



Tussle over VAR

Has introducing a Video Assistant Referee in football matches solved or increased on-field bickering?

N. SUDARSHAN

The story so far: The Video Assistant Referee (VAR), a system of using video replays to assist on-field decision-making in football, was formally approved by the International Football Association Board (IFAB), the body which defines the rules of the game, back in 2016. Since then, it has been used in competitions in Germany, Italy, Spain, Australia and the U.S. It was seen for the first time in a FIFA competition at the 2017 Confederations Cup before being deployed at the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia. It made its much-awaited debut in the UEFA Champions League this year, and true to form, was not without controversy. In the marquee quarterfinal clash between Manchester City and Tottenham Hotspur, two game-changing decisions were made after intervention by VAR. Fernando Llorente's winner for Tottenham was allowed to stand following a review but Raheem Sterling's goal, in the dying moments of the tie, which could have sent City through, was cancelled.

How does it work?

The use of VAR is limited to four situations – whether a goal should stand or be ruled out because of potential violations, penalties, straight red cards and cases of mistaken identity. A VAR team will communicate with the on-field referee when it spots a “clear” error. Alternatively, the referee may ask for a review himself and receive input to make an objective decision (like an offside call) or choose to watch the footage of the incident on a screen by the side of the pitch before arriving at a subjective decision (like judging a foul).

It has been a mixed bag for VAR, though recent evidence suggests it is moving in the right direction... in recent Champions League matches, the system succeeded in eliminating mistakes

Has it improved decision-making?

Thus far it has been a mixed bag for VAR, though recent evidence suggests that it is moving in the right direction. In the recent Champions League knock-out matches, the system did succeed in

eliminating the apparent mistakes. Marcus Rashford's dramatic stoppage-time penalty for Manchester United away at Paris Saint-Germain was awarded only after a VAR review. In Real Madrid's match against Ajax in Amsterdam, the referee disallowed Nicolas Tagliafico's goal for the hosts after determining that Dusan Tadic was offside.

Have the critics been won over?

Not entirely, though they seem to finally see the point in its introduction. Two of the biggest concerns when VAR was first adopted were that it would affect the flow of the game with its repeated interruptions and that it would eliminate the “human feeling” of the sport by undermining the referee's authority. The criticism regarding the tempo of play did have some merit. In an FA Cup tie between Tottenham and Rochdale in London in early 2018, there were as many as 10 reviews, each lasting nearly a minute, while fans and players waited for the decisions. To address such a scenario, UEFA, in the Champions League, has ensured that the replays which the referee will see through the VAR monitor will also be broadcast, so that both fans and players can be part of the experience. UEFA's Twitter account even explained why Ajax's goal against Madrid was ruled out. In the trade-off between the number of disruptions and the correct decision being made, it is easy to see to which side the balance will tilt.

But the argument that with VAR, the human feeling is lost isn't entirely tenable. VAR only serves as a recommendation tool for the referee, who must still always make the final decision. Unlike cricket, the technology isn't in the hands of the players. So it cannot be used as a tactical tool to slow the game down. In fact, players who goad the referee to use VAR will receive a yellow card. A good experienced referee will mostly follow the ‘minimum interference-maximum benefit’ doctrine, thus resulting in fewer stoppages. Another upshot is that VAR works on the ‘justice for all’ principle as against ‘justice for some’ like in cricket and tennis where technology is pretty useless once players exhaust the fixed number of reviews.

What lies ahead?

It has to be accepted that VAR isn't an exact science. A few decisions will remain debatable even after technological intervention. For example, in the Llorente goal discussed above, the ball appeared to brush his arm, but the referee made the subjective call that it was unintentional and did not hand undue advantage. There have also been instances where handballs have been decided with slow-motion replays, like in the last World Cup final between France and Croatia, which made the act of handling look worse than it actually was. All of this means the system needs constant refining. If it is also accompanied by a behavioural shift on the part of players, so that they do not dive for a penalty or appeal for a non-existent handball, it will be the best of both worlds.

Will closing LoC trade end terrorism?

With the government withdrawing a Kashmir-specific confidence building measure, are the chances for peace better or worse now?

SUHASINI HAIDAR

The story so far: On April 18, the government announced suspension of trade from midnight at two designated points along the Line of Control (LoC) in Jammu and Kashmir, citing concerns about “misuse” by elements from across the border to smuggle weapons, narcotics and fake currency. The Ministry of Home Affairs has said that cross-LoC trade will only be resumed after it puts in place stricter measures and systems. What does the suspension of trade mean for the two countries?

When did trade across LoC begin?

Trade across the LoC began in October 2008, as part of the Kashmir-specific confidence building measures (CBMs) that had been initiated by former Prime Ministers Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Dr. Manmohan Singh and former Pakistan President Gen. Pervez Musharraf.

The zero-duty trade of goods at the Uri trading point, along with the cross-LoC bus between Srinagar and Muzaffarabad, was meant to “soften boundaries”, allowing people of Jammu and Kashmir and Pakistan-occupied-Kashmir (PoK) to engage with one another more freely, and was soon followed by another trading point at Poonch connected to Rawalakot in PoK.

Why has trade been suspended?

Explaining the decision to suspend trade, sources in the Ministry of Home Affairs said the trade corridor was being misused by terrorists based in Pakistan, as a channel to smuggle arms, ammunition, narcotics, counterfeit currency and funds to support anti-India activities within Jammu and Kashmir. They also cited the illegal trade of goods from the United States, such as “California almonds”, while the cross-LoC system was meant exclusively for locally-sourced items. The government has alleged that 10 of the trading companies involved were run by Kashmiri militants who had crossed over to Pakistan. Officials referred to the National Investigation Agency's (NIA) ongoing case of terror-funding against the former president of the LoC Traders' Association Zahoor Ahmad Shah Watali, who is charged with funding terror groups. Finally, the Ministry of Home Affairs said the route was now being used to facilitate non-Kashmiri trade, and that after India cancelled Pakistan's MFN (most favoured nation) status in the wake of the Pulwama attack (February 2019), traders would likely misuse the route further to evade higher duties and taxes on goods.

How is cross-LoC trade different?

Business across the LoC is different because it works on a barter system between traders on both sides of Kashmir. So far, 21 goods has been approved for barter, which include handicrafts, saffron, mushrooms, fruit, cereals, honey, spices and carpets. Since the Line of Control is disputed between India and Pakistan and not recognised as an International Boundary (IB), the goods are referred to as ‘traded out’ and ‘traded-in’, instead of exports and imports. Also, unlike regular cross-border trade between India and Pakistan at the Wagah-Attari border, cross-LoC trade takes place only four days a week.

What will be the impact?

Since it began, experts estimate that more than ₹6,000 crore worth of trade has been conducted over the LoC points, and a total of 1.6 lakh job days created because of it. Starting from a mere three crore Pakistani rupees (PKR) worth of goods traded in and 2 crore Indian rupees

Line of business

The Indian government recently suspended trade across the Line of Control with Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. Here's a closer look at the cross-border trade, which has been suspended several times from 2015 to 2018

Ceasefire initiatives

NOVEMBER 2003
India and Pakistan declare ceasefire along the LoC and lay the ground for initiation of peace process

DECEMBER 2004
India and Pakistan finalise confidence-building measures

OCTOBER 2008

Intra-Kashmir trade or cross-LoC trade begins

2015-2018

Trade across the LoC suspended several times on charges of narcotics smuggling, weapons trade and border shelling

MARCH 2019

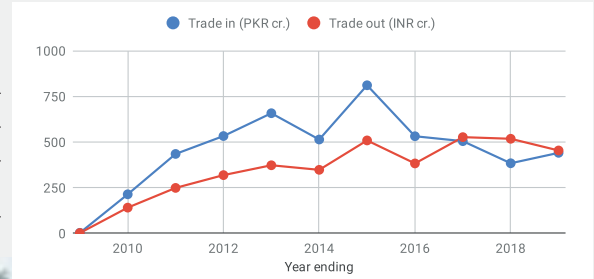
Suspended again due to repair work on Kaman post bridge

APRIL 2019

Government suspends LoC trade until better security mechanisms are put in place

Govt.'s reasons for suspension

- Use of channel for American products like California almonds
- Channelling funds for terror
- Drug trade
- Smuggling of arms and ammunition
- Funneling fake currency notes



Border disorder

- Cross-border trade has declined since 2015
- Due to the non-acceptance of LoC as an international border between India and Pakistan, exports and imports are called ‘traded-out’ and ‘traded-in’ goods, respectively

FACT FILE

- Cross-LoC trade was done by a ‘barter’ through the Uri-Muzaffarabad and the Poonch-Rawalakot routes on an agreed list of 21 items on both sides
- The trade took place four days a week from Tuesday to Friday
- The trucks must have either a J&K or an AJK registration number and should not weigh more than 9 tonnes

SOURCE: BUREAU OF RESEARCH ON INDUSTRY AND ECONOMIC FUNDAMENTALS (BRIEF)

Traders want to know why the government has been delaying procurement of ‘truck body scanners’ to ensure easy detection of contraband currency, drugs and arms

trade at both points at Uri and Poonch, of which about 110 of them trade actively. The affected traders says that with uncertainty over the reopening of the trade, their livelihoods will be in jeopardy, along with those of loaders, transporters, retailers who are part of their trade, as well as their families, totalling 40,000-50,000 people. Many political leaders in Jammu and Kashmir like Mehbooba Mufti and Omar Abdullah have also protested against the move, given that the government has also severely curtailed civilian traffic on the main Srinagar-Jammu highway. This they say will lead to small- and medium-scale traders being squeezed at both ends, and result in heavy losses particularly for the fruit business; the State is renowned for its apples and cherry crops. Like on other issues, Jammu leaders like former Minister Prof. Chaman Lal Gupta said the trade had been run on an ad hoc basis, without adequate security measures, and must not be restarted in the prevailing circumstances.

Is this the first time this has happened?

In the past decade, trading at the Uri-Muzaffarabad (Chakan da bagh-Salamabad) post has been stopped thrice because of cases of narcotic smuggling, and once when a shipment of arms was seized during checks in 2017. According to the authorities, numerous seizures have been made recently of pistols, grenades, spares and

ammunition, including one particularly large cache concealed in a consignment of bananas. The drug hauls have been sizeable too: in 2017, J&K police found 66.5 kg of suspected heroin worth ₹300 crore packed between boxes of garments in a truck that came from PoK, while five other seizures yielded nearly ₹1 crore in counterfeit notes. At the Poonch-Rawalakot point, trading has been suspended more frequently due to cross-LoC shelling, particularly between 2016 and 2018, when ceasefire violations rose sharply. Even so, the LoC trade was seen as one of the most resilient CBMs introduced more than a decade ago, as it had been able to continue despite major hostilities between New Delhi and Islamabad.

What lies in store?

Unlike cases in the past, the April suspension wasn't due to any one particular incident but a series of investigations over the misuse of the cross-LoC trade service. As a result, resumption of trade is likely to be a more long-drawn out process. Traders have protested against some of the allegations levelled by the MHA, especially the case of the California almonds, which, they insist have not been traded since 2016. They have also asked why the government has been dragging its feet on the procurement of “truck body scanners” (which would ensure easy detection of contraband currency, drugs and arms) and save much time for traders who have to undergo lengthy manual searches. The case for full body truck scanners has been pending since 2010, when the government first agreed to install them.

After many false starts, the MHA and J&K announced they would complete the installation of the scanners by end 2017, but still have made no headway in the process yet. The MHA has said that cross-LoC trade will only be resumed after it puts in place stricter measures and systems, but has not specified what they may entail. It seems unlikely that the suspension will be lifted soon, especially given the security requirements during the ongoing general election and with State polls due later this year.

How is a Supreme Court judge to be probed?

What is the mechanism in place to examine allegations of misconduct against members of the higher judiciary?

K. VENKATARAMANAN

The story so far: The allegations made by a former Supreme Court employee against the Chief Justice of India have brought the focus on the mechanism that exists to examine charges of misconduct against members of the higher judiciary. What exactly is the procedure involved and how was it devised?

How are allegations of misconduct against judges of High Courts and the Supreme Court dealt with?

Allegations of misconduct against serving judges of the superior judiciary, that is, the various high courts and the Supreme Court, are dealt with through an ‘in-house procedure’. Most complaints may pertain to judicial conduct, and may be at the behest of parties aggrieved by the outcome of their cases. However, some may concern the personal conduct of judges. Two purposes are served by the adoption of an internal procedure to deal with such complaints: when the allegations are examined by the judge's peers, outside agencies are kept out, and the independence of the judiciary is maintained. Second, awareness about the existence of a mechanism to examine such complaints will preserve the faith of the people in the impartiality and independence of the judicial process. The in-house procedure envisages that false and frivolous allegations can be rejected at an early stage and only those that are not baseless, and may require a deeper probe, are taken up for inquiry.

What is the origin of the ‘in-house’ procedure?

The idea of self-regulation as a method by which allegations of misconduct against judges can be approached came up first in a 1995 case concerning the then Chief Justice of the Bombay High Court. The Chief Justice resigned amidst an uproar caused by reports that he had been paid unjustifiably high amounts by a publisher. In a case relating to this allegation, the Supreme Court outlined the procedure that may be adopted in such situations. Until then, misconduct on the part of superior court judges was perceived as something that only Parliament could deal with through the procedure for removal of judges given in the Constitution. However, the court made a distinction between “impeachable behaviour” and bad behaviour. Later, in 1997, when Justice J.S. Verma took over as Chief Justice of India, he took up the issue. He circulated a document titled ‘Restatement of Values of Judicial Life’, a guide containing the essential elements of ideal behaviour for judges so that their independence and impartiality are beyond reproach. The Full Court passed a resolution that an ‘in-house procedure’ would be adopted for action against judges for acts of commission or omission that go



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

against accepted values of judicial life.

When was the in-house procedure adopted?

A five-judge committee was formed to devise the procedure. The report of the committee was adopted by a resolution of the Full Court on December 15, 1999. This procedure has been adhered to since then. However, the in-house procedure was not in the public domain for many years. In 2014, a Supreme Court Bench directed the court's registry to make the in-house procedure public for the sake of transparency. The court was then dealing with a serious allegation made by a woman district and sessions court judge that she faced harassment from a sitting judge of the Madhya Pradesh High Court.

How does the in-house procedure work? What are the various steps?

When a complaint is received against a High Court judge, the Chief Justice concerned has to examine it. If it is frivolous or concerns a judicial matter, she may just file the complaint and inform the Chief Justice of India. If she

considers it serious, she should get a response from the judge concerned. If she is satisfied with the response and feels no further action is required, she may close the matter and keep the CJ informed. However, if the CJ feels a deeper probe is needed, she should send the complaint as well as the judge's response to the CJ, with her own comments, for further action.

The procedure is the same if the CJ receives the complaint directly. The comments of the high court Chief Justice, the judge concerned and the complaint would be considered by the CJ. If a deeper probe is required, a three-member committee, comprising two Chief Justices from other High Courts and one High Court judge, has to be formed. The committee will hold a fact-finding inquiry at which the judge concerned would be entitled to appear. It is not a formal judicial proceeding and does not involve lawyers or examination or cross-examination of witnesses.

If the charge is against a high court Chief Justice, the same procedure of getting the person's response is followed by the CJ. If a deeper probe is deemed

necessary, a three-member committee comprising a Supreme Court judge and two Chief Justices of other High Courts will be formed. If the charge is against a Supreme Court judge, the committee would comprise three Supreme Court judges. There is no separate provision in the in-house

procedure to deal with complaints against the CJ.

What are the possible outcomes from the inquiry committee?

If it finds that there is substance in the allegations, the committee can either hold that the misconduct is serious enough to warrant removal from office, or that it is not so serious as to warrant removal. In the former case, it will call for initiation of proceedings to remove the judge. The judge concerned would be advised to resign or take voluntary retirement. If the judge is unwilling to quit, the Chief Justice of the High Court concerned would be advised to withdraw judicial work from him, and the President of India and the Prime Minister would be informed of the situation. Such an action may clear the way for Parliament to begin the political process for impeachment. In case, the committee finds substance in the allegation, but it is not grave enough to warrant removal from office, the judge concerned would be advised accordingly, and the committee's report will be placed on record.

SHANKAR GOPALKRISHNAN

The balloon-seller was a fixture each evening. He peddled his wares at the park and stopped by at houses. He walked around with a vertical prop, the tops of which bulged with balloons of all shapes, sizes and colours. The young ones hung around and followed him as if he were the Pied Piper! Such was his pull. Occasionally, parents yielded to a child's whim and bought, maybe, one balloon. Mostly they took a different route out of the park so the balloon-seller wouldn't tempt a child and cause tantrums.

It was not only balloons he sold. He carried bows and arrows gilded in gold, even a miniature 'television set'. The TV had a little knob. Twirl it, and your favourite movie stars appeared on screen — now Amitabh Bachchan, now Rajesh Khanna, now Hema Malini. You get it?

The gadget was delicate. It worked a few times all right. But if the child gave a little more pressure to the knob, it cracked. You were now stuck with a non-functional TV which wouldn't scroll anymore. Parents threw a fit for wasting money on the silly purchase. But no worries! You sliced the TV's belly, pulled out the picture-scroll and saw the stars, all at once.

Another favourite was the "magic-window" contraption — a red-coloured paper with a glass at the centre. Depending on how you folded the paper — once, twice or three times — a different picture appeared on the glass. It was sheer magic, enough to keep the child busy for at least that evening.

Sometimes, a different balloon-seller came by, with a gas cylinder in tow. From the cylinder hung balloons, some taut and some straight. They were 'gas' (helium) balloons. But he didn't appear to have much success. Parents kept their children away as if he were a child-snatcher. Rumours were rife that the gas balloons had so



ILLUSTRATION: DEEPAK HARICHANDAN

Where are the street charmers gone?

They have become extinct, rendered irrelevant with the passage of time, and it was inevitable

much 'power' that one child actually got lifted and carried away into the clouds.

It was not easy to get cotton-candy. We looked for him each day during summer holidays. It was a delight when the candy-floss wallah came to the neighbourhood. He carried a huge glass cube. Neatly piled inside the cube were candy-floss balls — pink and fluffy. No, you never got a full candy-floss ball. The man was a sculptor with magic in his fingers. He would pull out an umbrella mould and press the cotton-candy against it. What came out was a cotton-candy umbrella. He added a crown, a stick to prop up the umbrella, and with a flourish he handed it over to the child. If you paid a rupee more, he made a cotton-candy bird, complete with beak and crown, feathers and tail.

His creations were limited: it was either the umbrella or the bird. For a child, it meant the world as it dug into the cotton-candy with relish and had the entire face, cheeks, jaws and even ears, smeared a deep pink.

The quiet of lazy, summer afternoons was broken with a *twang*. The sound was unmistakable. It went *twang-twang* continuously. Part the curtains and you saw a strange man carrying a weapon that looked like an oversized AK-47. The rest of the afternoon had a familiar ring. Out of every home emerged old bedding rolls that had become limp and thin since the cotton wasn't fluffy anymore. The AK-47 fluffed up the cotton and gave the bedding rolls a new lease of life! But the whole neighbourhood was filled with a haze, wisps of cotton

flying all over, an odious smell with it. Entertainment was often on the footpath. It came looking for you when you lost interest in life. One afternoon the magician took over the entire footpath. It was not the good old Indian rope trick, but something similar. He had a boy step into a basket, and in full public view, had him disappear into thin air. The trick took time. The magician was a master storyteller, and stretched his trick for a whole hour. It served multiple purposes — there was a gradual build-up to the excitement and the eventual denouement. He waited till the audience swelled.

Once you were a spectator, you were simply hooked. You had to wait till the boy disappeared and miraculously re-appeared to collect the fee from a dumb-found-

ed audience! It was an afternoon well spent; there was anyway nothing better to do.

Where have all those people gone? Where is the knife-sharpener wallah with his cycle-wheel that let off sparks, where is that bhaji wallah who knocked each door with his grocery basket? Where is that monkey-man who entertained us with his simians? Where is the cow that answered all our questions about the future with a nod of its head, so we knew exactly how the future is going to pan out? Where is that man with his cow and created a racket with that drum, which went *boom-boom*?

Where is that fiddle-wallah who sold coconut-shell fiddles which produced music in his hands? And the moment he transferred it to us, it croaked like a crow? Where is that man who sat

by the roadside working on his toothpick, whose only occupation was to give elaborate directions to anyone who lost his way? "Somnathapura? Turn *rightu...* turn *leftu...* turn *rightu...* *adhey!*" He lost his job to Google Maps, of all things.

They've become extinct, rendered irrelevant with the passage of time? It was inevitable. But they live on in our memories of childhood.

I can feel it now, getting under the hood of the bioscope wallah, the black cloth draped over my head. As I strain my eyes and get used to the darkness, I can see each character slowly coming to life. It is a whole new world, fairy-tale-like and beautiful, with song and dance and revelry. I am there. Don't bring me back.

shankar.ccpp@gmail.com

Time as money

TUSHAR DAS PATTANAYAK

I was wondering, what had time been comparable to money. One could save time by reducing spending. One could save today and use it tomorrow.

Where can I save my time? Answer: In a Time Saving Account or Time Current Account. There would be Time Banks under the ambit of a Time Bank of India (TBI). I could invest time in fixed deposits and recurring deposits to reap the benefits of compounding in a long-term scenario. I could create an FD of my casual leave and earned leave. I could invest my time in mutual funds, in equities to hedge against time-inflation (which happens when the demand for time increases and supply decreases). There would be a Bombay Time Exchange: people could trade in Time through the exchange. There would be Time Insurance and Time Bonds. There would be Time Credit Cards. People could take a loan from time banks. For example, take a 20-hour short-term loan for examinations.

Here, one question arises. How can we save time? The regulator, TBI, would play a decisive role in this. For every work the TBI could specify a certain time limit.

If you finish it within that time, you save. If you exceed the limit, that much of time will be debited from your time saving account. The tracking could be done through a DNA-linked central server of the TBI. The watches would be different for each person depending on the saving, which would be linked to the current time account. Students who have saved more time in the bank could withdraw it and use it to prepare for examinations, for instance.

Actually, time is way more safe and secure than money as money can be taken away at gunpoint; however, nobody can take away your time. The situation would be reversed. Gangsters would rob your money only to convert it into time. Time would be more precious than gold.

The downside is that to save on time, people would travel faster, ignoring the safe speed limit, which would raise accident rates. But this can be regulated with some penalty of time. Moreover, everyone would have spent time in an economical and efficient way. This is TimEconomics. Though it is absurd, I wish it would come true one day.

tushar.nitrk@gmail.com

If I save two hours of day-time today, I could use it in the evening to delay the sunset for me. Wouldn't that be beautiful? Then winters would be warmer for time-savers. Summers would be darker and cooler for newly wed couples as for them dark is beautiful. They could achieve this by saving more night time and using it to delay the sunrise. The experience of day, night, the seasons and the weather would be different for everybody depending on their time-saving potential.

People wouldn't save photos and videos; instead they would let the time duration be saved. They could relive moments by unlocking the time duration. The concept of a time machine would become real. People would gift time in functions. People would wish for more time in their life. The person who has more time would be richer. There could be a mechanism for Time-Rupee conversion on the lines of inter-currency conversion. Everyone could get equal opportunity to save time and become richer.

People wouldn't save photos and videos; instead they would let the time duration be saved. They could relive moments by unlocking the time duration. The concept of a time machine would become real. People would gift time in functions. People would wish for more time in their life. The person who has more time would be richer. There could be a mechanism for Time-Rupee conversion on the lines of inter-currency conversion. Everyone could get equal opportunity to save time and become richer.

Actually, time is way more safe and secure than money as money can be taken away at gunpoint; however, nobody can take away your time. The situation would be reversed. Gangsters would rob your money only to convert it into time. Time would be more precious than gold.

The downside is that to save on time, people would travel faster, ignoring the safe speed limit, which would raise accident rates. But this can be regulated with some penalty of time. Moreover, everyone would have spent time in an economical and efficient way. This is TimEconomics. Though it is absurd, I wish it would come true one day.

tushar.nitrk@gmail.com

Our Lady of the Flames

The Notre-Dame cathedral stood calm, though shorn of spire and roof

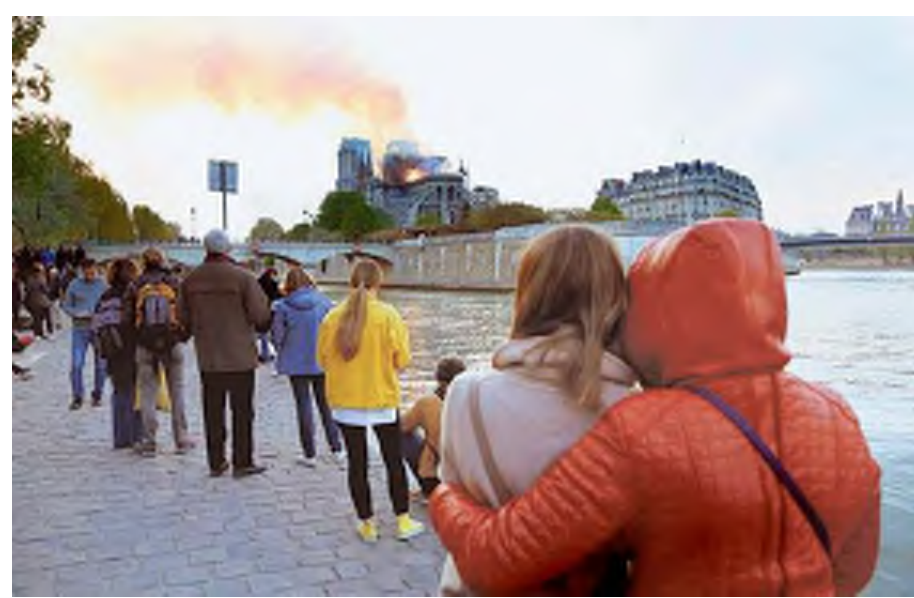
NIRUPAMA NITYANANDAN

In 1963, the year I was born, the first major restoration of the Notre-Dame cathedral began in Paris, to repair significant damage caused in 1944 during the Second World War.

In 1961 my father, who was on a training scholarship in Paris, bought for my brother, Miroslav Sasek's wonderfully illustrated and large children's book, titled *This is Paris*. It had simple line drawings, pictures that looked as if they had been torn out of a child's notebook, ragged edges and all. There were shiny baguettes, smart concierges, supercilious waiters, flower girls, sidewalk cafés, gendarmes in batwing capes and boxy cars, many cats... and all the monuments of the great city.

I have gazed long and curious at the mysterious rosettes, learnt the words "stained glass" and "Notter Dahme". And I have wriggled in fear at the shadow of the Hunchback, all sitting on my parents' bed in Chennai.

That book fell apart eventually, thumbed through, scribbled on, perused hungrily, fed by my father's unabated Francophilia — which led eventually to my own love affair with that city.



So when Notre-Dame de Paris caught fire, on the thirty-second anniversary of the day my own scholarship began, I felt the same hollowness in my stomach as I had in 1985 when the Moore Market in Madras went up in flames.

On that occasion, I do not remember being able to do much else other than share my parents' shocked laments. There was no more haring off across town to watch the old stalls and bookshops burn, confront the irreparable, say goodbye... But this day, one look exchanged with a haggard husband and out we went, into the Metro, along the banks of the river, on to the bridges with our fellows, into the cool spring night, ominously warm and dry, to the very hypocentre of the catastrophe.

At least a kilometre away, we get the first whiff of cinders.

Two bridges away from the island where Notre-Dame stands, people crowd the balustrades, huddle in strange intimacy, the traffic is blocked off. Hands stretch up, necks craning in the now-all-too-familiar gesture of the smartphone or iPad, capturing what we perhaps do not trust to living neu-

rones anymore. And over the silent river she has dominated, for 'it' is a 'she', incarnated splendidly in her gender-specific tongue, the cathedral's belly spurts flames, a truly awful sight.

The six or seven fire hoses that we can see, spurting steadily for the last three hours, seem pathetically inadequate as derisory as school-kids in a contest.

We are silent, dense, tense together, the prospect of the two bell towers collapsing is vertiginous. Old and young of Paris, tourists,

She probably held fast because of all the love she has received

people like us who have wandered in from far away, neighbouring inhabitants on their balconies, we are all attentive as visitors in a hospital, waiting with bated breath for the verdict.

All at once a large group starts singing quietly, *Ave Maria*.

An hour later as we circumbulate, yes, the word prakdshanam pops into my mind, we find ourselves nearer the facade. On the opposite bank is the oldest surviving church in Paris, Saint-Julien-le-Pauvre.

A young man is leading an impromptu prayer meeting, people kneel, sit on the paving stones, pray, sing or, like me, climb up onto the railings to watch and listen.

Notre-Dame's smaller sister is huddled under an old, old tree. I wonder what she thinks about her giant sibling across the water in flames. They have looked across at each other for 800 years. The thought makes me dizzy and I climb down to continue our peregrination.

The cathedral hunkers down like an old beast, drawing her compact, ancient stones together, in immense patience, receiving the care that the extraordinarily courageous firefighters give her, while we watch. Loud spurts of spontaneous applause and hurrahs break the air.

It is midnight. The flames have distinctly diminished, although bright orange sparks flower up into the sky around the bell towers. We can feel the collective tension breaking, a kind of sigh thrums through this April night — people start splitting away in groups to go home. She may be safe, she is safe.

The director of the theatre where I work said, "She probably held fast because of all the love she has received."

Whatever our stories, we invent our interior cartographies, we need paths that our memories follow, landmarks that lead, symbols that reassure. And places of communion divine or otherwise. Where history reaches down a long finger and taps you on the nose, to tell me that — Besant Nagar or Paris? Same-same.

The next morning I walked along the quay, now freed from some of the police barriers. She was calm, shorn of spire and roof. The Paris sky drizzled its spring tears. I wished it had sent a storm the previous night.

niruntya63@gmail.com

Around the daily morning walk

Some images at daybreak, and certain subtle messages for the walker

HARI ARAYAMMAKUL

For me, the early morning walk has been an unbroken routine for decades. The daybreak schedule has certainly helped me maintain a reasonable body weight, but what has kept me going for such a long time is not just my fitness goals. The refreshing kaleidoscope of life that the first light of the day opens up before me provides much-needed self-sustaining energy to my regimen. The smile or the hand wave I exchange with fellow-walkers gives an optimistic and happy start to the day.

This is the time of the day when most of us are relaxed and calm before the day's mad rush begins, and naturally the smiles and gestures are sincere and genuine.

The first thing I make sure before starting my daily wanderings is that the spectacles are in its right place

The first light of the day provides the much-needed self-sustaining energy

on my face so I get a clearer view of the smiles and the glow in their eyes.

I often come across a vehicle that transports children to a coaching institute from their hostel. The children are taken for their early morning coaching classes before the regular school hours begin. Such boarding institutions with strict discipline, tight schedules and fees running into lakhs of rupees have come up in different parts. The institutes and the schools work in tandem and support each other with the boarding facilities.

What makes these coaching institutes attractive to the parents is their high success rate in entrance tests for the professional course streams. I usually run across the vehicle at a particular junction whenever I take that route for my stroll. As the bus slows down, I look at the children and see emptiness in their eyes. The energy that is typical of children is missing. They, in their uniform, do not talk to each other but sit silently, glued to themselves.

Their indifference and the forlorn look unsettle me, for we have ourselves been preparing to admit our

child in Class 10 in a more prominent institute away from our home next year. The lifeless faces of the children in the bus have kept haunting me, and often I have discussed the matter with my wife to find a solution to the riddle.

But the Catch-22 situation continues. "If you want to give him a happy childhood and good memories for the future, let him continue in the present neighbourhood school. But if you wish for an 'assured' successful career, send him to the institute for a couple of years."

We spoke to our friends whose children were already in the institute. Some said empathetically, "Yes, it is hard on the children, but there is no choice." A doctor couple, whose daughter is in the institution, preparing herself to follow her family profession in medicine, was more forthcoming. "You can't allow your child to relax when others are grinding themselves away. It is not enough that your child is good; he has to be the best in the lot to be up there. You have to push them to succeed. So no room for sentiments; go and get a seat booked in advance."

Lost in my thoughts and missing the dewy surroundings of the walking trail for a while, on my return track I reached the shrinking small wetland near my house. Far in the east, the summer sun is slowly starting its fiery journey for the day. The white herons have already made a huddle around the last pool of water in the drying field. Those early birds sit silently, close to each other, wings closed, head slightly pushing down, waiting for the odd fish to appear under their beaks.

They never look beyond the little circle around them, and what surprised me was the patience they show in spite of crowding around the small pool, knowing fully that they will have to fly away before the rising sun's wrath fell on them. They seem certain there is enough prey in the pool. Their composure, not nervousness or anxiety, helps them carry the day.

I can't stop imagining that this daybreak image has a subtle message for me.

harichitrakootam@yahoo.com



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



Sun, sea, sand and straight flushes

The floating casinos of Goa are giving the land of beaches and susegad a whole new spin
SWAROOP DEV

Those elusive dreams

For a boy, the easy chair was pure magic; it could transform mundane existence to a life of peace
SUNDARESAN SIVARAMAN

Some secrets of management

There are many ways of successfully currying favour at the workplace
D. HANUMANTHA RAO

Contributions to this page may be emailed to openpage@thehindu.co.in to a length of up to 700 words. Please provide the postal address and a brief description of the writer. An email id that is provided could be considered for publication. Certify in writing that it is original material; *The Hindu* views plagiarism as a serious issue. Also confirm that the submission is exclusive to this page. Taking into account the volume of material being received, we regret our inability to acknowledge receipt, or to entertain telephonic or other queries on the status of a submission. If a submission is not published within eight weeks, consider it to be out of the reckoning — in most cases owing to dearth of space. The publication of an article is not to be seen as *The Hindu* endorsing the viewpoint in any way.