trail of breadcrumbs’; Apr. 19) made us nostalgic, reminding us of how as children we too swarmed to the bakery across the street for hot buns.

RAO & RAJU

The 40 days
As Aakar Patel says (‘Observe, detect, eliminate’; April.19), Ibn Sina, or Avicenna, the Persian polymath and father of early modern medicine, was the first to use 40 days for sanitary isolation. *Al-Arba’iniya* in Arabic means ‘The 40’. He introduced the concept to limit the spread of infections.

NAWAZ ISMAIL



More on the Web
thehindu.com/opinion/open-page



COVID-19 and the vulnerable

The lockdown has exacerbated the disadvantages of migrant workers and the urban homeless

CLEMENT AROCKIASAMY

How pandemics begin

There are certain striking common threads in each outbreak, with the most deadly ones being zoonotic

GOURI PASSI

A summer flavour

There was a time when the arrival of the palm fruit vendor was eagerly awaited in Bengaluru

STANLEY CARVALHO

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Ready to roll (Clockwise from left) Workers ready an isolation coach at a yard in Howrah; refitting a coach in Prayagraj; food and medicines being moved on board freight trains at Coimbatore; laying new linen on the spacious berths; hospital curtains and separate bathrooms; mosquito nets being fitted on windows of an isolation coach at ICF in Chennai.

• PTI & B. JOTHI RAMALINGAM

NFR, meanwhile, has so far made 407 PPE coveralls, 2,500 litres of hand sanitiser and 76,000 reusable masks. In Tamil Nadu, the government is in touch with the Integral Coach Factory in Chennai and Goldenrock Workshop in Tiruchi for the bulk supply of healthcare consumables like steel cots and IV stands. The Hubballi Workshop is making contactless cubicles, while the Coach Rehabilitation Workshop in Bhopal has come up with a mobile cubicle that can be transported to remote areas.

The meal wagon

Most importantly, with roads blockaded and trucks abandoned by drivers, IR has had to play a crucial role in ensuring that the supply of foodgrains is not hit. Not surprisingly, it more than doubled its numbers, moving 4.58 million tonnes of foodgrains from April 1 to April 22, compared to 1.82 million tonnes over the same period last year.

In an innovative move, two sets of long-distance, super-heavy, fast freight trains were introduced – Annapoorna Trains by Northern Railways and Jai Kisan Specials by South Central Railway. These services have taken advantage of the freed-up tracks to join two freight trains and run them as one, thus doubling capacity.

Normally, a freight train of 42 wagons carries around 2,600 tonnes of foodgrains. The special trains now carry 5,200 tonnes. As this goes to print, 55 Annapoorna trains and 8 Jai Kisan specials have been run, clocking a creditable average speed of 44 kmph.

Other quick decisions have also helped IR up its role. It has tweaked its regular routes, aggregated small parcels, and picked up unique cargo. It identified 65 parcel routes for essential goods and, until April 14, has run 507 such trains.

In Bhusaval in Maharashtra, for instance, trains transport onions but not bananas, which go by road. Post-lockdown, a parcel van of bananas was sent to Delhi. Now, following requests from fruit



beds earmarked. In Mumbai, Jagjivan Ram Hospital, the zonal hospital of Western Railways, has become the only one to be converted into a COVID-19 hospital. Spokesperson Ravinder Bhakar said it was treating around 80 patients.

In the Northeast, NFR has modified 315 passenger coaches, with 2,500 isolation beds, and has earmarked another 170 beds as isolation beds across its hospitals. “These will be made available whenever required,” says NFR’s chief spokesperson, Subhanan Chanda.

While these measures were under way, the doctors in IR’s hospitals pointed out the need for personal protective

equipment (PPE). Producing PPE is no mean feat: a special type of fabric has to be procured, a particular sewing machine is used for seamless stitching, and a special tape attached to prevent contamination. The final design adopted by the Railway Board was prepared by the Jagadhari Workshop, which sent its sample PPE to the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) for approval.

“Right now, we are aiming for just 1,000 PPEs a day. They will first be used by doctors working in COVID wards at railway hospitals. But as we ramp up production, we can provide it to other hospitals too,” says a senior railway official.

In Mumbai, Jagjivan Ram Hospital, the zonal hospital of Western Railways, is being converted into the first COVID-19 hospital

traders, Central Railway plans to run several parcel trains for fruit. Similarly, Western Railway has dramatically increased milk loading at Palanpur in Gujarat to transport milk to Haryana and Delhi. From March 23 to April 20, 14 milk specials have run, carrying 9,903.20 tonnes of milk.

In the Northeast, NFR has moved more than 480 rakes of essentials and 25 parcel trains for the seven sister States. Assam’s Barak Valley is one of the remotest corners of the area that NFR services, and Umesh and his team there ensure that supplies keep coming in.

For the first time, a goods terminal near Silchar was used for medicine parcel service – one for Barak Valley and the other for Tripura; then a milk rake came from Gujarat, supplying 50 wagonloads. The SETU helpline allows customers to call and place requests for bulk transport of essentials such as PPE, medicines and foods. Nationwide, IR has transported 1,150 tonnes of medical items.

IR is also providing cooked meals for the needy, tying up with local NGOs and groups for distribution. IRCTC, the Indian Railway Catering and Tourism Corporation, has set up kitchens across the country, starting at Mumbai Central.

At present, the Railways is providing meals to over 50,000 people a day nationwide, and efforts are on to increase this to 2.6 lakh meals per day wherever it is possible.

Fast forward

The challenge will be to see if IR can keep up the momentum after the lockdown is lifted. While it’s always played a leading role in the transport of bulk commodities such as coal, iron ore and foodgrains, it could use the opportunity provided by the pandemic to dramatically revamp its freight business.

Its huge, trained workforce and extensive resources and networks could be used to create a new freight model if it has the foresight to do so. It could, for instance, tie up with road transport to offer seamless cargo movement, and incorporate sophisticated facilities to cover a wider range of goods, including perishables, medicines etc. The challenge will be to establish timetabled long-distance trains and assured delivery times even after passenger trains are back on track. And, most important, keep its rates competitive.

In other words, as much as the Railways has upped the ante to deliver during the pandemic, its real victory will be if it can emerge from the pandemic a smarter, sharper, and more efficient brand.

With inputs from Rahul Karmakar in Guwahati.

LIFELINE

Reinventing the wheels

Passenger trains ground to a halt after the lockdown, but the massive Indian Railways infrastructure has been chugging away steadily

Ajeet Mahale

It was April 7, two weeks into the nationwide lockdown announced to combat COVID-19, and all roads were closed. Riku Singh was stuck in Guwahati, while his mother, who has stage four cancer, was in Udharbond in Cachar district, more than 300 km away. Singh was distraught because he could not find a way to get medicines to her urgently. In desperation, he tweeted at the Assam Health Minister and the Assam Police asking for help.

Meanwhile, post-lockdown, the Northeast Frontier Railway or NFR had set up a Swift and Efficient Transport of Utilities (SETU) team, whose members were scanning Twitter. They read Singh’s tweet and contacted S. Umesh, the Area Manager at Badarpur railway junction in Assam. Umesh called NFR’s Divisional Operations Manager, Kapinjal Kishore Sharma, in Guwahati, who picked up the medicines from Singh. The package was then put in a goods train and sent to Silchar, from where Singh’s uncle picked it up and delivered it to the patient. “The railway people arrived like angels. I have no words to express my gratitude,” says Singh.

When Sukhdev Mandar in Ludhiana urgently needed a particular drug from Nagpur for his immunity-related ailment, the Central Railway (CR) chief parcel supervisor at Nagpur agreed to trans-ship it via Itarsi in the absence of a direct train.

They don’t normally do trans-shipment but, as Krishnath Patil, CR’s senior divisional commercial manager, said, “These are extraordinary circumstances”.

Indian Railways (IR), the world’s fourth largest rail network, seems to be responding snappily to the times. IR might have suspended all passenger trains on March 22, the first time in its history, but the country’s lifeline has been far from idle. Apart from a myriad off-beat interventions like the ones above, it has been busy reinventing itself so that its massive infrastructure – spread across a staggering 64,000 km, over 7,000 stations, and with 12 lakh employees – can be honed into a valuable tool during the pandemic.

Coach to ward

“We were asked to come up with ideas to use our existing facilities in the fight against the novel coronavirus,” says a senior official with the Railways. The Railway Board, the top decision-making body, started daily video conferences with officers across 16 zones.

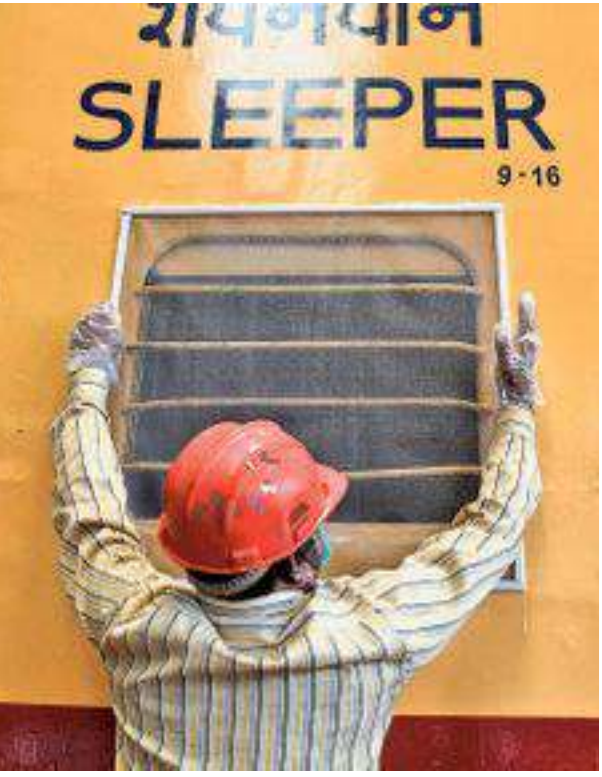
One of the first ideas that came up was to convert coaches into quarantine or isolation wards, given the acute shortage of these. Soon, the idea became a key initiative for IR. By the end of March, the Railway Board had issued a set of guidelines in consultation with the Armed Forces Medical Services, the medical departments of zonal railways and Ayushman Bharat. Some 5,000 coaches had been repurposed as of April 10.

These isolation coaches have one toilet and one bathing room each, the middle berths have been removed, and windows fitted with mosquito nets. They have oxygen cylinders and fixtures for medical equipment. They have special COVID-19 features like taps with long handles and dustbins with foot pedals.

However, even if these coaches are pressed into service – as Rajesh Bajpai, Executive Director, Railway Board, says, “Our hope is the country never reaches a stage when these coaches have to be used” – the challenge will be to station them in spots where uninterrupted water and electricity supply is assured. Second, in the absence of airconditioning and specialised equipment, it might make more sense to use these as second-line quarantine rather than treatment facilities.

Hospital back-up

The next major initiative was to put to use IR’s extensive health facilities, consisting of 586 health units, 45 sub-divisional hospitals, 56 divisional hospitals, eight production unit hospitals, and 16 zonal hospitals across the country. This vast network is now being readied for COVID-19 patients, with as many as 5,000

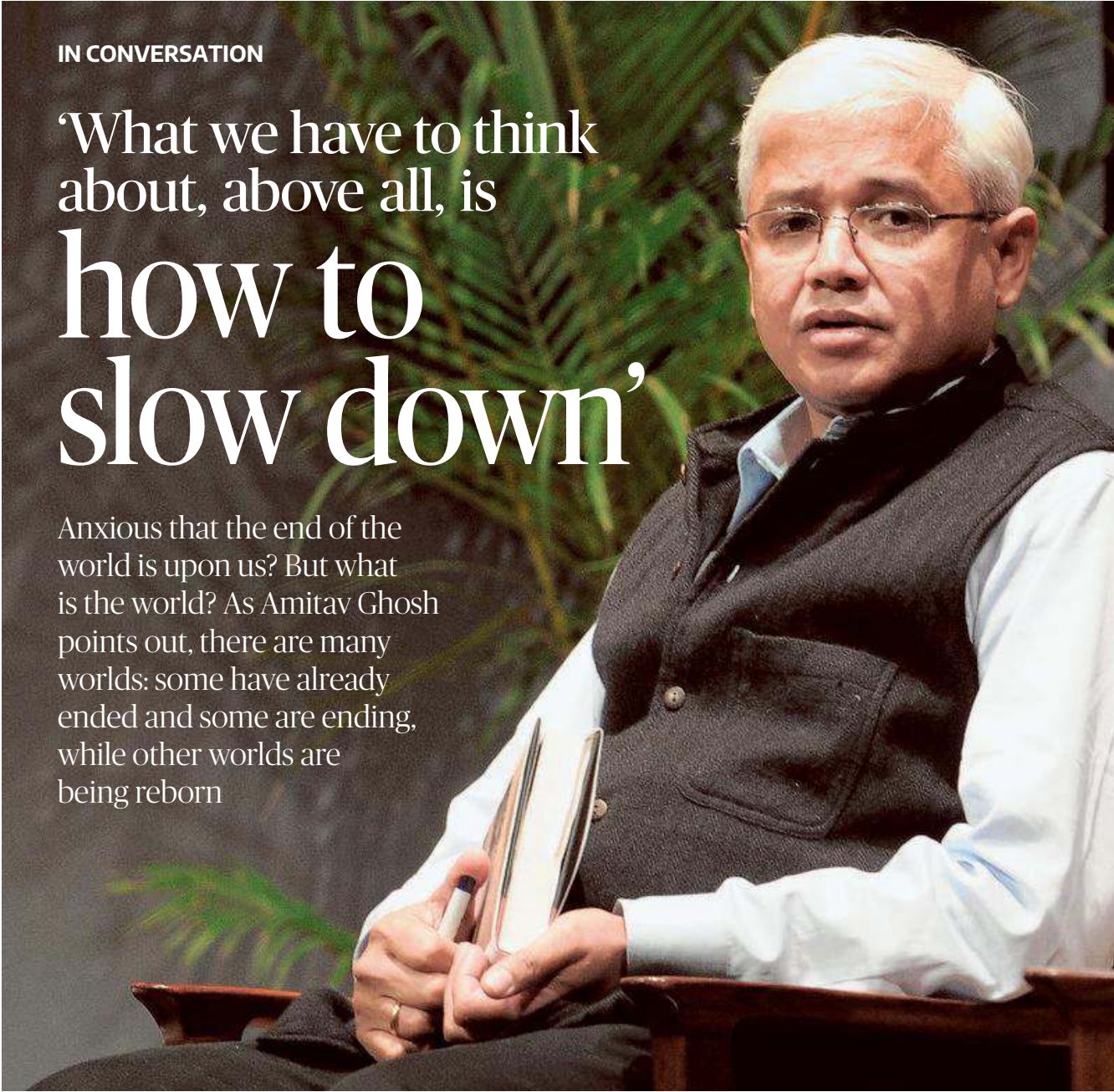


Western Railways has dramatically increased milk loading at Palanpur in Gujarat to transport milk to Haryana and Delhi. From March 23 to April 20, 14 milk specials have been run

IN CONVERSATION

‘What we have to think about, above all, is how to slow down’

Anxious that the end of the world is upon us? But what is the world? As Amitav Ghosh points out, there are many worlds: some have already ended and some are ending, while other worlds are being reborn



■ V.V. KRISHNAN

made it clear that the Earth is not an inert entity. No one has said this more clearly than James Lovelock, who (in collaboration with Lynn Margulis) propounded the Gaia hypothesis. Here are some sentences from an article of his called ‘What is Gaia’: “Long ago the Greeks... gave to the Earth the name Gaia or, for short, Ge. In those days science and theology were one and science, although less precise, had soul. As time passed this warm relationship faded and was replaced by the frigidity of schoolmen. The life sciences, no longer concerned with life, fell to classifying dead things and even to vivisection... Now at least there are signs of a change. Science becomes holistic again and rediscovers soul, and theology, moved by ecumenical forces, begins to realize that Gaia is not to be subdivided for academic convenience and that Ge is much more than a prefix.”

Lovelock’s ideas were for a long time criticised and mocked by scientists, not the least because of his choice of the name ‘Gaia’ – who was the Greek goddess of the Earth. But the reason he chose that name is that he couldn’t find an equivalent concept in the modern technoscientific vocabulary; he had to go back to a personification of the Earth as a goddess.

That’s certainly food for thought, but sometimes mankind is compared to a cancer on the planet, a bad virus. What do you think? Are we the virus from Gaia’s point of view?

■ This implies that human history could have had one, and only one trajectory. I don’t think that is true. Even ‘capitalism’ had many trajectories, some of which, like the so-called East Asian model, were much less resource-intensive than the Anglo-American model. Things could have been different if certain key chapters in our history had not worked out as they have: the conquest of the Americas; Britain’s rise to global dominance in the 18th and 19th centuries; and, most of all, the near-universal adoption of the Washington Consensus after 1990.

We should not forget that no less than half of all the greenhouse gases that are now in the atmosphere, were put there in just the last 30 years. This period had been called the ‘Great Acceleration’, and it’s a fitting name, I think, because all our crises are effects of this acceleration – climate breakdown, the migration crisis, and, of course, the novel coronavirus pandemic.

These crises are all cognate, although there is no direct causal link between them.

So, is everything wrong with the planet? Isn’t there any glimmer of hope that you see?

■ Personally I think it’s not productive to look at the state of our world through the frame of ‘hope/despair’. We need to try to cope with the crises that are unfolding around us because it is our duty to do so, not because there is (or isn’t) a magical solution.

Okay, but assuming that the end of the world might just be around the corner – when can we expect it to happen? Or has it already started and we are seeing it unfold before our eyes?

■ ‘The world’ is not the same for everyone. There are many worlds: some have already ended and some are ending, while other worlds are being reborn. It’s often been pointed out that for many indigenous peoples the world they knew ended a long time ago. However, they have managed to survive and have drawn on their experiences to create new worlds. I think we have a lot to learn from them at this time.

When this lockdown began I felt something akin to the relief one feels when one falls sick with exhaustion after a long period of hyperactivity

Worlds also end and begin in small ways sometimes. For most of my life I lived in a certain kind of literary world, one that followed certain practices and methods. That world ended for me when I began to understand the reality of climate change. But that doesn’t mean I stopped thinking or writing – quite the contrary. So you could say the passing of one world led to the birth of another.

That’s extremely interesting. As for the present crisis you earlier told me: “I think we will all have to rethink our ways of life, our ideas of travel and so forth.” How do you view each person’s responsibility in this regard, to put this rethinking in concrete terms?

■ To begin with I think we need to recognise that the planetary crisis requires collective action. It has now been established that the idea that it could be addressed by individual lifestyle changes was thought up by an advertising firm, as a conscious strategy, so that fossil fuel companies would not be subjected to regulation. In that sense our most important responsibility, if we live in a democracy, is to bring pressure to bear upon our politicians.

At the same time, changing our lifestyles is important too, because it does, at the very least, foreground

important issues in our own minds and in the minds of others. Greta Thunberg’s approach is exemplary, to my mind: at the same time that she has created a global political movement she has also made very important lifestyle changes.

Any suggestions you can share for people who might be wondering what they can do as individuals? For example, what rethinking are you doing?

■ To be honest, when this lockdown began I felt something akin to the relief one feels when one falls sick with exhaustion after a long period of hyperactivity. Suddenly it became clear that we were all caught, almost inadvertently, in a spiralling cycle of acceleration. And of course, it is this acceleration, on a global scale, that lies behind the pandemic. What we have to think about, above all, is how to slow down.

Slowing down indeed seems to be one of the best things to do now. Apart from your own books, are there others you would recommend for the current crisis?

■ One obvious reading is J.R. Macneil and Peter Engelke’s *The Great Acceleration*.

Will it be enough if a large number of individuals rethink? In my experience, except for some environmentalist cliques, the majority of people are not rethinkers. They will try to put the COVID-19 experience behind them as soon as they can.

■ I think, unfortunately, that you are right. What the history of epidemics shows is that while they are raging people imagine that they will rethink everything. But when they are over they go back quite quickly to their old ways.

Do you think intellectuals, artists, writers can play an important role in this situation? We’re not exactly experts in saving the world... I mean, writers in general are not practical-minded. If you ask a writer to hammer a nail into a wall, it’s likely both the writer’s hand and the wall will get damaged...

■ I am always a little wary of the idea of writers, artists and intellectuals setting out to ‘change the world’. We are, as you point out, not very practical people. But, on the other hand, the world cannot do without its dreamers.

Read the full interview online.

The interviewer and detective novelist based in Bengaluru is the author of the Majestic Trilogy.

Zac O’Yeah

Brooding over the COVID-19 pandemic that has resulted in a global crisis of never-before-experienced proportions, I turned to my mentor, fellow author Amitav Ghosh, for advice and perspectives on the state of our planet.

When we chatted the other day, you predicted that “unfortunately I am sure things are going to get worse.” In what ways do you foresee things getting any worse than this?

■ There are many ways the present situation could get much worse. Just imagine what would happen now if a major city were to be threatened by a cyclone or a wildfire (as was happening only a few months before the pandemic). In any case it is very clear now that the measures taken to

control the pandemic will cause a great deal of immiseration in many countries, India being just one of them. What will be the social response to the worsening conditions? We don’t know at this point, but if we look back to the last great period of climate disruption – the so-called Little Ice Age of the long 17th century – we see a truly terrifying cycle of epidemic, famine, war, revolution and social breakdown.

Some would say that the world is more resilient now than it was then. But it could also be argued that the world is much more fragile now than it used be, simply because of the incredible complexity of so many of our systems (the catastrophe inflicted on India’s migrant workers is an example of this). It has been instructive also to see how food distribution systems have been affected by the novel coronavirus lockdown in many countries, including the U.S. The

global food system is fragile and my greatest fear right now is of a food crisis.

In much of your writings, you talk about the earth sending messages through disasters – already in *The Calcutta Chromosome* 25 years ago you hinted at the idea of malaria as some kind of entity with its own soul like a cult god. But how are we to interpret these messages: as angry threats or anguished prayers or stern guidance? They’re certainly not polite requests, if we think of damaging floods, tsunamis, forest fires, etc. Or is the earth saying: You only have yourself to blame for behaving so stupidly, short-sightedly and egotistically?

■ One of the more positive aspects of the climate crisis is that it has

For most of my life I lived in a certain kind of literary world, one that followed certain practices and methods. That world ended for me when I began to understand the reality of climate change

REVIEW

White anger, crimson sky

These stories about political and ethnic conflicts in Assam leave a strong impact despite the spotty translations

Debapriya Basu

This book brings together 15 short stories from Assam, originally written in Assamese, Bodo or English, and edited by one of the foremost names in Assamese literature, Aruni Kashyap. As the title indicates, all the narratives address the realities of political agitation and ethnic conflict that has been Assam’s share since colonial times.

Shadow of the gun

Curiously, however, the editor seems to assume that all readers will have an understanding of how and why the stories represent “what it means to live under the shadow of the gun”. Apart from invoking the universality of human suffering, this book purportedly also wants to present such experiences through the lens of very specific cultures and communities of a particular region.

Strange, then, that not a single line of context is offered in the preface, none of the individual texts have headnotes, and no author biography possesses publication dates and

sources. This does leave one to flounder a bit. Since the colours of oppression and insurgency have shifted and coalesced in Assam in complex ways over time, some contextual information would have not only been helpful, it would have intensified the impact of these tales.

And the tales do leave a strong impact, in spite of the spottiness of the translations. Of the 15 stories, four were originally written in English, two in Bodo and the rest in Assamese. The most notable of the English narratives is ‘Vigil’ by Jahnabi Barua, exploring with understated intensity the mind of a mother torn in love for her sons, one of whom is a police officer, the other an insurgent.

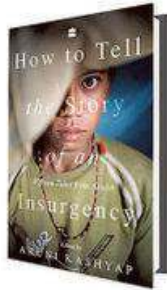
The Assamese stories almost uniformly choose straightforward nar-

rative over stylistic experimentation and all the contributions use simple, even stock, situations to convey an affective message. These are strong stories, dealing with love, loss, politics (personal and organisational), idealism and suffering seen almost exclusively through the eyes of women, children, and other outliers of a community.

Stuti Goswami’s assured translation of Sanjib Pol Deka’s ‘What Lies over Here?’ uses the motif of folk theatre to tie in the themes of communities in conflict, others explore political indoctrination meetings (Ratnottama Das Bikrom’s ‘Crimson’ sic) or village burnings (Arun Kumar Nath’s ‘Koli-Puran’).

‘Crimson’ (sic) is easily the most accomplished in the collection, supported by Mitali Goswami’s luminous translation. A teenage boy and his “pekpeki” (chatterbox) sister come of age in the aftermath of unexpected violence. Teenage rivalry, idealism, menstruation and bloodshed are masterfully woven into the titular refrain: “[c]rimson sun, crimson blood, crimson western sky.” Wordplay and world-play come together to produce

These are strong stories, dealing with love, loss, politics, idealism and suffering seen almost exclusively through the eyes of women, children, and other outliers of a given community



How the Tell the Story of an Insurgency
Edited by Aruni Kashyap
HarperCollins
₹399

a tale that’s sensitively handled, insightful and moving.

A stylistically different piece is Juri Baruah’s ‘A Political Tale’. It is a meditation on the road as metaphor for life, spinning the conceit out into symbolic spaces of memory and experience. But the emotional force of a female political activist’s interior monologue is hobbled by an awkward translation and inadequate footnotes.

Heat of outrage

What ties all the stories together is the white heat of outrage. These are deeply angry voices, one and all, not yet ready for laughter as resistance. The Assamese tales are all marked by earnestness; it is only in the two Bodo tales that we see sparks of satire.

In time, perhaps, anger will be able to perfectly turn the knife of sarcasm, and more stories like Nandeswar Daimari’s superb Bodo non-fable ‘A Hen that Doesn’t know how to Hatch its own Eggs’ will emerge.

Both Bodo tales use some black humour in offerings that are stark and pitiless in their refusal to comment. The careless translations (especially in the rendering of Katindra Swargiary’s ‘Hongla Pandit’) cannot detract from the power of these deceptively simple tales.

At the end of the day, this is a book so important that one is tempted to overlook its uneven quality and shoddy presentation.

The reviewer is Assistant Professor, English, at IIT Guwahati.

Riven

A security guard keeps vigil at a relief camp in Narayanguri village in Baksa district of Assam in May 2014.

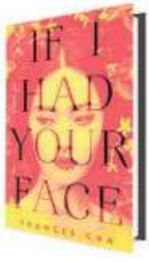
■ RITU RAJ KONWAR

BROWSER

If I Had Your Face

Frances Cha
Ballantine Books
\$27.00

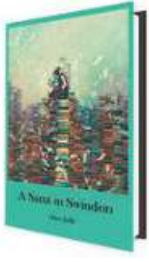
In contemporary Seoul, four young women make their way in a world defined by impossible standards of beauty, secret salons for wealthy men, strict social hierarchies and K-pop fan mania. In this hostile setting, their tentative friendships may turn out to be the only thing that saves them



A Saint in Swindon

Alice Jolly
Fairlight Books
Price not mentioned

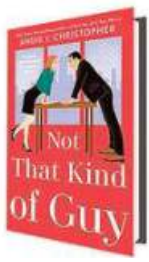
A stranger arrives in town and never leaves his room. He only demands books. Who is he? What is he reading? Speculations run rife. This funny and dystopian tale is about the importance of literature in an increasingly dark world.



Not That Kind of Guy

Andie J. Christopher
Berkley
\$8.45 (Kindle price)

State attorney Bridget Nolan is successful in all aspects of her life except romance, not that she has much time for it. Matt Kido, the legal intern, falls for her. They spend a rollicking time together in Las Vegas, but are quite ready to put it all behind them. Then everything changes.

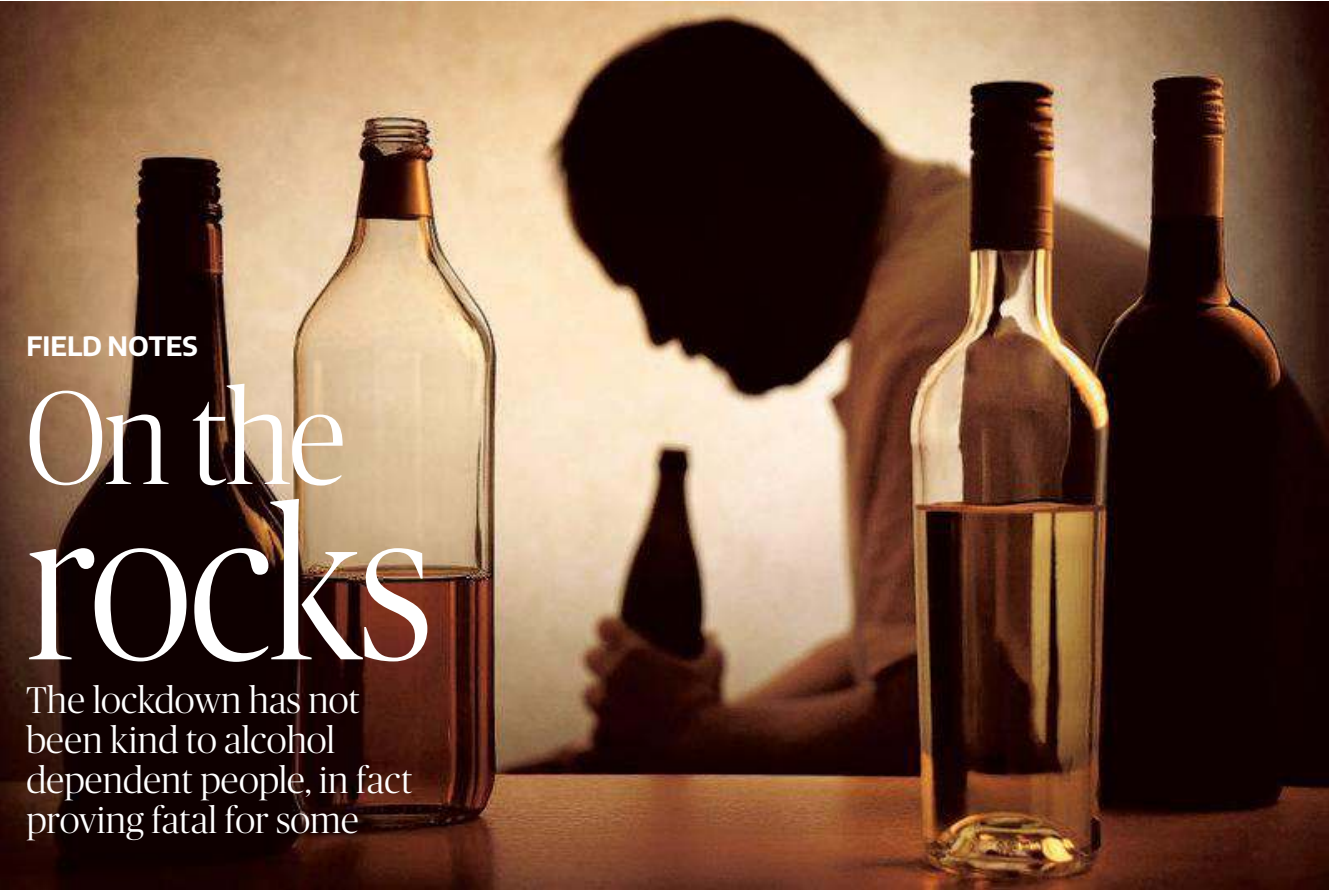


Mad, Bad & Dangerous to Know

Samira Ahmed
Soho Teen
\$10.99 (Kindle price)

Told in alternating stories set 200 years apart, this novel is about two young women fighting to write their own narratives and escape the pressure of cultural expectations. Leila and Khayyam’s lives intertwine, and as one woman’s long-forgotten life is uncovered, another’s is transformed.





FIELD NOTES

On the rocks

The lockdown has not been kind to alcohol dependent people, in fact proving fatal for some

'If alcohol dependent people find themselves in difficult straits, it's symptomatic of the state's contradictory approach to alcohol, which is both puritanical and pragmatic'

Zubeda Hamid & Abhinaya Harigovind

It was March 28, Day 4 of the nationwide lockdown imposed in response to the novel coronavirus pandemic. Kerala government's 14405 Vimukthi de-addiction helpline saw a sudden spike in calls: from eight on March 24, they shot up to 201. One call was from the wife of a 42-year-old daily wage worker in Ernakulam. The man, who had an eight-year history of alcohol dependence, was huddled beneath his bed with his daughter who, he was convinced, was going to be attacked. There was no such danger, but he was hallucinating.

Around the same time, a 45-year-old man was brought in by his family to the Centre for Addiction Medicine at Bengaluru's National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (NIMHANS). The man, also with a history of alcohol use, had suffered three seizures, was dehydrated and comatose. He was one of 89 patients who came to the centre within a week of the lockdown, said Lekhan Shukla, an assistant professor there. "This was a big jump; we ordinarily see two or three such cases a day," he said.

In Chennai, a week after the lockdown, Karthik (name changed on request) was brought to the Institute of Mental Health by his parents. He hadn't slept in five days and was hallucinating. "I believed a group of people had entered my house and were beating me up," the 31-year-old, who works as a driver with an app-based service, told us. "I couldn't tell the difference between reality and hallucination."

Tip of the iceberg
Each of these men was experiencing severe withdrawal symptoms, triggered by the sudden unavailability of alcohol after the lockdown, when all shops except groceries and pharmacies were shut down. Alcohol withdrawal symptoms can range from shivering, dehydration and sleeplessness to more acute conditions such as delirium, hallucinations, fever, vomiting and seizures.

Within a week of the lockdown, reports of deaths and suicides related to alcohol withdrawal began to rise. In Tamil Nadu, for instance, 10 deaths have been reported in this time, many of them caused because addicts consumed dangerous substances in lieu of alcohol – after-shave lotion, varnish, sanitiser, and

methyl alcohol. The last few decades have seen alcohol abuse grow into a major public health problem. As far back as 2009, a report in *The Lancet* found that more than half of all alcohol drinkers in India fall into the 'hazardous drinking' category. A 2018 report by WHO noted that about 2.6 lakh deaths in India each year can be directly or indirectly traced to excessive alcohol consumption.

The majority of alcohol drinkers across India are men, but the percentage in some States is higher than the national average of 29.2%, according to the National Family Health Survey 2015-16. In Tamil Nadu, it is 46.7%; in Kerala 37% and in Andhra Pradesh 34.9%.

What worries Dr. Shukla is the scant awareness about treatment, and the curtailed access to medical centres at this time when public transport is closed. "The people we are seeing with alcohol withdrawal is just the tip of the iceberg – we can assume that most people have not made it to a hospital and have suffered. Studies tell us that the mortality rate for people with severe withdrawals is over 15%."

Healthcare professionals are also worried about the impact on families: there has been a withdrawal-re-

In a bind (Clockwise from below) Murals depicting the ill-effects of alcohol addiction on the walls of the excise building in Thiruvananthapuram; a toddy shop in Ernakulam; representational image.

■ S. MAHINSHA, H. VIBHU & GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK



lated spike in incidents of domestic violence, said Maya Varadarajan, managing trustee of TTK Hospital for Addiction, a Central government-designated Regional Resource and Training Centre. The hospital has been closed since the lockdown, but its counsellors are working from home, checking up on patients.

Serious distress
The treatment protocol for people suffering from alcohol withdrawal syndrome is to admit them, do blood investigations and brain imaging, check for fractures that could have occurred during falls, check for malnutrition and dehydration, and give intravenous benzodiazepines and high doses of vitamins.

On March 30, the Kerala government issued an order that said that

since a section of people were undergoing serious distress, some even attempting suicide, due to alcohol unavailability, a process should be initiated to make a limited amount of alcohol available to them. But doctors petitioned the Kerala High Court against the order. "The order to issue passes to obtain alcohol was a peculiar one and not scientific. Medicines and complete abstinence from alcohol are used to treat alcohol-withdrawal symptoms," said G.S. Vijaykrishnan, general secretary, Kerala Government Medical Officers Association. On April 2, a division bench of the Kerala High Court stayed the government order for three weeks.

Today, as part of Vimukthi, Kerala's anti-narcotics campaign, 14 de-addiction centres operate at district

or taluk hospitals across the State. Each centre has 10 beds now, and the process of expanding facilities by another 10-20 beds is under way in each district, according to D. Rajeev, Additional Excise Commissioner and CEO of the Vimukthi Mission.

Harm minimisation
Tamil Nadu's District Mental Health Programme, meanwhile, foreseeing a rise in alcohol withdrawal cases, has chalked out a set of guidelines for medical officers and district psychiatrists. The State-run Institute of Mental Health in Chennai is functioning round-the-clock, with a counselling helpline, in addition to the State health helpline. Diazepam, a drug used to treat alcohol withdrawal, is available at all Primary Health Centres, said IMH director P. Poorna Chandrika.

If alcohol dependent people today find themselves in such difficult straits, it's symptomatic of the state's contradictory approach to alcohol, which is both puritanical and pragmatic, said Soumitra Pathare, Director of the Centre for Mental Health Law and Policy in Pune. "Alcohol is seen as morally repugnant – but it is also a huge revenue generator for the state. What we need during lockdown is a harm minimisation approach, where people are given access to de-addiction treatment, but where people are also allowed to decide when they want to undergo treatment, because unplanned withdrawal can be life threatening," said Dr. Pathare.

With inputs from Divya Gandhi.

GREEN HUMOUR BY ROHAN CHAKRAVARTY



ALLEGEDLY

Kattabomman colours an apple

I've never worked as hard in my whole life as I have during this lockdown

So how is the lockdown treating you? I have a simple, three-point formula that anybody can use to make sure they not only survive the lockdown but positively enjoy it: don't be poor, don't be a migrant worker, and don't be a member of a minority community. If you can manage this, everything will be fine. At least until you lose your job. As and when you lose your job, don't panic – apply to the IT cell, and you'll get a job that pays infinitely better than MGNREGA.

As for me, I've never worked as

hard my whole life as I have during this lockdown. I'd never imagined that work-from-home would be so much more hectic than work-from-work. Not only have I been putting in 18-19 hours a day, I've also been forced to learn new skills and new facts about everyday life – all thanks to Modiji.

Jhaadu-pocha-bartan routine
Apart from reading, writing, and forwarding propaganda on WhatsApp, now I also know how to comb a toddler's hair when the toddler is in continuous and irregular motion,

the strategic-tactical line on when to use Scotch-Brite and when to deploy the steel mesh, and to never EVER turn away, even for one second, when milk is on the stove – it will always, ALWAYS stab you in the back.

In our home, three individuals – all women, of course – do the heavy-lifting when it comes to domestic work: cook, cleaner, nanny. In their lockdown-induced absence, the wife's MHA advisory – in complete disregard of the patriarchal settings that come factory-fitted with every entitled Indian male – has divided the housework and care work equally between herself and myself. Out of consideration for me, she has assigned to herself the tougher 50% – all the managerial stuff that is high value and therefore full of tension. These include planning the day's schedule, issuing precise instructions, monitoring me for timely compliance and quality control, etc. I get the 50% that is less stressful because it is merely physical labour, and rather easy to do so long as you know your Lizol from your Colin from your Harpic.

Just chill
So the lockdown for me has been a non-stop, confused blur of jobs: jhaadu-pocha, bartan-cooking, reading-writing, pot-banging-potty-cleaning, hand-washing-candle-lighting, milk-feeding-copy-editing, tear-wiping-fairytale-telling, arguing-mask-wearing, handwashing-and-praying.

The easiest – because you've been doing it all your life – is your work-work. The household chores – mopping, cleaning, etc – I don't mind so much because they leave me mentally free to contemplate the planet's post-human future. The toughest is shepherding Kattabomman from morning to midnight. I dread his daily official meetings. Since April 1, the first day of his school life, I've been waking up earlier than I ever have to set up his zoom calls with his nursery teacher. I undertake extensive online research to prep for his 'learning activity', and still manage to bungle it every time.

Last Friday's 'activity', for instance, was a typical disaster, with potentially calamitous side effects on marital concord. On an A4 sheet of paper, I'd drawn an outline of an apple, as I was supposed to. Katta-

bomman somehow turned it into a pink heart with green whiskers. The pink heart also sported thick yellow hair in the style of Cher. For some reason, it also had purple eyes, a sad purple mouth, and a limp, purple tail.

"What the hell is this?" the wife asked, from over our (mine and Kattabomman's) shoulders.

"Eh...I was just asking myself the same question," I said.

"Where is the apple cut-out I gave you?"

"You were wrong about the apple cut-out," I said. "You--"

"God, I don't have time for this," she said, rolling her eyes like Cersei Lannister.

"Just chill," I said. "It's just a stupid activity for three-year-olds."

"You had one job," she said. "To paste the apple cut-out on the bloody page."

"You were supposed to give me an apple outline, not an apple cut-out," I said.

"Is there a difference between an outline and a cut-out?"

"There is. If you check the Oxford English Dictionary--"

"Forget it. The app says cut-out."

"The noodle app?"

"It's moodle, not noodle," she said.

"The app is wrong about the apple activity."

"A-for-apple," said Kattabomman.

"Ok I'm done!" she said, throwing her hands up in a dramatic but hackneyed gesture of mock surrender. "From tomorrow, you and your son manage on your own. I'm out of it!"

"Let me remind you," I began, "That we agreed to split all suffering 50-50." But she'd already stomped out.

I stared at Kattabomman. He stared at me. We both stared at the botched monstrosity that was meant to be a 'learning activity' for the letter A. It required him to colour inside the outline of an apple while chanting the slogan, 'A-for-Apple'. He was still at it, painstakingly applying the final touches to what seemed like an apple displaying severe symptoms of COVID-19.

"*Dei, ennada idhu?*" I asked him, exhausted and exasperated.

"*Po!*" he said, bringing his tiny fist down on the sickly apple. "*Po, corona, po!*"



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

PEACE IN A POD

The writing’s on the page

Do you enjoy listening to how someone found their groove?

Usha Raman

When Aditi Surana was 14 years old, a handwriting coach pointed out that she had spent the better part of an hour carefully drawing a string of zeroes on the page. Instead of feeling apologetic or embarrassed, Surana looked at the writing carefully and found that there was definitely a pattern there. And patterns usually say something – or can be decanted for meaning.

Graphology seems a rather odd gateway to a podcast, but what Aditi Surana has done is combine her longstanding passion for handwriting analysis with her skills as a high-performance coach to create the context for conversation.

In each episode of IVM’s new podcast series, *Absolutely Write*, Surana engages with a guest to unpack their personal journey while she peers into their handwriting for clues to their personality. The conversations are open-ended and somewhat winding, peppered with friendly banter and some serious reflective pauses.

“Complicated conversations actually offer insights to the passive listener,” says Surana, explaining what she hopes to achieve with her podcast. “Just listening to someone talk about their journey in a non-judgmental space can create clarity.”

Surprises, anyone?

Guests on the show so far have been IVM insiders, hosts of other podcasts, and hence there is a level of comfort and familiarity that comes through. This is also the limitation, precluding any real surprises for either the host or – by extension – the listener.

Surana is quick to note that this is by design, as the team wanted to include guests who “were



comfortable with the medium.” To her credit, Surana is able to bring in a measure of the unexpected when she unravels the dots and crosses in the writing samples from her guests.

Trait and reason

Speaking with her first guest Anupam Gupta, host of the business podcast *Paisa Vaisa*, she points to his habits of close observation and attention to process as a basis for decision making, expressed in parenting styles as much as in advising on stock market moves.

Rather than becoming caught up with the handwriting itself, Surana then pulls back to ask Gupta on how he applies this trait to his work as a financial analyst. This is where, potentially, the learning for the listener takes place. Clearly, having a seasoned podcaster as a guest helps smooth awkward pauses, though tell-tale nervous laughter does punctuate some of the early shows.

Clearly, having a seasoned podcaster as a guest helps smooth awkward pauses, though tell-tale nervous laughter does punctuate some of the early shows

Podcast episodes toggle between interviews with these selected guests and shorter pieces launched every Friday where Surana focuses on “a topic that is essential to your personal growth.” These deal with such themes as our relationship with money, building – and breaking – habits, and finding flow (recalling Eckhart Tolle), speaking, clearly, to an audience that enjoys self-help as a genre.

Achievers in conversation

If you are among those who enjoy listening to how someone found their groove, I’d like to recommend another show that recently came to my attention. Former NPR journalist and U.S.-based leadership coach Chitra Ragavan’s *When it Matterred* engages achievers in conversation around their professional journeys – and the personal moments that propelled them to success or brought them back from the brink of failure.

Started in July 2019, the podcast has had guests including former FBI Director James Comey and physician-astronaut Shawna Pandya.

Ragavan’s long experience with radio and her training as a journalist comes through in her audio style, the research that informs the interviews, and the expert way in which she guides the conversation to yielding those decisive moments.

The Hyderabad-based writer and academic is a neatnik fighting a losing battle with the clutter in her head.

GOREN BRIDGE

NORTH
▲ A J 4 3
♥ K 8
♦ A 9 2
♣ A K 9 6

WEST
▲ 10 9 8 6
♥ 3
♦ K J 10 6 5
♣ J 5 3

EAST
▲ 7 5 2
♥ Q J 9 6 4
♦ 7 4
♣ 8 4 2

SOUTH
▲ K Q
♥ A 10 7 5 2
♦ Q 8 3
♣ Q 10 7

The bidding:
SOUTH WEST NORTH EAST
1♥ Pass 1♠ All pass

Opening lead: 10 of ♠

Argentina!

North-South vulnerable, South deals

Bob Jones

Today’s deal is from an important tournament held recently in Argentina. Most pairs reached six no trump and failed, due to the foul heart split and the unlucky location of the king of diamonds. One declarer, Argentine expert Monica Angeleri, brought it home.

Angeleri won the opening spade lead in hand with the king. She led a heart to dummy’s king and a heart to the jack and ace as West shed a dia-

NORTH
♥ Void
♦ Void
♠ A 9 2
♣ Void

WEST
♥ Void
♦ Void
♠ K J 10
♣ Void

EAST
♥ Void
♦ J
♠ 7 4
♣ Void

SOUTH
♥ Void
♦ Void
♠ Q 8 3
♣ Void



mond. She cashed three more spade tricks and four club tricks, thanks to the fall of the jack, to reach this three-card ending with the lead in dummy: (grid 2)

She knew that West had started with five diamonds, and she had to play her for the king, as East could just cash a heart if she had that card. She led a low diamond to her eight, putting West on lead with the 10. West had to lead away from her king of diamonds and Angeleri had her slam. Beautifully played!

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

‘All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players’

Berty Ashley

On April 26, 1564, William Shakespeare was baptised in Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire, England. We know his date of birth from the Baptism records. He is credited for introducing more than 3,000 words to the English language. Under the patronage of which monarch did he do most of his work and consequently under which era does he come?

Between June 1592 and March 1594, a disease ravaged London leading to 11,000 deaths in a population of just 2,50,000. So a lockdown was ordered (just like now) and this led to a huge loss for the London entertainment industry. Since there was no demand for plays, Shakespeare started writing poetry and began his famous poems of 14 lines. What was the deadly disease that brought about the two-year lock-

down and what group of poems was the result?

Shakespeare wrote 39 plays in total and they all can be classified under three broad categories. The first category were meant to be biographies of kings, the second were plays full of fun, irony, wordplay, with contrived endings. The last followed a noble, flawed hero who made a mistake and fell from position before the normal order was somehow resumed. What were the categories?

This word which means ‘to strut in a defiant or insolent manner’ was first seen in 1590 in *Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *King Lear*. The noun version of this, that millennials use today to denote stylish confidence, can be traced back to 1640. What word is this?

Shakespeare was also an actor who performed many of his own plays and those of other playwrights. One of the characters that we believe he played was that of a spirit of the titular character’s father that ap-

pears three times at night in the play. Which play was this that was also the name of the spirit?

Shakespeare had become a famous playwright in London but in his hometown of Stratford he was well known and respected for his other job. This job made him very wealthy and he was regarded as a brilliant businessman as he made excellent investments. What was his other job which is fitting, as now his house and the theatre he performed are all of prime value?

This planet has 27 moons and 24 of them are named after characters from the plays of Shakespeare. When the first two moons were discovered the responsibility for naming them was taken by John Herschel, son of the discoverer. Instead of assigning names from Greek mythology he named the moons Oberon and Titania from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and the International Astronomic Union decided to carry on the tradition. Which planet is this, whose largest moon Titania is also a character from the same play?



Street-smart A mural of William Shakespeare. • FLICKR

LETTER FROM A CONCERNED READER

Fully cowfefe only

Respected Madam/ Sir,

How is the quarantine news? Whether everything is ok in the esteemed newspaper? One day rumour is coming that one newspaper is terminating employees. Next day rumour is coming that one TV channel is terminating employees. Everyday rumours only. Kali Yuga. What else one can say?

Before Corona days, I used to think oho, it will be so nice to work in office. Full computer and AC and all. Decades ago, during probation time, maybe I have told this story. Bank of India branch used to be next to one cowshed. Smell is very bad. But after two-three weeks, brain is adjusting for smell. But we are noticing one thing, deposit slip is being used like anything. Every day, one or two slip books are disappearing. During morning meeting manager said, “Hello, what nonsense. Whole day seven customers are coming. But evening 70 slips are missing.”

Mrs. Chacko, is it you? Mrs. Chacko face is turning red. She said, “Sir, just because by mistake one person tried to take new ceiling fan from the branch to one person’s house means every time one person will be treated like Charles Sobhraj?”

Then two-three days later, when we are returning from lunch break, mystery is solved. Everyday lunch time we are locking branch but leaving window open so that post or messages can be put inside. But what is actually happening? Madam/ Sir, nearby cow is coming, putting head into the window and eating all paper items. When we came back, she is casually enjoying deposit slip as if ras malai. We laughed and laughed like anything but whether head office will believe? Never. They said if you want new deposit slip book, please ask cow owner. Whether we are Bank of India or Gold Mohur Cattle Feed Company?



But these days any cows coming inside office? Zero. Full AC and kitchen and sofa set and all. That’s why I sometimes think what enjoyment it will be to work in modern office.

But after Corona, no need. At least those days stable jobs was there. Today? Monday you are manager. Tuesday you are in the dustbin.

What story I was going to tell? No no. Not cow story. One other story. OHO. YES. Story of housewarming.

Friday morning Mrs. M came and said, “Please get ready today, tomorrow one housewarming is there.” I said, “Kamalam, did I sleep for two months by mistake? Corona is over?” She said, “What nonsense you are talking. My cousin in Bhopal is doing housewarming in video conference. All are attending. Please get ready.”

I said, “What is there to get ready? Video conference means put one shirt and look at camera no? Even trouser not needed.”

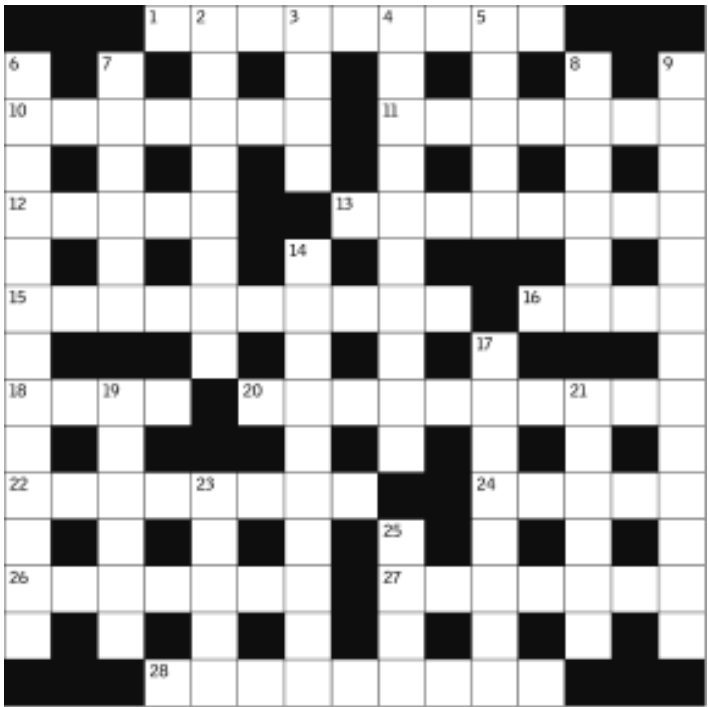
Kamalam looked like M.R. Radha seeing first day first show of *Aayirathil Oruvan*. She said, “Your hair is growing like banyan tree in Theosophical Society. Please do one haircut.” I said, “Kamalam, how I will get haircut? Whether police will allow barber shop?” She thought for two minutes then said, “I will cut your hair.” I said no no no no no.

Madam/ Sir, what happened? She cut my hair. Nowadays, from morning to evening I am wearing one Deccan Chargers cap. Under cap hair is like old toothbrush Kamalam is using for jewellery cleaning. Total humiliation. During housewarming people are saying, excuse me, why Mr. Mathrubootham is wearing cap? That too of old team? Mrs. M is saying oho that is because he is lifelong fan of Deccan Chargers.

What did I say? Nothing. Because Mrs. Mathrubootham said, during housewarming pin-drop silence. Only smiling.

Yours in humiliation,
J. Mathrubootham

THE SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO.3097



Across

- 1 With respect to area around Norfolk, Everyman has to be obnoxious (9)
- 10 Laugh abruptly with derisive interjections following excitement (3-4)
- 11 A Rover’s waxed, for starters, when money’s seen around here! (3,4)
- 12 Where you find some heresy? No; dogma! (5)
- 13 Nine getting into pastry, sliced for a do (5,3)
- 15 Concert venue, a large place in which to fall asleep entirely (6,4)
- 16 A young woman almost flipped somewhere in Latvia (4)
- 18 They made ‘SOS’ a palindrome (4)
- 20 Gaffer isn’t swayed by facetious excuse for typo in text (3,7)
- 22 Release redacted; it’s inevitable (4,4)
- 24 Hush-hush, not about to become public (5)
- 26 Carelessly malingering without a reason for machine’s downtime (7)
- 27 Anglesey spending year struggling to become member of African Union (7)
- 28 Where Douglas is breaking flamingoes – not good (4,2,3)

Down

- 2 Serf working across terrain in mediaeval principality (8)
- 3 Losing head, stop being calm (4)
- 4 ‘Clue is ‘Fish!’’ Flounders.’ That’s how it

- goes’ (4,2,4)
- 5 Italian scorer, clever dick to some extent (5)
- 6 Now – regrettably – Dad’s eating hay (4,3,3,3)
- 7 Biscuit mix (6)
- 8 Exercise and hot drink proposed by Spooner (3,3)
- 9 Revising hastily at last? There’s nothing more to add (4,4,2,3)
- 14 One who told tales when cradle rocked (1,1,8)
- 17 A minion’s faltering complaint (8)
- 19 Supports British experts (6)
- 21 What’s displayed by keener gymnasts, in part? (6)
- 23 What cowboys may carry; what may carry cowboys (5)
- 25 Primarily, announcement showing incredulity flatly! (2,2)

Solution No. 3096



- Answers
- 1. Queen Elizabeth II, Elizabethan Era
 - 2. The Plague, Tragedies & Comedies
 - 3. Histories, Tragedies & Comedies
 - 4. Swaggar
 - 5. Hamlet
 - 6. Real Estate/ Property salesman
 - 7. Urans
 - 8. North America
 - 9. A Spear
 - 10. An Upstart Crow

ART SPOT

A retrospective of master abstractionist Mehlli Gobhai, now on view online, weaves between his social and artistic commitments

Coming up for light and air

Sukhada Tatke

How to convey that which lies beyond the realm of words? What secrets are revealed by stretching recognisable forms into almost invisible identities? What mysteries call for splashes of colour to transform into precise dark shapes through which a gleam of light manages to escape and illuminate?

To view the lifework of artist Mehlli Gobhai, who died two years ago, is to find oneself on the path of a parabola, climbing hesitantly in one direction and landing with more questions than answers in a different place. Moving around the five levels of the National Gallery of Modern Art in Mumbai – where his work was displayed before the gallery was shut due to the lockdown – one got a rare glimpse into the evolution of Gobhai's body of work: his drawings as a teenager, life sketches, illustrations as an advertising professional, his paintings using different materials, spanning 70 years of interplay between his intellectual, social and artisanal commitments.

"Mehlli's art focused on the axis mundi, the world axis, the column of light, the sap rising through the world tree – images of ascension were at the core of his work," said Nancy Adajania, co-curator of 'Don't Ask Me About Colour'. The upwardly rising spiral of the building thus served to accentuate the viewing experience. Viewers can now see the show online.

"Mehlli did not avoid colour. He refused to be intoxicated by it," said Adajania, explaining the title of the retrospective. "In fact, the ground colours of all his later paintings – more familiar to viewers – were chalky pink and pale yellow. He would gradually build up the sienna,

umber, charcoal grey over this base," she said.

Shown for the first time ever, his mixed-media works bursting with celebratory colours – red, yellow, mint green, cobalt blue – came as a shock. "I like colours to be somewhat submerged," Gobhai had once said. "I like forms to be somewhat submerged, and to come up for air." This polychrome palette marked the artist's definitive transition from representation to abstraction.

Abstract mysteries

Pivoting the exhibition was a stone sculpture of the tantric goddess Chamunda, which greeted viewers at the base of a stairway. An index finger on her lips in a rahasya mudra suggests her position as a custodian of mysteries. If Gobhai regarded Chamunda as a deity of abstraction, the master abstractionist gently draws us into his sphere of images to alter the ways in which we relate to the world we think we know. Is that the outline of Krishna playing a flute? And there? A dancing woman perhaps? A woman holding a teacup with her toes?

Gobhai later shifted to dark, subdued shades of sepia, charcoal grey, sienna, while always staying alive to the sacredness of geometry and mathematical harmony. Figures now melted into abstract motions, lines and divisions dominated the scene. "How does one manage the chaos, bring the contradictions into a choreography of reconciliation? That was one of his key questions," said co-curator Ranjit Hoskote.

"The line became prominent as a measure of chaos, a geometry that would keep turbulence in check. The swing and weight of the plumb line, the dance of parallel and intersecting lines, become vital gauges of space in his work at this time. These stylised, simplified linearities are al-



Polychrome palette
(Clockwise from above) Two untitled paintings by Gobhai, mixed media on canvas, 1970s; and the late artist.

• SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT & APARNA JAYAKUMAR

so the last vestiges of the figure in his work, traces of an elbow, a knee, a pelvis, as we see from the drawings in his notebooks of that period," said Hoskote.

Disparate empires

Gobhai's fixation with abstraction had been an almost lifelong one, but he was never removed from the world of ideas. He read poets, aestheticians, philosophers, and discussed them with friends. "For Mehlli, the abstractionist was very much a person who grappled with ideas and had an intellectual life," said Hoskote.

In Gobhai's copy of Wilhelm Woringer's 1908 classic *Abstraction and Empathy*, he had underlined a sentence, reflecting his own thoughts: "These regular abstract forms are, therefore, the only ones and the highest, in which man can rest in the face of the vast confusion of the



world-picture."

From all around the NGMA building, you could experience disparate empires of Gobhai's creative mind. Looking down the atrium from the topmost floor, for instance, his wooden cubes stood surrounded by paintings that were more low-relief



sculptures, moving beyond the two-dimensional surface with layer upon layer of canvas or paper. From another level, standing amid his life sketches and advertising work, you saw his sharp and dark geometrical works.

Alongside his work as a leading abstractionist, Gobhai never stopped making life studies. His nude figures, the curators write, are "electric with energy. They convey the body's pulses and torsion through a choreographic economy of strokes, hatchings and loops."

Deep commitments

One cannot write of Gobhai's work without acknowledging his deep socio-political commitments for a safe and inclusive society, be they concerns about street children or solidarity with environment activists and displaced local communities. In one of his 1990 posters for the Sadat Hashmi Memorial Trust just before the Mumbai riots, two figures are entwined in the foreground as a city burns. Accompanying these drawings, the curators found a note which proved prescient: "Don't wait for grief to bind us. Fight communalism now."

For the curators, the retrospective was not so much a project as a

homage to a departed friend. As they went about with their research, "events and anecdotes leaped up from the pages and connected with stories he had told us," said Adajania.

These included his rich journal entries. In one such, there is his delightful attention to both fleeting and lasting moments in nature. "Came to a thicket – misty, cool, with the giant deodars faintly visible around me... suddenly, a group of small lemon-coloured birds flew out of the mist... and alighted on my head and shoulders before they realised I was not an inanimate object. Sudden panic and they flew off into the cool mists."

Gobhai's pantheistic spirit quietly pulls one into the expanse of his swarthy and muted universe, and in proximity with nature. Life jumps out of these basic geometric trappings and encampments, capacious vestibules to earth itself. His work seems to say: from earth we have come, to earth we shall return. Not without light. Always a hint of sublime light.

The exhibition can be viewed at <https://www.gallerychemould.com>.

The reporter and writer is based in Grenoble.

Gobhai's fixation with abstraction had been an almost lifelong one, but he was never removed from the world of ideas. He read poets, aestheticians, philosophers, and discussed them with friends

• GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK



Urvashi Sarkar

The paediatrician's waiting room was unusually crowded.

Parents and grandparents sat on narrow benches, cradling infants. The sounds of coughing and sniffing, mostly from adults, rang through the room. Some wore face masks – cloth, synthetic or rayon, whatever they had been able to get their hands on. Others had given it a miss. A young man stepped out of the waiting room with his toddler son twice, to cough. It was late March and fears

of the novel coronavirus were spreading fast.

My own persistent cough convinced me that I needed to wear a mask – at least in the presence of my daughter, six weeks old, who had developed a mild temperature the previous night. It had passed, but was enough for her grandmother to decide that it warranted a visit to the paediatrician.

When we went inside, the paediatrician – an elderly woman – was also sniffing. She wore no mask. "I should be wearing a mask...but you know..." she trailed off.

Once I was satisfied that my

daughter's short bout of fever was not serious, I asked if I could breast-feed her, given my cough.

"You can," she replied. "But don't talk to her while you do."

Masked motherhood

Not talk to my newborn? Not sing lullabies, utter gibberish, or babble words of love? That didn't seem possible. And so, the mask stayed on my face while I sang to her, burped or changed her. Practising 'social distancing' or 'physical distancing' was anything but easy; the very idea of it went against my need to hold, cuddle and comfort my infant.

OFF-CENTRE

Bringing a child into the world in 2020, when parenting is paranoia and the shape of the future is hard to imagine

Raising Generation C

Days after our paediatrician visit, Prime Minister Narendra Modi delivered the shock announcement of a national lockdown from March 25 to prevent the spread of coronavirus. My first concern was whether it would be possible to take my daughter for her vaccination, which was due the very next day.

True to my fears, the paediatrician had shut her clinic without notice. When I called her, she told me that as an elderly woman, she could not risk exposure to the virus. My husband and I panicked. Our daughter's vaccination had already been delayed once because she was underweight. We dreaded delaying it any further. After a number of frantic calls, we found a doctor who was willing to meet us and administer the vaccine at a hospital.

Inside the hospital lobby, we were greeted with the sight of a policeman wearing a mask and a handful of patients, including a profusely coughing old man. My husband and I were instructed to sit separately. Hospital staff glanced at our heavily swaddled infant curiously. "Don't bring your baby to the hospital if you can help it. Hospitals are one of the most infectious places for children to be, especially now," one of them told me.

My daughter was born in a suburban Mumbai hospital in late January; her wails and cries marking her arrival in the world a few days before expected. She had just about made it to a normal birth weight. I began adjusting to the tiny little person in my life, tailoring my clock to hers, teach-

ing myself to interpret her cries and body language. As I struggled to breastfeed her and my daughter's weight dipped, I fretted and worked myself into a state of worry. When later, her cheeks fattened up and belly grew rounded, I laughed with relief. I was learning to be a mother.

Fearful whispers

By February, the first whispers of the novel coronavirus were being heard. As the murmurs about a seemingly remote illness grew into a din which could not be ignored, I willed myself to believe, like many others, that India would somehow escape this wild contagion.

But it was not to be. We could no longer ignore that the virus was going to hit India as badly, even as the government continued to be in denial, like most of us.

And as I watched my little girl wriggle and demand to be fed, oblivious to all else, a sense of terror descended on me. How was I going to protect her from this alien, wildly contagious infection for which there was no known cure?

I began to limit her interaction with the outside world, cancelling

As my daughter nears the three-month mark, I am aware that her name is yet to be registered in the city municipal records. She is yet to see the colour of the sky or feel fresh air on her face

her naming ceremony and requesting family and friends to defer their visits to meet my daughter. At home, I became a gatekeeper, interrogating family members who needed to step out. If motherhood meant being protective, Corona took my protectiveness to another level, possibly of paranoia.

When my husband and I had talked about whether we wanted to be parents, we had worried that the world was a deeply violent place with hate, discrimination and intolerance on the rise everywhere.

Cities were increasingly unlivable, social and economic security were the privilege of a few, while nuclear weapons and climate change – mediums of mass destruction – presented permanent threats to humanity.

A fraught future

Why had we decided to bring a child into the world? Was it because we were reasonably confident of providing for the needs of another human being? Had we succumbed to social expectations? Thick in the era of COVID-19, I am aware of another underlying reason: it was the idea that we could reasonably predict a certain life trajectory to our child, albeit with caveats.

But now, no previously made calculations about the future hold. We find ourselves at a loss of terms and language in which to imagine a future for her. Right now, we possess neither the understanding nor the ability to anticipate the shape of a post-corona world. If the socioeconomic and environmental inheritance of our generation stood on shaky ground, the world in which my daughter and her generation will grow up promises to be only more uncertain and fraught.

As my daughter nears the three-month mark, I am aware that her name is yet to be registered in the city's municipal records. She is yet to see the colour of the sky or feel the fresh breeze on her face. Instead, we are closeted at home, caring for a little human being who was born in a year of raging pandemic but whose frequent wails and unexpected smiles still govern our lives even under lockdown.

The writer is an independent journalist based in Mumbai.