

Automation
Anywhere: Betting
← Big on Bots

p.04



Rosé by Any Other
Colour Tastes as Delish

p.21

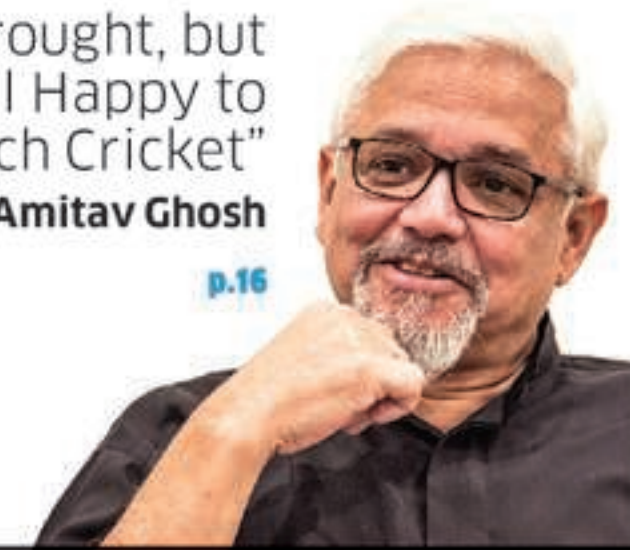
"There is a Drought, but
People are Still Happy to
Watch Cricket"

Amitav Ghosh

p.16

Do Indian Companies Need
a Walled Garden?

p.08



THE ECONOMIC TIMES

magazine

www.economicstimes.com | Hyderabad | 24 pages | ₹10

June 16-22, 2019



WAR OF THE WEATHERVANES

As extreme weather events become more common, demand for better weather forecasting is disrupting a once staid space

p.06-07



PM: \$5 Trillion Economy is Challenging but Achievable

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has sought the cooperation of states in helping India achieve the target of becoming a \$5 trillion economy. "The goal to make India a \$5 trillion economy by 2024 is challenging, but can surely be achieved," Modi said, adding states should recognise their core competence, and work towards raising gross domestic product (GDP) targets right from the district level.

PM Modi made these comments while addressing the NITI Aayog's fifth governing council meet here on Saturday. The meeting was attended by chief ministers of all states, except West Bengal's Mamata Banerjee and Telangana's K Chandrashekhar Rao, and lieutenant governors of Union Territories. Top ministers of the Modi cabinet and the top officials of the NITI Aayog attended the event.

Pointing out that the export sector was an important element in the progress of developing countries, Modi said the Centre and the states should work towards growing exports to increase the per capita income. "There is immense untapped export potential in several states, including the Northeastern states. A thrust on export promotion at the state level will provide a boost to both income and employment," he said.

Modi said the need for proper implementation of decisions and schemes was vital as the country was moving towards a governance system characterised by performance, transparency and delivery. He stressed upon the need for structural reforms in agriculture to boost private investment, strengthen logistics and provide ample market support to farmers.

According to a statement, the PM said the food processing sector should grow at a faster pace to benefit farmers. He also called for effective steps to tackle drought.

Having won a majority in the recent general elections, Modi said it was now time for everyone to



Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the NITI Aayog meeting in New Delhi on Saturday

work for the development of India. PM said there was a need for a collective fight against poverty, unemployment, drought, flood, pollution, corruption and violence, among others. "Everyone at this platform has a common goal of achieving a New India by 2022," he said.

Outlining his vision for empowerment and ease of living for each and every India, PM Modi stressed the focus should be on collective responsibility for achieving short-term and long-term goals.

Referring to the importance of water, Modi urged states to also integrate their efforts towards water conservation and management.

Outlining the need to achieve the targets set for the health sector by 2022, including eliminating of tuberculosis by 2025, he urged states that had not implemented PMJAY under Ayushman Bharat to come onboard the scheme at the earliest.

—Our Bureau/New Delhi

MHA Turns Up Heat on Bengal Govt

New Delhi/Kolkata: The Centre has sought a report from the West Bengal government on the growing incidents of political violence in the state and has also issued an advisory that the "unabated violence" over the years was a matter of deep concern. The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) said political violence in the state has claimed 160 lives in the past four years. It also issued another advisory regarding the ongoing strike by doctors in the state and sought a report on the matter urgently. A week ago, the MHA had issued a similar advisory on deteriorating law and order situation in the state.

West Bengal Governor Keshari Nath Tripathi Satur-

day wrote to Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee advising her to take immediate steps to provide security to doctors and find out a solution to the impasse. Banerjee later said that she has spoken to the governor and appraised him about the steps taken by the state government to resolve the impasse in hospitals. She also appealed to the agitating junior doctors in state-run hospitals to end their strike and normalise medical services. The government was ready to take all necessary measures to ensure the doctors' security and no administrative action would be initiated against the medicos, she added.

—Our Bureau & Agencies

Hong Kong Halts Controversial Extradition Bill

Hong Kong: Hong Kong's embattled leader on Saturday suspended a hugely divisive bill that would allow extraditions to China, but protesters vowed to press ahead with a mass Sunday rally.

The international finance hub was rocked by political violence as tens of thousands of protesters were dispersed by riot police firing tear gas and rubber bullets. Those clashes came three days after chief executive Carrie Lam refused to be budged by a record-breaking rally in which organisers said more than a million people marched



Carrie Lam

through the streets calling for the Beijing-backed bill to be scrapped. After days of mounting pressure, Lam Saturday announced work on the bill would be halted. She stopped short of saying it was permanently scrapped. China's government said on Saturday it supported the decision of Hong Kong's leader.

But opponents were unmoved and said they would go ahead with a march on Sunday afternoon, hoping another huge turnout will pile more pressure on the city's beleaguered leader.

Rel Infra Reports Biggest Ever Loss; Auditors Raise Concern Over Business

Mumbai: Anil Ambani-led Reliance Infrastructure (RInfra) has reported a net loss of ₹3,301 crore in the fourth quarter of 2018-19, its biggest ever, as the company undertook impairment and write-offs of over ₹8,500 crore. The auditors have raised questions about the company's ability to continue in business. RInfra set-off exceptional losses against ₹6,616 crore from

sufficient and appropriate audit evidence about the relationship of these companies with RInfra, or the reason behind these transactions, and so they can't assess the implication. The company also booked losses on its investments in Reliance Power, where it owns 33.1%, after huge impairments and write-offs in the March quarter. The exceptional loss on Reliance



Power also included loss on sale of shares of Reliance Power pursuant to invocation of pledge of ₹1,261 crore. The auditors said the depreciation method adopted by Reliance Power was not in line with ac-

counting standards.

counting standards. Given that the group, its associates and joint ventures incurred a net loss of ₹2,426.82 crore during the year ended March 2019, and due to other factors, the auditors said there was "material uncertainty" that cast "significant doubt" on the group's ability to continue as a going concern.

counting standards. Given that the group, its associates and joint ventures incurred a net loss of ₹2,426.82 crore during the year ended March 2019, and due to other factors, the auditors said there was "material uncertainty" that cast "significant doubt" on the group's ability to continue as a going concern.

RInfra said its standalone debt was down by nearly 70% to ₹5,960 crore in March 2019 from ₹19,143 crore in March 2018. "The company aims to be zero debt in the next financial year or earlier based on liquidity events," it added.

RInfra said its standalone debt was down by nearly 70% to ₹5,960 crore in March 2019 from ₹19,143 crore in March 2018. "The company aims to be zero debt in the next financial year or earlier based on liquidity events," it added.

RInfra said its standalone debt was down by nearly 70% to ₹5,960 crore in March 2019 from ₹19,143 crore in March 2018. "The company aims to be zero debt in the next financial year or earlier based on liquidity events," it added.

—Our Bureau

Xiaomi Partner Sets Up Plant in Greater Noida, to Invest \$200 mn

New Delhi: Xiaomi's component supplier Holitech Technology said it has set up its first component manufacturing plant in Greater Noida and would invest around \$200 million over three years in India. Holitech, which provides components to the world's top companies, excluding Apple, had previously announced an agreement with the Andhra Pradesh government to set up a plant in Tirupati. Those talks didn't fructify. The UP government had extended several incentives to set up the plants under the state's electronics manufacturing policy, Holitech said. The new plant would start production in the third quarter of 2019 and would generate 6,000 jobs in three years. The facility with 4 factories and spread across 25,000 sqm would make compact camera modules, capacitive touch screen modules, thin film transistors, flexible printed circuits and fingerprint modules.

—Our Bureau

By-polls to 6 RS seats on July 5

New Delhi: The Election Commission Saturday announced bypolls to six Rajya Sabha seats on July 5, including the one vacated by BJP chief Amit Shah following his election to the Lok Sabha. Notifications will be issued on June 18 and elections and counting of votes will be held on July 5. In a statement, the commission clarified that the vacancies for bypolls to all Houses, including the Rajya Sabha, are considered "separate vacancies" and separate notifications are issued and separate polls are held, though the schedule can be the same. It cited two HC rulings that had supported the system of holding separate bypolls in the same state.

—PTI

GROWING GULF

More than oil prices, the real concern in the Middle East is when Iran will walk away from its own nuclear commitments



Fire and smoke billowing from Norwegian-owned Front Altair tanker said to have been attacked in the waters of the Gulf of Oman

:: Indrani Bagchi

Well, Iran did do it," US President Donald Trump told Fox News. "And you know they did it because you saw the boat."

After a Japanese and a Norwegian tanker were attacked in the Gulf of Oman on Thursday, the spectre of a world war, an oil shock or, at the very least, yet another Middle East conflict between the US and Iran has kept governments, oil markets and insurance companies on the edge. Coming on the heels of US sanctions on Iran, Saudi Arabia-Houthi misadventures in Yemen, Saudi-Qatar split and the unending war in Syria, many believe the tanker blow-up has the potential of being a Franz Ferdinand-Gavrilo Princip moment.

The US is trying to establish – with grainy videos – that Iran, in an act of deliberate sabotage, took limpet mines and stuck them to the sides of two tankers, which frankly, isn't as simple as it looks.

Iran has rubbished the US claim. Meanwhile, to complicate matters, the owner of the Japanese tanker that was hit believes his vessel was attacked by things other than mines or torpedoes. Media reports quoted Yutaka Katada, president of the Kokuka Sangyo shipping firm that owns one of the targeted tankers, telling reporters Friday: "The crew are saying it was hit with a flying object. They say something came flying toward them, then there was an explosion, then there was a hole in the

vessel. Then some crew witnessed a second shot."

Oil prices predictably spiked, as markets turned jittery on fears of a Middle East conflagration that would actually be far worse than the US-China trade war. Iran is the obvious suspect here – in May, several vessels were attacked off Fujairah, Saudi Arabia's East-West pipeline was hit and a Katyusha rocket landed in the Green Zone in Baghdad, all of which were apparently warning shots by Iran against the "maximum pressure" by the US.

India and Japan now have an opportunity together to play a larger role in averting what could become a global disaster

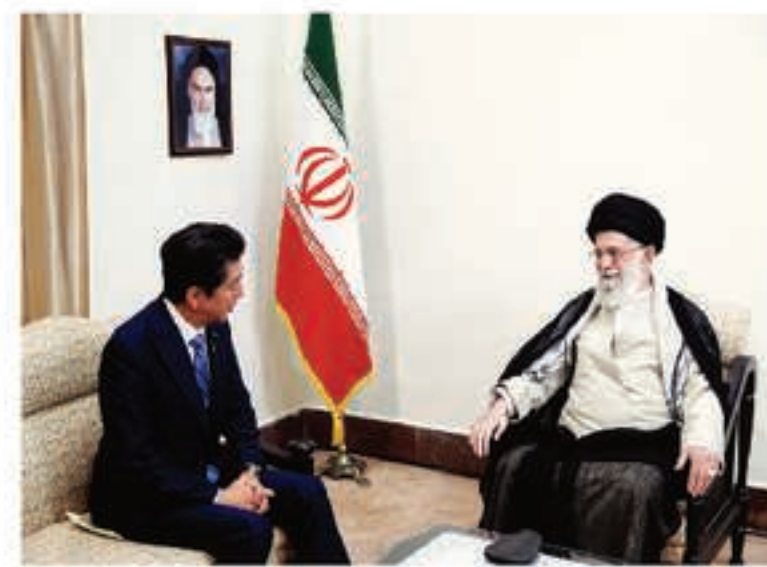
Thursday's attack came when Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was in Tehran, hoping to bring the Iranian leadership around to restart nuclear negotiations with the US. Iranian media showed Abe meeting Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei with an envelope in his hand. Khamenei tweeted, "We have no doubt in @abeshinzo's goodwill and seriousness; but regarding what you mentioned from U.S. president, I don't consider Trump as a person deserving to exchange messages with; I have no response for him & will not answer him." It has been interpreted as a snub to a letter by Trump to restart talks with Iran.

"They've been told in very strong terms we want to get them back to the table," Trump said. He has now said it a couple of times that he wants to restart talks with Iran. But despite the economic pressure, the Iranian leadership has only hardened its position. Trump's walk-back from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action

(JCPOA) or the Iran nuclear deal has only strengthened the positions of the hardliners in Tehran. They have lived with decades of US squeeze, wars and sanctions. They are not likely to bend that easily. In fact, the worry for the US is how Iran can easily turn the tables on them.

In the immediate and medium term, oil prices are not really what we should be worrying about. Yes, insurance charges may increase due to the uncertainty in the Gulf or transport costs could rise. But according to the IEA, global supply of oil will far outstrip demand in 2019-20. In its Friday report, it said demand would rise to 1.4 million barrels in 2020, but supply would be a whopping 2.3 million barrels a day, spurred by extra production in the US, Brazil, Norway and Canada. It was telling that the spike in prices after Thursday's attack was less than the drop in prices in the days prior.

The real concern is when Iran walks away



Shinzo Abe with Ayatollah Khamenei

from its own nuclear commitments. On May 8, Hassan Rouhani said Iran would no longer send out enriched uranium and heavy water beyond 300 kg, as had been agreed in the JCPOA. From July 7, Iran is expected to walk back from two more commitments – they will enrich uranium beyond the stipulated 3.7%, and restart repair and modernisation of the Arak heavy water reactor. That would truly set the cat among the pigeons.

The dangers are becoming apparent. Last week the Israeli foreign ministry tweeted that more sanctions should be imposed on Iran to prevent it from "violating parts of the JCPOA"! Israel was one of the cheerleaders for the US's walking away from the JCPOA in the first place.

Trump has said he wants to get out of Middle Eastern wars and concentrate on the bigger strategic challenge, China. The possibility of accidents in the sensitive Straits of Hormuz and an unintended escalation are now far greater than before, putting at risk the US's Indo-Pacific strategy.

India, like Japan and South Korea is caught between two undesirables. India has stopped importing oil from Iran (and Venezuela). Although Chabahar has been ring-fenced from US sanctions, banking curbs have made it impossible to get any work going there. Iran is vital to India for Afghanistan, connectivity, energy and regional balance.

India and Japan now have an opportunity together to play a larger role in averting what could become a global disaster. ■

indrani.bagchi@timesgroup.com

ELITE GROOMS

Delhi based Businessman, 30, 5ft 10", Rajput. Masters in Electrical Engineering from US. Father is a well known Businessman. Family is financially well off. Looking for compatible and well educated match in India/Abroad. Contact: 9310065725

Delhi based Doctor, 30, 5ft 8", Arora. MS. Father is an Industrialist. Family is financially well off. Looking for a likeminded and well educated match in India. Contact: 7428751516

Mumbai based Business Analyst, 33, 5ft 10", Agarwal. Father is a retired Lawyer. Family is financially well off. Looking for a likeminded and well educated match from Hindu community in any metro city of India. Contact: 7824805304

USA based Businessman, 30, 5ft 10", Kannada/Brahmin. Lives in USA. Father is a Freelance Consultant. Family is financially well off. Looking for a compatible and well educated match from a similar community in India. Contact: 7824805304

New Zealand based Management Professional, 36, 5ft 11", Nair. MBA. Father is a well known Chartered Accountant. Family is financially well off. Looking for a compatible and well educated match. Contact: 9388083797

Bangalore based Consultant, 28, 6ft 2" Brahmin Niyogi. MS from a reputed Institute. Father is the Chairman of multiple companies and Mother is an Entrepreneur. Looking for a likeminded and well educated match. Contact: 9341813211

ELITE BRIDES

Ujjain based Management Professional, 26, 5ft 6", Agarwal. Post Graduate in Jain/Shwetambar. M.Sc in Economics. Father is a well known Industrialist and is financially well off with a net worth of several Crores. Looking for a likeminded and well educated match in India/Abroad. Contact: 9324433072

Mumbai based Entrepreneur, 27, 5ft 3", Marwari/Maheshwari. Masters in Architecture. Father is a Joint Commissioner of Police. Looking for a likeminded and well educated match. Contact: 8690466155

Amsterdam based Consultant, 27, 5ft 5", Rajput/Sikarwar. Father is a Businessman. Family is financially well off with a good net worth. Looking for a compatible and well educated match from any community in Europe/USA. Contact: 8690466155

Kolkata based Doctor, 32, 5ft 2", Sunni. MBBS/DNB. Father is retired. Looking for a likeminded and well educated match in India/Abroad. Contact: 9883624342

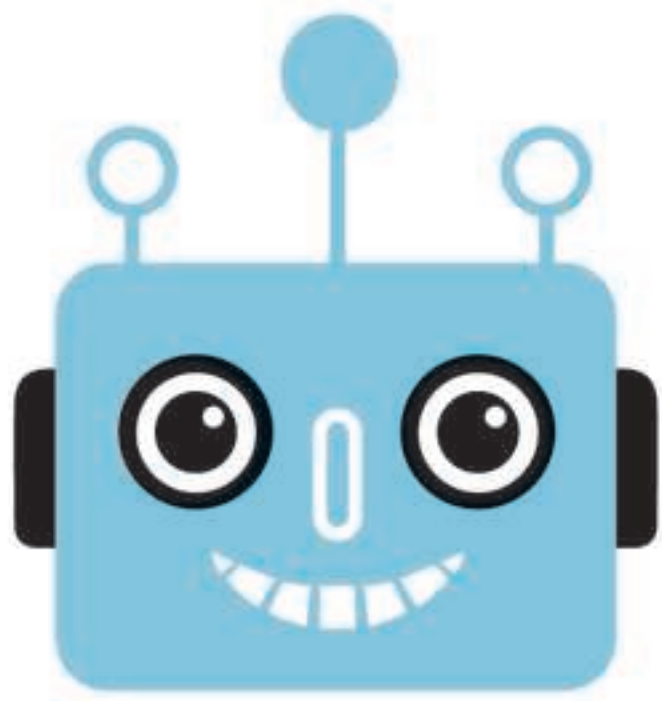
Hyderabad based Software Engineer, 24, 5ft 2", Arya Vysya. Graduate from a premier Institute. Father is an Entrepreneur and is financially well off. Looking for a compatible Doctor match in India/USA. Contact: 9346691572

Elite Matrimony
From BharatMatrimony

Exclusive matchmaking service for the elite

- Over 1 lakh Exclusive Elite Profiles
- Experienced Relationship Managers
- Confidential Service
- High Success Rate

Call us: 1800 200 4433



Bot, Off the Shelf

A Silicon Valley-based tech company with roots in India is simplifying business processes in offices by mimicking human behaviour. Its star-studded investor list and valuation show it is on the right path

:: Malini Goyal

Automation Anywhere (AA) doesn't easily ring a bell. In India's startup world, where entrepreneurs turn superstars overnight, the founders of AA – a robotic process automation (RPA) firm that makes software bots to automate business processes – aren't household names. Yet, the 15-year-old company, started by four Indians with roots in Vadodara, has been grabbing headlines and raking in profits with robotic consistency.

The California-headquartered AA is counted among the hottest and fastest-growing companies leading the RPA wave globally. It has not just grown rapidly – in triple digits – but has recorded profits for the last seven years-plus. Not surprisingly, investors have lined up with top dollar.

Last year, AA's Series A fundraising of \$550 million from bulge-bracket investors counted among the top 10 venture rounds in the US. Bootstrapped until then, the company's valuation has been surging. In July, it raised \$250 million from investors such as New Enterprise Associates and Goldman Sachs, valuing it at \$1.8 billion. In November, it landed another \$300 million from SoftBank Vision Fund at a valuation of \$2.8 billion. "We had an amazing story to tell. We have fantastic top-tier investors. We are a little spoiled for choices," says Ankur Kothari, who co-founded the company with Mihir Shukla, Neeti Mehta, and Rushabh Parmani.

Endorsements have come thick and fast. "With AA's offering, anyone can build a bot. Its ease of use enables business users to deploy RPA solutions without having to rely on IT departments," says Peter Munzig, MD, General Atlantic, an investor in AA.

Despite the impressive credentials, Kothari isn't quite used to media glare. At the business centre in Mumbai's The Grand Hotel, even as he reluctantly poses for a profile shot, he requests if we could avoid using his picture. "I am a hardcore engineer. A techie. My wife is going to rib me on this one."

For multiple reasons, Kothari and AA's journey deserves attention. Of course, the startup's stellar growth is a compelling story in itself. But beyond the numbers, the AA founders' rise marks the arrival of a new breed of Indian software-as-a-service (SaaS) entrepreneurs on the global stage. (Even though Kothari left India in the 1990s right after college, he identifies himself as an Indian entrepreneur and has kept his India links alive).

High on confidence and ambitions, these entrepreneurs often straddle two worlds. Tapping into their Indian roots while leveraging their Silicon Valley networks, they are making the most of the two geographies to build globally competitive businesses for the digital era. In doing so, they are moving beyond the labour-cost arbitrage model that helped build the earlier wave of IT outsourcing giants like TCS, Infosys, and Wipro.

More important, as startups like AA expand their global footprint, their organisational construct offers a peek into what a globally competitive Indian MNC might look like in the AI-led digital era.

"The product-company mindset is very different from the services mindset. In the latter, customers tell you what to do. In the former, you have to be a disruptor and tell customers what to do," says Milan Sheth, executive vice-president (IMEA and ROW), AA Digital Workforce.

What exactly does AA's tribe do? In one sentence, it is cheer-leading the era of invisible bots or digital workers – intelligent assistants that can automate specific job roles by thinking, analysing

and acting the way humans do. Think of them as software robots that can handle high-volume, repeatable tasks such as preparing reports and reconciling records like monthly sales, expenses, inventory status and medical records.

"As companies transition from legacy software to modern software, systems within an organisation continue to operate in silos and talk to each other only through people," says Kothari. "We looked at the problem and wanted to ask if we could develop a way where software could mimic human behaviour. It was a problem we fell in love with."

While automation and digitisation has been happening for some time, what is different about the likes of AA and their robots is that bit about mimicking human behaviour.

Consider, for example, Melbourne University, an AA customer that gets thousands of applications every year. AA's bots have not only helped it automate parts of the application process but also generate valuable analytics and insights. "They now know their students much better," says Kothari. With the knowledge of student demography, background, popular courses, dropout rates, etc., "the university is now working on improving its experience. Scaling too is so easy with it."

"Its 'IQ Bot' layers in AI and machine learning for more complex decision-based tasks," adds General Atlantic's Munzig.

RPA is today a \$50 billion addressable opportunity. Consulting firm Zinnov estimates enterprises to have spent \$2.3 billion in FY19, a figure that is likely to grow to over \$11 billion by FY24, making it one of the fastest-growing enterprise software plays globally.

Last year, AA rolled out its bot store. It is like an app store, where one can pick pre-built bots or digital assistants with specific profiles or personas. Say you are an HR head. Besides HR-automation software, you can also download bots like Digital Recruiter (helps with vetting résumés and recruiting) or Digital Sourcer (crawls the Web, including platforms like LinkedIn, to source relevant résumés).



"AA's ease of use enables users to deploy robotic process automation without having to rely on their IT staff"

Peter Munzig,
MD, General Atlantic

Name: **Automation Anywhere (AA)**

Bios: **Headquartered in San Jose, it began operations in 2003 as Tethys Solutions and was rebranded AA in 2010. Its founders have strong roots in Vadodara.**

Employees: **2,200**

Valuation: **\$2.8 bn**

Investors: **Raised \$550 mn in Series A last year from investors like Softbank, Goldman Sachs, General Atlantic**

Business: **It does robotic process automation or layering software with AI and machine learning to do high-volume, repeatable tasks**

Customers: **2,800, including TCS, Google, IBM & KPMG**

Global footprint: **Leveraging Silicon Valley and the India advantage, AA has 41 offices in 35 countries and R&D centres in the US, Vadodara and Bengaluru**





“Among early movers in the intelligent automation space, AA has built strong product, partnerships and capabilities”

Praveen Bhadada,
partner, Zinnov India

AA has a product that is available in eight languages and can process data in 190 languages.

While AA is headquartered in the US, it has a substantial presence in India. Of its 2,200 employees, 744 are in India: 300-odd in Bengaluru and 400-odd in Vadodara.

Why Vadodara? “When we started in 2003, we didn’t want high attrition. Also, Vadodara is an engineering town with good talent supply,” says Kothari. This was also the time when India had few product companies and talent. Familiarity also helped – co-founder Shukla studied in Vadodara. But now, the Bengaluru office is growing rapidly. “Talent here is comparable to the Bay Area,” Kothari says. The

one big difference is the exposure a techie gets in the US, with so many product companies working on cutting-edge technologies.

With offices in 41 countries, AA’s global operations are driven through four regional hubs, but the teams in India and the US are the ones that are truly creating the products and providing critical support to customers. The company claims its China business is also growing well.

India is an important market – it accounts for around 30% of AA’s business. “AA was among the first RPA companies that saw India as an automation hub,” says Vijay S Bhaskaran, partner, robotics and intelligent automation, E&Y. The presence of IT-outsourcing biggies and a growing wave of global innovation centres (GICs) owned by multinationals has propelled India to one of AA’s top three mar-

kets. “Even when the UK headquarters of a company buys our product, often 70% of the usage happens in their India GIC,” says Kothari.

India Inc is also rapidly embracing RPA. “Unlike other enterprise software, RPA in India is growing rapidly and already contributes 6-8% of an RPA company’s global revenue, which is phenomenal,” says Praveen Bhadada, partner, Zinnov.

How does AA maintain relevance in an area that is changing so rapidly? “Be aware that you are three years away from disruption. You fall in love with the problem, not the solution,” says Kothari.

Innovation holds the key, so AA’s R&D investment and team is growing rapidly. For example, six years ago it made its first investment in AI. Today, it is AA’s fastest-growing product line. Now the company is investing heavily in mobile and on-cloud RPA.

“It feels like we have just gotten started. Being in a space that is changing rapidly, I find it edgy, exciting, and full of possibilities,” says Kothari. “China led the manufacturing wave and also its automation. We see a parallel for India in the services space. Thanks to IT outsourcing, India has played a critical role in standardisation of processes. We have the potential to be the automation capital of the world.”

Flush with capital, AA plans to use it to accelerate growth, push for global expansion, beef up its product portfolio and pursue M&A deals. The enviable cast of investors backing it also brings a massive advantage: network. “Say,

when we were looking at Korea, both SoftBank and General Atlantic have a vast portfolio and lot of experience,” Kothari says. “Their connection is awesome. They accelerate your learning.” ■

malini.goyal@timesgroup.com

With partners like KPMG and Deloitte, AA now has over 500 bots in its store. “I was blown away by their conviction and confidence that world-class software products can come out of India,” says Sheth, who quit his E&Y job to join AA.

Will AA’s bots bring the threat of robots taking away human jobs closer to reality? Last year, AA created 1 million digital workers and has plans to grow it to 3 million by 2020. But Kothari dismisses the job-loss fear. “The fear of automation is extremely overblown. These robots will take out the repetitive tasks, making the work more human,” he says.

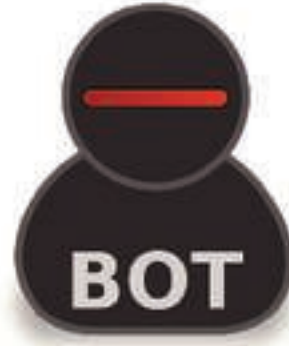
What does it take to lead the charge in a cutting-edge technology like AI? Having a base in Silicon Valley helps.

Says Kothari: “Its environment allows you to think big and global from day one and scale fast.” Shukla, who is based in California, adds: “Within a small radius in Silicon Valley, you get so many software companies and some of the world’s best talent. Failure is celebrated here. We now see the same happening in Bengaluru.”

According to Shukla, the Silicon Valley advantage is that you can see ahead and get an early sense of where the world is headed.

The cofounders’ experiences in product companies also help. Shukla, for example, has worked with pioneering product companies like Netscape in the US. “In that environment, you learn many things like managing fast growth. I can apply those learnings here.”

One key lesson? For any technology or product like the internet or personal computer, the way to make an impact is to ensure that it works for big and small users (from developers to users), be available on all kinds of devices, and be a global company but locally optimised.



HOW TO ENHANCE YOUR GLOBAL EMPLOYABILITY

ADVERTORIAL

A SENIOR FIGURE IN INDIA’S FINANCE INDUSTRY EXPLAINS HOW TAKING ADVANTAGE OF ICAI’S MUTUAL RECOGNITION AGREEMENT WITH CPA AUSTRALIA HELPED ADVANCE HIS CAREER.

By Nicola Heath

For Ritesh Sharma CPA (Aust.), Director of Finance and Head of Accounting at Allianz Partners in India, international postings are vital to a rewarding career.

“When you meet people from different backgrounds and ethnicities with different qualifications and skillsets, it broadens your perspective of life,” Sharma says. “It helps you grow professionally and personally.”

Sharma qualified from the Institute of Chartered Accountants of India (ICAI) in 2000. In 2006, he relocated to New Zealand where he studied an MBA in Finance and International Business and worked as a management accountant with the national carrier, Air New Zealand.

He soon realised that if he wanted to climb the corporate ladder, he needed to broaden his skillset beyond “number-crunching” to encompass skills like strategy, leadership, and business development.

He decided to pursue the CPA Australia designation in 2009. The mutual recognition agreement (MRA) between ICAI and CPA Australia was a huge advantage for Sharma, who was able to complete the course in 12 months and continue working fulltime while he studied.

THE BENEFITS OF THE CPA AUSTRALIA DESIGNATION

The CPA Australia designation offers expanded job opportunities and serves as a useful career development tool. For Sharma, becoming a CPA led to his promotion to financial manager at Air New Zealand.

He also found the strong practical component of the course, which saw concepts like leadership, and ethics

and governance taught using real-life examples, particularly valuable.

Sharma recommends the CPA Program for anyone working in accounting who is interested in advancing their career.

A candidate with a CPA Australia designation on their CV has “a real repository of knowledge, not only from an accounting perspective, but also other parts of the business, like strategy and leadership” which Sharma says is essential to career development.

Sharma’s career has gone from strength to strength since he added CPA to his CV. In 2015, he returned to India, where he took the position of Finance and Tax Lead at Lockheed Martin before moving to Allianz Partners in 2018.

His current role as the Finance Director and Head of Accounting oversees India and the Pacific. “It’s a good opportunity to expand my horizons,” he says.



Ritesh Sharma CPA (Aust.)
Finance Director and Head of Accounting
Allianz Partners

Advance your career globally.
Find out how to make the most of ICAI’s MRA by visiting cpaaustralia.com.au/ICAI



As extreme weather events become more common, the demand for better weather forecasting is disrupting a once staid space

WAR OF THE WEATHERVANES



:: Suman Layak

Professor Sridhar Balasubramanian has a personal weather station (PWS) installed on the terrace of his residence inside IIT Bombay's leafy Powai campus. It measures rainfall, temperature, atmospheric pressure, wind speed, and wind direction.

Balasubramanian, an associate professor with the department of mechanical engineering at the elite institution, often climbs up an iron ladder to reach the equipment. The battery powered device sends its readings over WiFi to an electronic panel electronic panel, kept downstairs, in a room designated for his 11-month-old daughter, a room otherwise filled with toys and a swing.

Weather is more than a hobby for Balasubramanian. He teaches weather as a part of two mainline courses at the IIT. On June 12, as Cyclone Vayu flew past Mumbai towards the Gujarat coast over the Arabian Sea, Balasubramanian tweeted real-time predictions and satellite images of cloud formations.

The professor is part of a small network of weather enthusiasts in Mumbai, who have all

installed a PWS. He is also member of a Whatsapp group called India Weather People, comprising of 100-plus enthusiasts. The data generated by the PWS at Powai is also shared with professional organisations such as the IBM's Weather Company. Sometimes Maharashtra farmers reach out to him over Twitter seeking weather advice and timing of their crop sowing.

Personal weather stations, along with automatic weather stations, sensors mounted on ships, aircraft and other remote crafts and locations act as the nerve endings that feed information to weather prediction systems, which play an increasingly central role in our times, as extreme weather events appear to be becoming more common, thanks to climate change. The more number of weather stations that are part of a forecasting system, the greater the accuracy, by and large. The robustness of the prediction model is the other determinant of accuracy. In the US, for instance, the network known as Weather Underground is fed by a network of some 180,000 personal weather stations set up all over the country by enthu-



siasts.

Balasubramanian has plans to formalise this network of Mumbai's weather enthusiasts and start a new venture someday. When he does, it will join a thriving ecosystem in weather forecasting that is emerging in India, with a growing number of enthusiasts and their PWS's, a large number of startups in the weather, satellite and agri-tech space, larger companies such as IBM's Weather Company, Finnish firm Foreca, US-based Accuweather, and India-based Skymet and Weather Risk Management Services that are competing for a growing market for weather-related information and forecasting, and the state-run Indian Meteorological Department, whose long-standing pre-eminence in the space is increasingly under threat from nimble-footed enterprises in the private sector.

According Tracxn, a company that tracks deals data, there are more than 300 weather, satellite and agritech-startups in India that are either consumers of weather data or producers of weather-related information services.

The most important development in the space is that over the last few years, the monopoly of the government over weather data has ended, as private companies and networks have set up a large number of automatic weather stations around the country, made feasible by sharply declining costs of hardware and sensors. Some of these networks have been set up in collaboration with state governments. Satellite imagery by Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) is available through its commercial arm Antarix, as well as from other global sources. And the Indian Meteorological Department (a unit of the Ministry of Earth Sciences) has started opening up lately, sharing its own data freely.

All of this means that multiple weather forecasts are now available real time. It has also become possible

Foot Soldiers of Weather Forecasting



IMD and its network, along with government bodies like Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology under Ministry of Earth Sciences track weather changes

More than 350 startups in weather and agritech, like Skymet, WRMS, Cropin, Satsure, RML Agritech, generate their own weather data

Foreign players like IBM's The Weather Company, Foreca, Climacell and Accuweather **provide forecasts of Indian weather**

Thousands of automatic/personal **weather stations have been set up by individuals and companies**

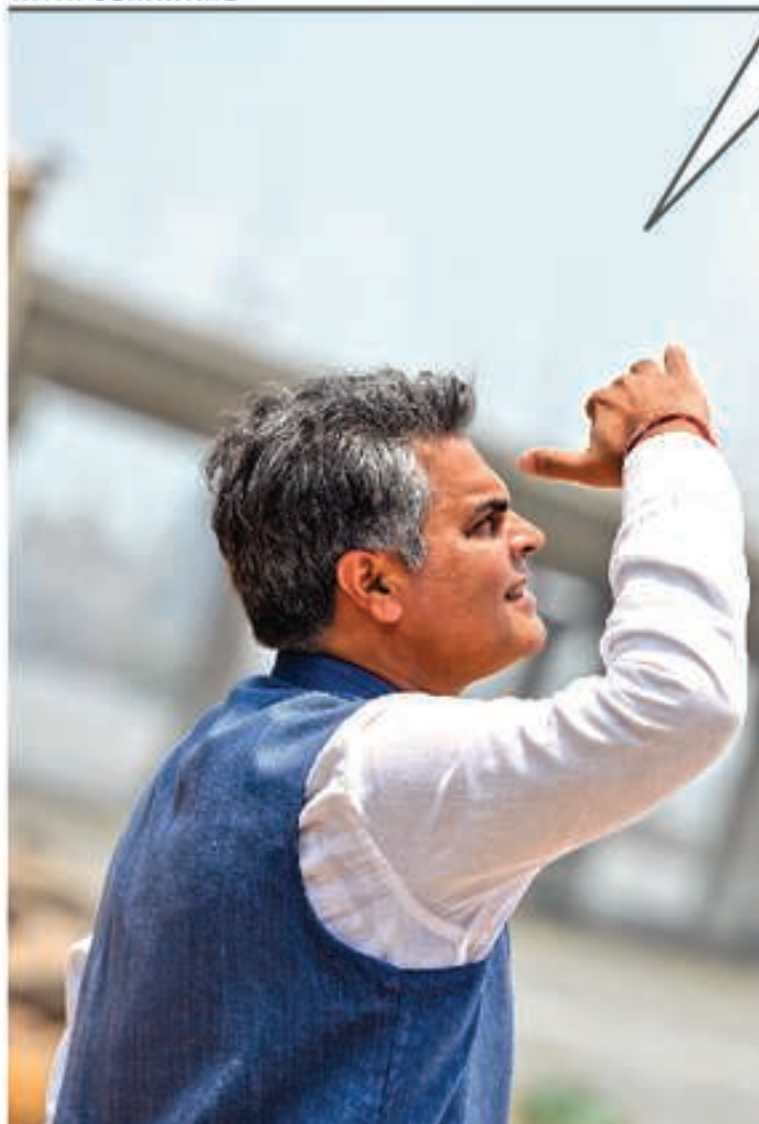
NITIN SONAWANE

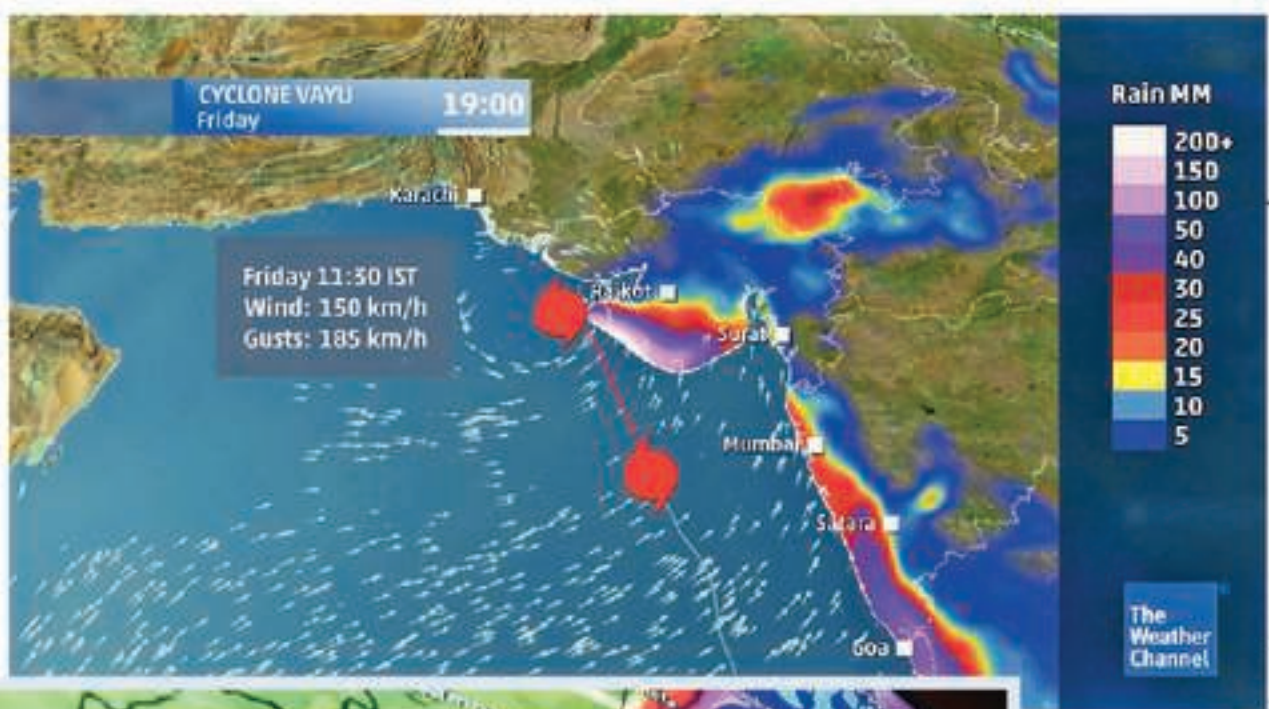
"If you track the development of the El Nino and the water temperatures of the Pacific Ocean, you can accurately predict monsoon rainfall in India on a piece of paper"

Jatin Singh, founder & MD, Skymet Weather Services



An automatic weather station manufactured by Skymet





“The challenge now is to make forecasts more granular, relevant to half a square kilometres of area”

Himanshu Goyal, India business leader, The Weather Company (IBM)

to use the available data to provide independent, highly localised and granular forecasts that can be monetized. The new weather regime is way more democratic. “One no longer needs to wait for the 7.30pm Doordarshan News to know if it will rain tomorrow. We can now know if it will rain in an hour,” says Samuel John, chief operating officer of Satsure, a satellite imagery company that works with ISRO arm Antares.

Big Weather

Satsure works as a partner for IBM’s Weather Company in India, offering satellite imagery combined with weather forecasts created by IBM. In 2018, it worked with state governments during the floods in Kerala and cyclone Titli that hit Andhra Pradesh, providing real-time updates and offering advice on the possibilities of fresh rains and affected areas that needed rescue or compensation.

The biggest disruptor in the space, however, has been Skymet Weather Services, started by Jatin Singh, a former broadcast journalist and son of a businessman who was a vendor to IMD. Singh started off in 2003 as a weather entrepreneur, as he saw an unmet need for weather data in news networks.

Skymet today has 6,500 automatic weather stations installed across the country, many of these in collaborations with state governments. It manufactures AWS, puts out weather forecasts for the entire country and sometimes challenges the IMD’s monsoon forecasts and methodologies, setting the two on a collision course that is being closely watched by stakeholders in the space. The criticism of IMD by various consumers of weather data and forecasts, including state governments, has been that it’s not been quick to change, or deliver granular and localized data relevant to specific regions.

Some of them have started taking matters into their own hands.

Skymet has already helped the department of agriculture in Maharashtra to install 2,061 AWS across the state. Anil Salunkhe, deputy director at the state agriculture department, told *ET Magazine* the state government is setting up its own system of forecasts and advisories that can be issued to farmers, without depending on the IMD. Four agricultural universities in the state have been roped in to

“The topography of India is such that anything beyond a 7-day forecast is not very accurate”

Anuj Kumbhat, CEO, WRMS



analyze the data churned out by the AWS’s. The project is ready to roll, and is awaiting the final go-ahead from the chief minister’s office.

Another state that has used Skymet’s expertise is Nagaland. State project officer Johnny R says that for about one and a half years, the Nagaland State Disaster Management Authority has been receiving data from Skymet to create forecasts and advisories on rain and storms for Nagaland that is disseminated through the Authority’s own YouTube channel. While this data is handed over to IMD, Johnny says that there is little data being generated by the IMD specific to the state.

IMD chief Mrutunjay Mohapatra, told *ET Magazine* in an interview over telephone from Geneva that collaboration, not competition, was the way forward. “It would be ideal if the private sector does not try to replicate our efforts as a rival but play complementary and collaborative role. We are the nodal body, but we cannot prescribe to others, neither can we discourage anyone. We have also made our data completely free and accessible on our website.”

Other start-ups also have their own data sets. The Weather Risk Management Services (WRMS), for instance, has set up more than 3,000 AWS’s across the country and data generated from these are shared exclusively with WRMS clients. WRMS is an IIT-Kanpur startup.

IBM’s Weather Company on the other hand works mostly with data generated by others. In a lean operation with only one meteorologist based in India, IBM uses IMD’s data plus other third party AWS’s and lets its international team analyse it. Both Skymet and IBM claim to have spotted the cyclone Fani that hit Odisha in May at least a fortnight before in made landfall. Cyclone spotting and advance warning is something that India has become good at. The IMD’s Mohapatra, is something of a celebrity in the weather forecasting circles for his talent in spotting cyclones. It has earned him the sobriquet ‘India’s cyclone man’.

Apart from the farm sector, information on storms and weather in general can be useful for different industries, especially logistics and airlines. Not to mention event organisers and suppliers around an event. For instance, the number of water bottles required at a cricket match can be predicted with some level of accuracy based on a forecast of temperature and humidity on the day

“Whether the monsoon is normal or deficient for the entire country is irrelevant for a farmer looking for more granular forecast”

Sridhar Balasubramanian, associate professor, department of mechanical engineering, IIT-Bombay



of the match.

A revolution in low-cost hardware, cheaper sensors and new technologies such as drones, combined with the growing power and effectiveness of algorithms are leading to new approaches in reading weather.

IBM uses different sensors that are on board airplanes across the world to source data about temperature, pressure and wind direction. The Ratan Tata- and Softbank-backed, Boston-based startup ClimaCell Inc plans to use a combination of traditional forecasting, telecom signals, street cameras and drones to analyse and forecast weather. ClimaCell promises to make India one of its focus markets. Even barometers and motion or wind de-

“It would be ideal if the private sector does not try to replicate our efforts as a rival but plays a complementary and collaborative role”



Mrutunjay Mohapatra, Director General of meteorology at Indian Meteorological Department

tectors on mobile phones are being roped in as sensors by some. Himanshu Goyal, who heads sales and alliances for IBM Watson Media and Weather in India says: “The challenge now is to make forecasts more granular, relevant to half a square kilometres of area,” he said.

Cracking the Monsoons

While India does well on cyclones tracking and there are enough indicators for predicting imminent rain even at the AWS level, the elephant in the room is of course monsoon forecasting. And despite a preponderance of weather stations and data, it remains a tricky affair. Anuj Kumbhat, the CEO of WRMS, says: “The topography of India is such that anything beyond a 7-day forecast is not very accurate.” Balasubramanian of IIT Bombay agrees.

For 2019, while the IMD has predicted a normal monsoon, Skymet has gone ahead and predicted a less-than-normal rainfall.

Jatin Singh, Skymet’s founder, told *ET Magazine* that there are differences in the methodology followed by Skymet and IMD. He says: “If you track the development of the El Nino and the water temperatures of the Pacific Ocean, you can accurately predict monsoon rainfall in India on a piece of paper.” Not everyone agrees though, and Balasubramanian says one must also take into account the IOD or Indian Ocean Dipole, also known as the Indian Nino, a temperature variation of the eastern and western parts of the Indian Ocean.

IMD chief Mohapatra said the agency was working on improving its monsoon-related services. “Currently we provide district-level guidance for monsoon-related information across the country. We are also running a pilot in 200 blocks for block level guidance and will soon extend it to 6,600 blocks.”

Agri-tech, insurance and risk management bring in the moolah for these companies. Skymet gets 90% of its revenues from Agri-insurance. For WRMS, it is entirely weather risk management and preventive services. However, it is weather, monsoon and forecasting that seem to have captured public imagination. IBM, for instance, now runs a full-fledged course on weather at the Asian College of Journalism in Chennai. And at IIT-Bombay, professor Balasubramanian has come up with his own special two-day course on weather in July that is available for all and has already seen quite a few registrations. With personal weather stations now available at ₹12,000 and upwards, and multiple Indian manufacturers for the same, weather and its forecasting too are becoming ‘close and personal’. ■

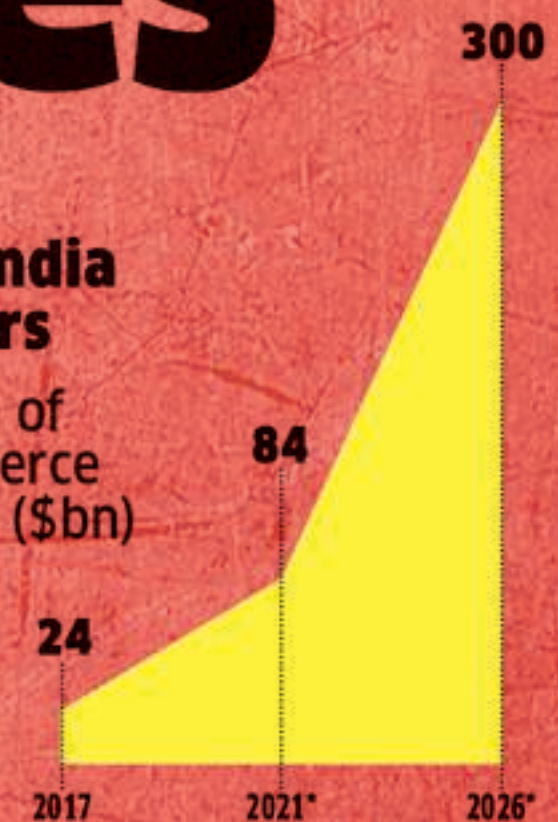
Survival Games

Protectionist voices are on the rise in the internet commerce space as Indian entrepreneurs find it increasingly difficult to keep up with deep-pocketed competitors from overseas

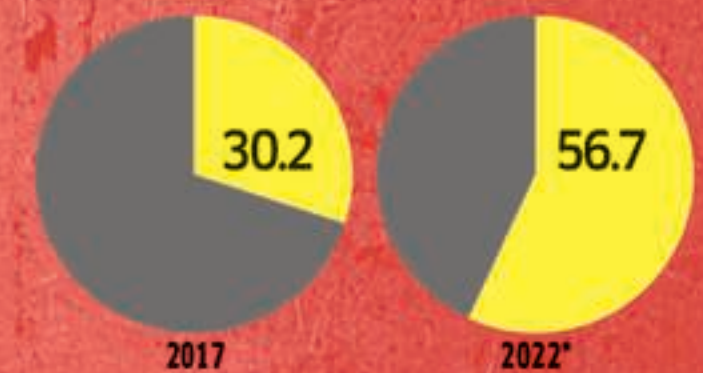


Why India matters

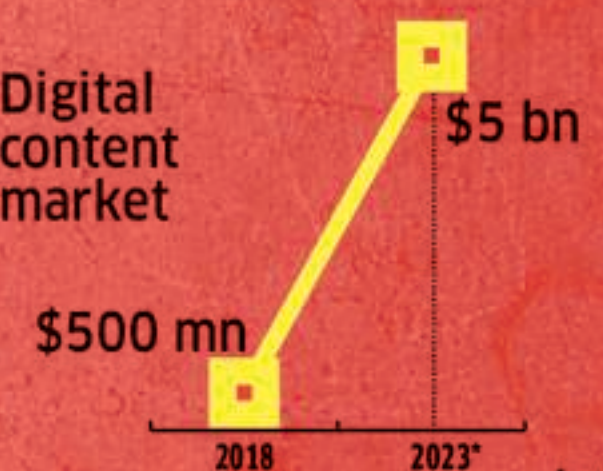
Growth of ecommerce market (\$bn)



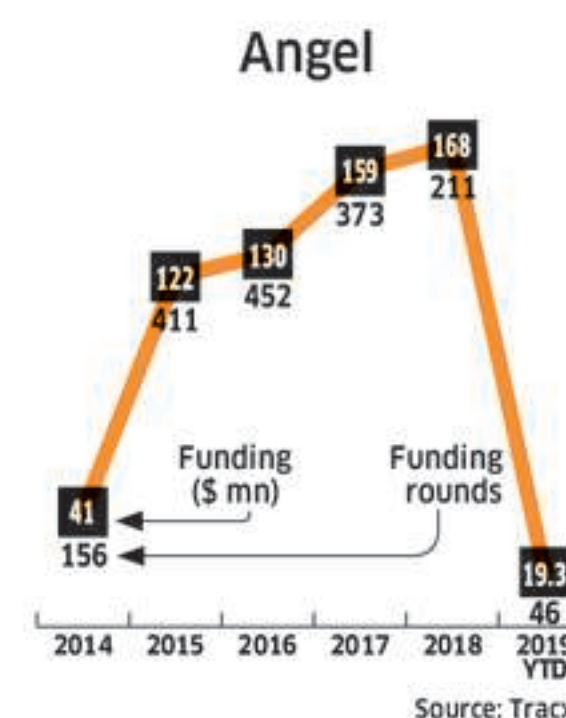
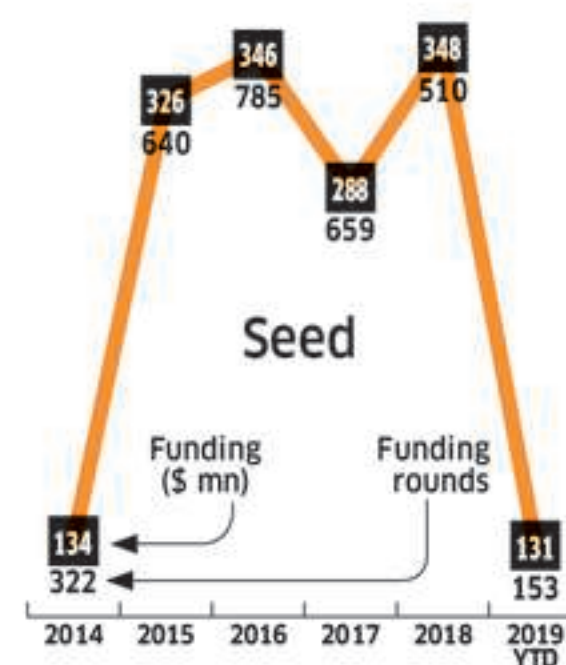
Mobile internet penetration (%)



Digital content market



Finding backers early has become difficult



Source: Tracxn

:: Rahul Sachitanand

Christie Arokiaraj, 23, is a welder who works from a small store outside the teeming Krishnarajapuram Railway Station on Bengaluru's eastern periphery. For nine to 10 hours a day, his gaunt frame is crouched over pieces of metal to meet a steady stream of orders from small businesses and homeowners in the vicinity.

His life sparks up after 9 pm, when Arokiaraj gets together with four or five friends and unwinds on platform 4 of the station. Using the free WiFi on offer, the youth use their smartphones to surf the web and check out videos on YouTube, Facebook and WhatsApp, between chat sessions. The latest forwards are exchanged and jokes are sniggered.

However, over the past three to four months, another app has caught their fancy: TikTok, the short-video sharing app owned by Bytedance, the world's most valuable startup that was valued at \$75 billion in late 2018. For 20-30 minutes daily, Arokiaraj and his friends watch slapstick comedy, cheer strangers mimicking Tamil and Bollywood movie stars and ogle at women dancing to slow mu-

sic from far away Madhya Pradesh and Mumbai – all on the app.

In the last 12 months that TikTok has been operational in India – including six months when it survived a ban – the upstart has rapidly racked up some 200 million users as of June, according to its own data. The app has been downloaded over a billion times across the world. “We are enabling people from every corner of the country with a global platform that gives them unlimited opportunity to capture and share their creativity,” says Sachin Sharma, director-sales and partnerships, Bytedance India. “TikTok is popular pan-India because we recognise that creativity is not just limited to audience belonging to certain towns or users speaking a particular language.”

The gaiety of the group on platform 4 shows Sharma is on the mark. Arokiaraj says TikTok has become the new must-have app among his peer group. Videos on the online platform dominate late-night conversations, held between loud train whistles.

But not everyone is thrilled by TikTok's explosive growth. The app's detractors say it was built in China in a walled garden – with virtually no threat from foreign rivals – funded by local investors and first launched in a familiar market. Cash-rich

developers launched the app here later. Chinese companies such as vernacular content provider Helo, beauty and lifestyle app Club Factory and UC Browser have profited from this strategy. The financial muscle of American companies such as Amazon and Walmart – which acquired Flipkart – have also queered the pitch for homegrown players, who get overshadowed, they say.

This, say observers, has led to a growing disquiet in the market, which has been cleaved into two – homespun entrepreneurs worrying about being muscled out by foreign investors and multinationals who claim success is determined by market forces and not financial heft. It has also forced entrepreneurs to take hard decisions. Craftsvilla, for example, had to rapidly shrink its operations over the past 12 months, says Manoj Gupta, CEO of the platform that sells ethnic apparel and fashion accessories. “It has become impossible to defend your business model with this kind of competition and the money they have. Local entrepreneurs need to be protected.”

Vinay Bagri, CEO and founder of fintech startup NiYo, says: “The looming Chinese and American threat is something we consider daily when we fret over the viability of our venture.”



“We want a level playing field for all participants in the market”

Rameesh Kailasam,
 president,
 India Tech

Foreign internet businesses making a splash in India

TikTok

SEGMENT: Short videos

LAUNCH: January 2018

NUMBER OF USERS: 200 mn

FUNDING: Softbank and Sequoia, with parent Bytedance expected to spend \$1 bn in 2019



and plans to add \$2-3 billion more, provide key (and rarely available) later stage capital to the ecosystem.

After Independence, India had a protectionist economy to help domestic industries. But the economy was opened up in the 1990s and global collaborations became almost a given, especially in the tech space. The voices of protectionism seem to be returning now with local entrepreneurs starting to vocalise their pain. "American startups have market depth and Chinese startups have wallet depth. They are infiltrating the country. What do Indian startups have?" says a technology startup founder on the condition of anonymity. "We need protection the way China had. Look at how big their tech industry has grown."

Companies like TikTok have raised the bar. Its largest homespun rivals, ShareChat, started with a bang in 2015 and racked up some 50 million users by June 2019. But today, potential investors ask ShareChat tough questions about how it can tackle deep-pocketed foreign competitors.

Executives at companies such as Amazon bristle at the suggestion that their growth has hobbled the odds of success of homespun entrepreneurs. A spokesperson for the firm tells *ET Magazine* the protectionist narrative is dated and untrue and the \$200 billion behemoth is a value generator in India. "Amazon.in is a thriving marketplace with the primary role of enabling Indian small businesses for online commerce. With its continued investment in technology and infrastructure, it has enabled more than 450,000 small and medium business to scale into successful national online retailers," says a company statement. As a result, Amazon has facilitated over \$1 billion in exports from sellers to the US, the UK, Japan and Persian Gulf countries. "Amazon continues to work closely with the local small business ecosystem with multiple programmes such as Launchpad, Amazon Easy, I Have Space. Amazon remains completely compliant to the laws of the land."

Sharma of Bytedance says TikTok's combination of great product experience and localised and personalised content recommendations has been a hit with users. "We will continue to focus on enhancing the product experience. We recently started monetising the platform and are working closely with brands to further build our ad solutions to understand what works for their audiences, and if TikTok can collaborate to help reach their consumers across the country," he says.

Protectionist voices in India's startup ecosystem worry about some sort of colonisation of India's internet economy by foreign companies. "I think we have an opportunity to build great internet companies from India," Sachin Bansal, then the executive chairman of Flipkart, told the audience at a business conference in February this year. "At the same time we should do



Helo

SEGMENT: Vernacular content

LAUNCH: July 2018

NUMBER OF USERS: 40 mn

FUNDING: Temasek

Google Pay

SEGMENT: Fintech/payments

LAUNCH: September 2017

NUMBER OF USERS: 45 mn

FUNDING: Google



Amazon India

SEGMENT: Horizontal e-commerce

LAUNCH: March 2013

NUMBER OF USERS: 200 mn

FUNDING: Amazon



Industry watchers say shifting market dynamics have worsened the odds of success for some of these entrepreneurs. Over the past five years, even as starting up has gone mainstream, the number of early backers for these fledgling businesses have become fewer. Later-stage investors have also started hedging their bets, preferring to invest only in the top few players in each segment. "In many cases, this is a tough, winner-takes-all market," says Anand Lunia, founder of India Quotient, an early stage investor in startups. "The flush of foreign capital and ideas has only exacerbated a rough market."

Foreign capital accounts for 80-90% of all investments in India's startups, according to industry estimates. Even as some companies build up their desi flavour – Vijay Shekhar Sharma of Paytm, for example, has consistently claimed his company is as local as Maruti and SBI even though Softbank and Alibaba Group are his biggest investors – the influence of overseas investors is evident. Large investors such as Softbank, which has invested \$2 billion in India



"The looming Chinese and American threat is something we consider daily when we fret over the viability of our venture"

Vinay Bagri, CEO and founder NiYo



Protectionist lobbies gaining steam

Retailers Association of India

MEMBERS: 50

MISSION STATEMENT: Challenge Walmart and Amazon's domination

PROGRESS: Strong lobbying resulted in some regulatory changes in the ecommerce industry

IndiaTech

MEMBERS: 15

MISSION STATEMENT: Create a level playing field for all tech companies

PROGRESS: Helped catalyse focus on data localisation for foreign companies operating in India

Funders Forum

MEMBERS: 12, with \$800 mn in assets under management

MISSION STATEMENT: To support local VCs and push for more government assistance

PROGRESS: A new initiative has seen rivals Chiratae, Stellaris and Kae Capital band together to be heard against global behemoths such as Accel and Sequoia

The E-commerce Council of India

MEMBERS: 25

MISSION STATEMENT: Bring homegrown entrepreneurs together to form a united voice

PROGRESS: Has a strong protectionist tone on subjects such as India's ecommerce policy



that by not creating an unfair playing field for some companies and instead create a level playing field across for everyone. I believe that if you create a level playing field, Indian companies will be at a great advantage and we will be able to build companies which will go global overtime."

In 2018, Bansal sold his stake in the ecommerce company he cofounded from a flat in Bengaluru to Walmart. He has since become a key early investor in startups. In 2019, he invested \$100 million in Ola. The CEO and cofounder of the ride-sharing giant, Bhavish Aggarwal, has recast shareholders' voting rights to keep predatory investors at bay. Japanese conglomerate SoftBank, which holds a substantial chunk of Ola, had recently wanted to invest \$1 billion in the cab aggregator. But Aggarwal had reportedly turned down the offer as it would have meant diluting his shareholding rights.

Regulators have reacted to some of the concerns of homegrown entrepreneurs. A notable move was the order on data localisation, which aims to protect private citizens' data. This diktat – supported by fintech firms such as Paytm and Phone Pe and opposed by multinational firms – seeks to compel companies to house the data they generate within India's geographical boundaries.

Data Localisation

However, opponents of this move say such a seismic shift is unrealistic, with technological and operational issues likely to slow down implementation. "There are many issues to consider when you localise data," says Anirudh Rastogi, CEO of Ikigai Law, a legal outfit in Delhi that works on tech and policy law. "Where do you find enough space to build these server farms to house this mass of data? Does housing all the data in one country mitigate risk?"

The boom in mobile users in India is expected to generate 2.3 million petabytes of data by 2023, from 40,000 petabytes in 2010. One petabyte is equal to 1,000 terabytes or 1,000,000 gigabytes.

Parminder Jeet Singh, executive director of IT for Change, says company data generated in India should be treated as a national asset. "There is no reason to sign away our lives so easily. Let the government devise a policy that makes these companies pay to tap these resources."

It isn't the content segment alone that is attracting protectionist attention. From fintech to fashion, lobbies are hard at work trying to put homegrown entrepreneurs' interests first. For example, India Tech, a lobby that counts MakeMyTrip, Ola, and Quikr as members, wants to ensure a level playing field for the ecommerce industry, says the unit's CEO Rameesh Kailsasam. "There is a fear that foreign companies may be bending the law with regards to regulatory issues. We want to ensure Indian companies aren't at a disadvantage when it comes to critical regulatory issues."

In early June, a bunch of startup investors, with around \$800 million in capital, banded together under the Funders Forum Collective to take on foreign investors and to act as an advocacy platform.

With India's ecommerce market expected to top \$1 trillion by 2021 – according a February report from the Retailers Association of India and Deloitte – the battle is only expected to intensify. No matter who wins, the customer shouldn't lose. ■

rahul.sachitanand@timesgroup.com

IMPOSSIBLE VALLEY



Wreckage of the AN 32 that crashed on June 3 en-route Mechuka was found in Pari Hills of Siang district after eight days of extensive search in a 1,000 sq km area

Crashes in Arunachal

13 Air crashes since 1995* including 2 AN-32s and a Su-30

The mountains of Arunachal Pradesh, where an IAF AN 32 plane recently crashed, has long been a danger zone for aviators

By **Shantanu Nandan Sharma**

The AN-32 crash in Arunachal Pradesh has become another grim reminder of the reality that flying over the mountainous state continues to be fraught with risks.

For World War II pilots, this eastern Himalayan region was the “Skyway to Hell” and despite advances in flight technology since then, the stretch of deep valleys and high mountains is still one of the deadliest flight routes in the world.

And once a plane goes down, the dense foliage and cloudy hills make it hard to even find the wreckage, as was the case with the Indian Air Force transporter en route from Jorhat in Assam to Mechuka in Arunachal Pradesh. The plane with 13 people on board remained missing for eight days. The wreckage was finally spotted on Pari Hills in Siang district. When rescuers managed to reach the crash site, at a height of nearly 12,000 feet, they found no survivors.

Once Upon The Hump

Flying over the unforgiving eastern Himalayas has often been tragic.

In April 1942, when the Japanese Army blocked Burma Road (the 1,150-km mountain highway between Lashio in present-day Myanmar and Kunming in China), US-led Allied forces had to undertake arguably the biggest airlift in aviation history. For the next three years, the C-47, C-46 and C-109 planes transported nearly 650,000 tonnes of supplies (fuel, food and ammunition) from airfields in Assam to those in Yunnan, China.

The Allied pilots nicknamed the route as “the Hump” because their aircraft had to navigate deep gorges and then quickly fly over mountains rising beyond 10,000 feet. “The Hump” is none other than today’s Arunachal Pradesh and parts of Myanmar and Tibet.

Arunachal Pradesh

AREA: 83,743 sq km

POPULATION: 13.8 lakh (2011 Census)

DENSITY: 17 people per sq km

BORDERS: China, Myanmar & Bhutan

Over 650 aircraft crashed in “the Hump”, killing more than 1,000 fliers, mostly pilots, according to Lt Gen William Tunner, then commanding the US Military Air Transport Service. Also, 81 aircraft went missing in the region, with searchers failing to spot any wreckage.

It took around 70 years before the debris of two such planes – a C-109 from Jorhat to Hsinching and a B-24J from Kunming to Chabua – was spotted in the hills of Arunachal by trekkers and villagers.

13 Since 1995

Planes may have become more advanced, but this region’s rugged terrain and severe weather conditions remain the same as they were during World War II.

Based on readily available data, Arunachal Pradesh has witnessed 13 air crashes since 1995. This included 10 choppers, two AN-32 transporters and a Sukhoi Su 30 fighter jet.

Plane accidents in the state before the 90s were rare since there was hardly any aircraft activity in the mountainous north. After the Al-

AVIATION CHALLENGES:

Thick cloud form by 1 pm, particularly in pre-monsoon season

Rapid changes in weather coupled with occasional strong winds

Rugged terrain, deep gorges and steep valleys rising above 10,000 ft

Low population density, poor road network hamper search operations

10 Of these are chopper crashes

106 No. of deaths (including that of Arunachal CM Dorjee Khundu), due to these crashes

594 No. of Allied forces’ aircraft that crashed in “the Hump”. The area comprises of today’s Arunachal and parts of China and Myanmar

81 No. of Allied aircraft that are still missing

345 No. of people, mainly from the US, listed as missing in these crashes



lied airlift ended in 1945, there was no urgency for planes to fly over “the Hump”.

Even the IAF, till about a decade ago, had restricted flights over this region till 1 pm because of rapid formation of thick clouds in pre-monsoon days along with other weather hiccups. But with the Chinese military aggressively strengthening its airbases on the other side of the McMahon Line that demarcates China and northern Arunachal Pradesh, New Delhi shed its complacency. The government soon handed over eight strategic airfields in Tuting, Mechuka, Aalo, Tawang, Ziro, Pasighat, Walong and Vijaynagar to IAF for upgradation. That was a decade ago.

By then, the IAF also began flying in the

*Data for accidents between 1947 and 1995 are not available
 Source: Ministry of Defence, news reports, Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, US



Lost & Found

Jan. 25, 1944: B-24J bomber flies from Kunming in China on a mission to Chabua in Assam but goes missing with four other aircraft on the

same route

2006: An American hiker spots wreckage of an aircraft near Damro village in Arunachal

2008: Indian government grants access to US investigators who confirm the wreckage is of B-24J

2009: Excavation does not lead to any conclusion about the crash

2015: Remains of victims recovered

Note: 4 lakh Americans died in World War II; over 73,000 are still missing in action
Source: Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency

evening and also experimented with limited night sorties.

To Stay Out of Danger

Commercial flights in Arunachal Pradesh first started in the mid-1980s when state-run Vayudoot Airlines (now defunct) flew 19-seater fixed wing aircraft to Pasighat and Ziro. But operations were abandoned mainly because the airline could not recover costs.

Then last year, when Air India subsidiary Alliance Air started flying a passenger plane (a 46-seater ATR 42) to one of the upgraded airfields – the Advanced Landing Ground in Pasighat, the issue of safe landing was made top priority.

Navigational aides were installed; some trees near the airfield were uprooted and drains along the runway were covered to enhance safety, Alliance Air CEO CS Subbiah had told this writer in May 2018.

The government is now looking at expanding civilian air operations to Arunachal Pradesh's other airfields under the regional air connectivity scheme called UDAN. State capital Itanagar however does not have an airport yet.

But landing in Ziro or Pasighat located near the plains of Assam is easier than landing in high-altitude Tuting, Mechuka or Walong located near China.

Air Marshal Pranab Kumar Barbora, who retired as vice chief of air staff in 2010, has the distinction of piloting all types of military aircraft in Arunachal. He says flying over the state's mountains has three challenges: the weather, the terrain and technical issues.

"If weather is coupled with terrain or technical (issues) is coupled with either terrain or weather, it's difficult to stay out of danger," he told *ET Magazine*.

Due to these factors, IAF does not allow new recruits to venture into valley flying (with mountains on both sides) in Arunachal Pradesh, he says.

In May 2008, Barbora flew an AN-32 to Daulat Beg Oldie airstrip located at a height of 16,614 feet in Ladakh and vouched for the technical robustness of the aircraft. But he also said that the transporter was unsuitable for flying at extreme heights.

"IAF has now begun to procure powerful planes," he said. "For example, the C-130 Hercules has four engines (as against two in AN-32). In case the pilot suddenly finds himself flying towards a hill, he can make a steep ascent in a C-130. An AN-32 cannot do that."

We do not know yet why the AN-32 crashed on June 3 since its black box was recovered only on June 13.

Siang deputy commissioner Rajeev Takur was at the base camp of the mountain on which the plane crashed when he spoke to *ET Magazine* on the phone. He said: "Weather and terrain are the main challenges for the rescue team. The crash is on a hill. One has to trek for a day from the nearby village of Gate [pronounced Ga Te]. We sent five mountaineers, two of them – Taka Tamut and Kison

Tekseng – had climbed Everest last year."

Hard to Spot Planes

Since the plane was missing for days, is it not odd that no one in the villages saw it fall out of the sky since the crash occurred in the afternoon? Actually not.

Arunachal Pradesh has a low population density – 17 people per square km against the national average of 382. Gate – the only village in the vicinity – has just 256 residents, according to the 2011 Census, making it unlikely that anyone noticed the crash.

Then there would have been clouds. During the ongoing pre-monsoon season, ground temperature in Arunachal rises quickly to 28-30 degrees Celsius, and by noon, the sky is covered in thick clouds, say weather experts.

Pilots can usually take their planes out of non-communication zone in the gorges provided there is visibility.

The AN-32 went off the radar at 1 pm, never to regain connectivity. The crash site is slightly off the usual flight path.

So when a plane falls off the sky on a cloudy day, there are chances that villagers would not notice. That is why it takes days and even years to find the wreckage.

On April 30, 2011, when a Pawan Hans Eu-

roCopter B8 chopper carrying Arunachal chief minister Dorjee Khandu and four others went missing, its wreckage was spotted five days later in Luguthang, also near the China border. There were no survivors.

Far Away from Roads

This is the dilemma. While flying in Arunachal is risky, air connectivity is indispensable as road network is poor.

During the recent Lok Sabha elections, as many as 434 polling stations in the state could not be reached by roads.

In a booth in Cheppe village in Anini constituency, polling officials walked for five days, with night halts in Anelih, Thyee, Engalin and Awoka, chief electoral officer Kaling Tayeng told *ET Magazine*.

No wonder so many World War II aircraft are still missing in action in the peaks and valleys of Arunachal.

Memories of a Forgotten War – a 2016 documentary by Utpal Borpujari, a national award winner – ends with visuals of the wreckage of a US aircraft in the hills of Arunachal.

"The story of World War II in the Northeast is not yet over. The Americans will continue searching for missing planes," he says. ■

shantanu.sharma@timesgroup.com

ATR 42 is used for commercial flights to Pasighat



"Pilots Face 3 Challenges in Arunachal: Technical, Weather & Terrain"

Retired Vice Chief of Air Staff **Pranab Kumar Barbora** achieved the rare feat of flying an AN-32 to Daulat Beg Oldie airstrip at a height of 16,614 ft in 2008, reopening the airbase after decades. Barbora, who has also flown planes in Arunachal, told **Shantanu Nandan Sharma** how rapid weather changes, along with gorges and mountains, challenge pilots. Edited excerpts:

How robust is the AN-32 aircraft?

AN-32 is the workhorse of the Indian Air Force. It's highly essential. We have more than a hundred of this aircraft which is used mainly for air-maintenance (ferrying of goods). But its load carrying capacity is on the lower side, about five tonnes or so. Yes, I flew one to Dawaltbaigh Oldie, but the aircraft is not suitable for such elevations. After all, it has only two engines. IAF has, however, started getting powerful planes now. For example, the C-130 Hercules has four engines. In case the pilot suddenly finds himself flying towards a hill, he can make a steep ascent in a C-130. An AN-32 can't do that.

Having flown over Arunachal Pradesh for many years and knowing the topography well, what could be the possible reasons for the recent AN-32 crash?

The reasons will be known only after an inquiry. My reading is it could be because of weather. The crash site is a little away from its flight path; so there could be other technical issues also. But there was no radio transmission about any technical problem. So, only a probe can put together all these pieces of jigsaw puzzle. So far as the 2009 crash of an AN-32 in the same area is concerned, it was found that weather and terrain lead to the crash.

Why is flying over the high mountains of Arunachal considered risky, right from the days of World War II?

The planes used during World War II were archaic. Those were slow-moving propeller aircraft which could not climb very high and were highly susceptible to weather. A large number of aircraft vanished. But the Americans don't forget their dead; so they try to retrieve the bodies even today. If locals or mountaineers spot any plane part, they swing into action and begin investigations.

The vegetation in Arunachal Pradesh is unbelievably thick. There are many areas where sunlight does not reach the earth. The undergrowth is even worse. When we lose an aircraft, which happened many a time, we always instruct the members of a search party to fasten themselves with a rope. Otherwise, there are risks of rescuers themselves getting lost.

So what is the main challenge – the terrain or the weather?

In a hilly terrain like Arunachal Pradesh, there is high vegetation and high moisture. As the day gets hotter, thick cloud formation takes place. Earlier, we limited our operations to those areas till about 1 pm. If you can't see what is ahead because of clouds, flying in that terrain is very difficult. There are high mountains all around. There are mainly three constraints – weather, terrain and technical. If weather is coupled with terrain or technical (issues) is coupled with either terrain or weather, it is very difficult to get out of danger.

But isn't our inability to fly anytime of the day an issue when the Chinese are so active on the other side?

As communication systems and other technology had improved, we were able to fly during afternoons and even at nights in Arunachal Pradesh. We formulated stricter standard operating process. About a decade ago, we developed limited night operations capability in and around Mechuka (that borders China). We had to do that as the Chinese bases came up right on the other side.

What was your first reaction when you reached Dawaltbaigh Oldie airstrip flying an AN-32?

I was relaxed. I wanted to light a cigarette. But I could not. There wasn't enough oxygen for me and the cigarette.



Self-Made

**click,
 click,
 click**

93 million selfies each day (as of 2015)
82% of youth between 18 and 34 in US are selfie-takers (as of 2018)
259 people have died taking selfies, half of them from India (2011-2017)
selfitis is the compulsive need to take selfies
 Source: Google, Statista, AAIMS

Phone-facing
1.43 billion smartphones were sold across the world in 2018
161 million smartphones were sold in India
 All of them had selfie cameras
 Source: Strategy Analytics

Camera Matters

Phones become top sellers based on the selfie camera quality
 There is also a dual selfie camera phone
2019 ranking of selfie phones:
 Source: DxOmark

- 1** Google Pixel 3 & Samsung Galaxy Note 9
- 2** Xiaomi Mi Mix 3
- 3** iPhone Xs Max



The selfie has become a global addiction since the first front-facing mobile phone cameras arrived in 2003. Ahead of Selfie Day on June 21, we look back:
 :: Sourabh Gupta

Most popular selfie point

Eiffel tower



Source: CNN Travel

Extreme Zones



SPACE SELFIE

NASA spacewalker Anne McClain's 2018 selfie from 418 km above the earth



EVEREST SELFIE

Mountaineer David Liano González's 2018 selfie from the top of Mount Everest



CLIFF-HANGER

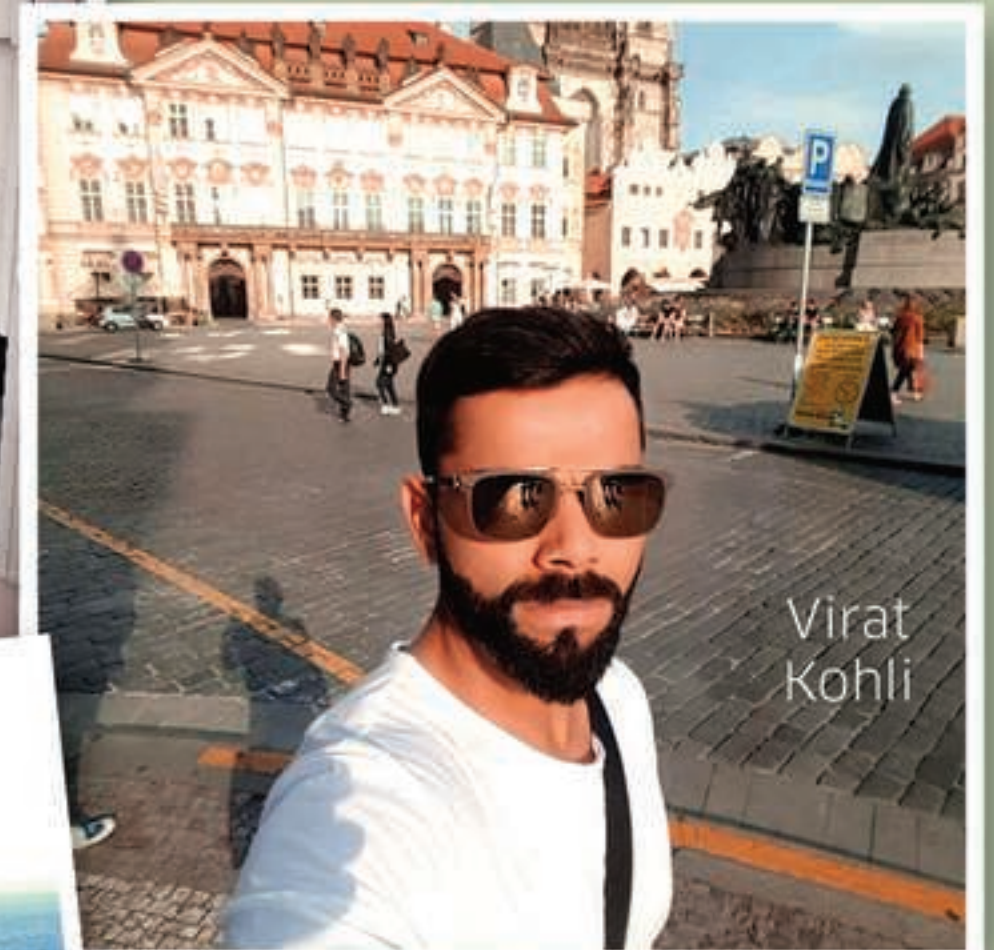
Russian model Angela Nikalou is an Instagram star for her risqué and risky selfies

#Selfie Stars

Celebrities often take selfies to engage with fans on Instagram & Twitter



Jacqueline Fernandez



Virat Kohli



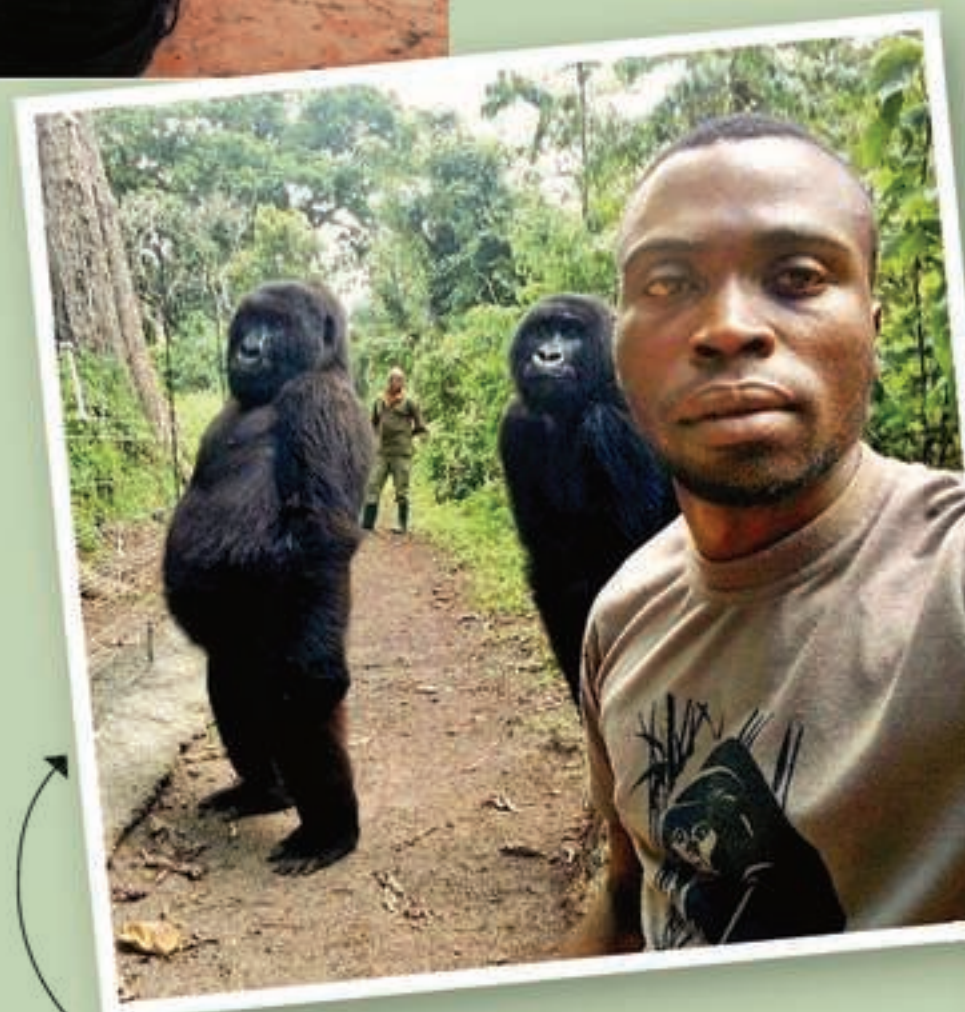
Ranveer Singh

No Selfies Please!

There is a growing movement against taking selfies too. One of them calls itself, well, Anti-Selfie



Stranger Things



GORILLA SELFIE

Gorillas appear to pose in this selfie taken by park ranger Mathieu Shamavu in Democratic republic of Congo in 2019



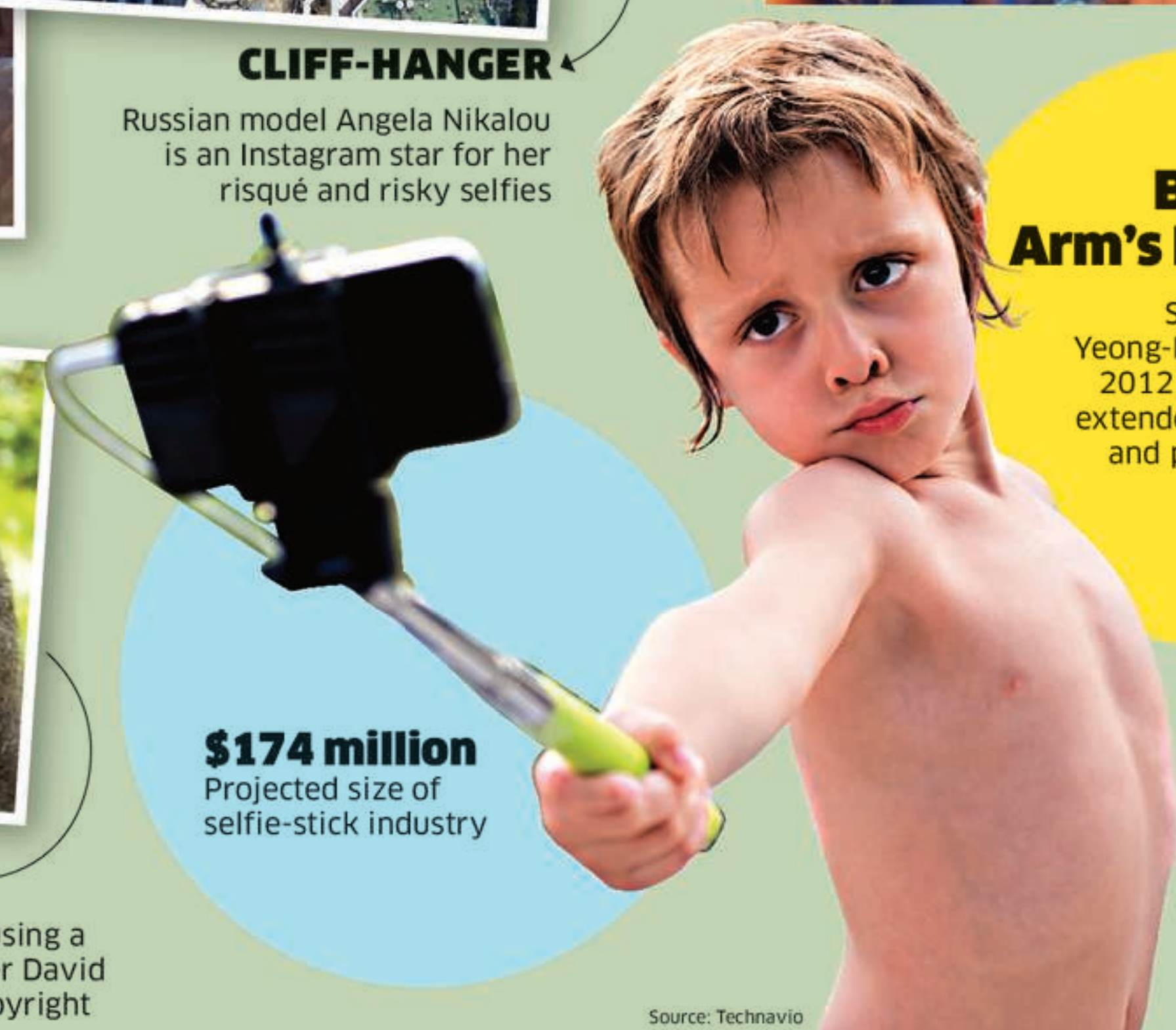
SHARK SELFIE

Dutch photographer Peter Verhoog with a great white shark in Guadeloupe, Mexico, in 2014



GORILLA SELFIE

Naruta the monkey took a selfie using a camera left behind by photographer David Slater. But primate was denied copyright



Beyond Arm's Length

Selfie stick -- Yeong-Ming Wang's 2012 invention -- extended the limits and panorama of the selfie

\$174 million Projected size of selfie-stick industry

Source: Technavio

Talent Crunch

It has been Rahul Gandhi's mission to promote fresh, non-dynastic talent in the party. Not only have his efforts yielded slim pickings, his wavering bets on people evokes a revolving door

:: Prerna Katiyar

The failures of the Congress party and its president Rahul Gandhi have been dissected closely in the aftermath of the grand old party's general election rout. The litany of shortcomings has also attracted the pushback that it is unfair to blame one man for the electoral vanquishing of a whole party or an ideology. One's political sympathies will likely be the greatest determinant of the side of the argument one finds more compelling. But there is one aspect of Gandhi's organisational work – one that has been an avowed priority for more than a decade, since he became the party's general secretary in 2007 – that can be justly scrutinised without the distortion field of the election that just went by.

"I am the symptom of the disease that plagues the Congress today. The party needs to open up. Young people with non-political background should get chances," Gandhi had declared, in 2007. The message was clear: Nepotism must end and fresh talent should get a chance in politics. Gandhi focused on reviving party wings such as the Youth Congress and the National Students Union of India through internal elections and related initiatives.

While Gandhi has steadily risen in the party since, becoming vice-president and ultimately president, the results of the talent-spotting and mentoring exercise have been mixed, at best. It is hard to point out anyone else in the Congress who has had as quick a rise as the party president himself.

In comparison, in the principal rival, the Bharatiya Janata Party, Nirmala Sitharaman went from being a new party member to the defence minister of the country in just about a decade. BJP has a number of stories to show for successful talent-spotting and swift ascents within the

party and government, both organically and via defections from other parties, including the Congress – Himanta Biswa Sarma of Assam being a high-profile example.

To be sure, Gandhi has made efforts, and they have yielded some fruit.

Four talent hunts have been held in the last 12 years. Some 40 young leaders were picked up in the first round held in 2007 and another 20 in 2011 on the basis of four rounds of interviews and training sessions. One of them was Remya Haridas from Kerala who won the Alathur Lok Sabha polls this year to become the only Dalit woman Lok Sabha MP from the state. Daughter of a daily wage labourer, she broke the class ceiling within the Congress in 2019. "Rahul gave me the opportunity and the confidence. I still remember his words from back then: a booth-level worker is the real worker in any party," reminisces Haridas, who holds a PhD and is known for using folk songs as a medium of political communication. She defeated CPM's PK Biju.

Her message and memories find resonance elsewhere. Another first-time MP, Jothimani S, who won from Karur in Tamil Nadu, says: "I can proudly say that I was one of the first beneficiaries of Rahulji's talent hunt exercise from 2007. He openly said the party is generally closed for public. To get an entry one needs introduction by an influential person. All this has to end." Exemplifying victory of fresh talent over incumbents, she turned out to be a giant slayer by defeating four-time AIADMK MP and Lok Sabha Deputy Speaker M Thambidurai by a margin of 4.2



Sidelined Now, But Used to be Close to Rahul

MADHUSUDAN MISTRY: In 2014, he was put in charge of key states but has now been moved to fringe roles

CP JOSHI: The former rural development minister is now the Rajasthan Assembly Speaker

KANISHKA SINGH: The former investment banker was at one point a prominent member of Rahul's inner circle

MEENAKSHI NATARAJAN: Mandsaur's ex-MP and former NSUI president was once seen as having been handpicked by Rahul for greater responsibilities

DEEPAK BABARIA: The AICC in-charge for MP is considered by many to be a poor choice for his lack of political acumen

MOHAN PRAKASH: A general secretary, he was removed as Maharashtra Congress chief over performance issues

G MOHAN GOPAL: Chairman of Rajiv Gandhi Institute of Contemporary Studies, he was one of the leaders credited for Rahul's aggressive posturing



Those Who Matter (Inner Circle)

K RAJU: The former IAS officer runs Rahul Gandhi's secretariat

SAM PITRODA: Gandhi family friend and Chief of India Overseas Congress has a knack for poorly timed statements

PRAVEEN CHAKRAVARTY: Former MD of BNP Paribas India, headed the party's data analytics team

KAUSHAL VIDYARTHEE: This Oxford graduate is Rahul Gandhi's personal aide



Those Who Matter (Party Organisation)

Ahmed Patel

Priyanka Gandhi Vadra

Anand Sharma

KC Venugopal

Ghulam Nabi Azad

AK Antony

Mallikarjun Kharge



“Booth-level Work Will be Priority”

Shashi Tharoor, Congress MP from Thiruvananthapuram, tells Prerna Katiyar the party must decide what it stands for and communicate that effectively. Excerpts:

Should non-dynasts be given more opportunities to rise up the ranks?

I think to look at this as an ‘either-or’ situation trivialises the deeper and fundamental issues that we in the Congress recognise we must address to ensure the progress of the party.

For one, the presence of a generous sprinkling of ‘dynasts’ remains a key feature of parties across the political spectrum – even among the most vocal self-professed critics of this feature.

But to address your point, the Congress has always recognised merit and hard work and has never shied away from pushing forward individuals to key positions irrespective of whether they came from political pedigree or not.

My own career of over a decade in politics has been a lived experience of this reality.



Is there a need for fresh talent-spotting and booth-building across states?

I do think the Congress is rightly accused of having lost touch with the grassroots in many states and it is important for us to pay even more attention to the work at the booth level to ensure that the fundamentals of the party remain strong. This will be a priority area for the Congress and will indeed

serve as a bridgehead in the larger revival plan that the party will embark on in the immediate future.

What is needed to revive the Congress?

In addition to strengthening our grassroots foundations, we must also decide what we stand for and do better to communicate it effectively and repeatedly. The Congress has historically been the political embodiment of India’s pluralism and has been a strong and committed voice for the preservation of secularism as its fundamental reflection.

We need to reaffirm our belief in these values and keep reiterating them at every opportunity. At the same time, there are other areas that we must focus on, such as being a strong and constructive opposition, both inside and outside Parliament.

We need to also explore pragmatic coalitions so as to strengthen the anti-government space, while also doing our best to wield leverage on the central government through the issue of Centre-state relations. And moving forward, we must not make the mistake of allowing the BJP to monopolise the nationalist narrative.

lakh votes. Congress contested the elections in an alliance with the DMK.

Apart from talent hunts, at the party’s 84th plenary session in Delhi in 2018, Gandhi promised to build a new Congress with talented young people, stressing the need to change the party organisation. “My first task would be to break the wall that exists between the workers and senior leaders. This organisation (Congress) needs to change. The worker sitting in the last row has the energy to change the nation but there is a wall standing between them and our leaders,” he had said.

But more than a decade after Gandhi started this mission, he continues to be seen as sharing the greatest rapport with the Congress club of dynasts such as Jyotiraditya Scindia, Sachin Pilot, Jiten Prasada, Gaurav Gogoi and others.

Party insiders defend the president’s talent promotion initiatives. “In almost every state, you will find young leaders he spotted and nurtured. They are being groomed by Rahul Gandhi himself,” says a Congress leader, who asked not to be named because he is not authorised to speak to the media. The list includes Raja Brar (two-time MLA from Punjab), Hibi Eden (NSUI president and two-time MLA from Kerala), Rajiv Satav (MLA and Youth Congress president in Maharashtra), Roju John (general secretary and an MLA in Kerala), Devendra Yadav (AICC secretary and Rajasthan co-in-charge), Vikas Upadhyay (MLA from Chhattisgarh), Jitu Patwari (minister in MP government), Ashok Chandra (Rajasthan PCC president), Girish Chodarkar (Goa PCC president), Paresh Dhanani (leader of Gujarat CLP), Omkar Singh Markam (tribal minister in MP), Geeta Kora (MP from Jharkhand), Kamleshwar Patel (minister in MP), Mukesh Bhakar (MLA in Rajasthan) and Ravneet Bittu (MP from Punjab).

Found in Talent Hunt

JOTHIMANI S: Defeated four-time MP M Thambidurai of AIADMK from Karur in Tamil Nadu

RAMYA HARIDAS: Defeated CPM MP PK Biju from Alathur in Kerala

HIBI EDEN*: Defeated CPM’s P Rajeev from Earnakulam in Kerala

ROJU JOHN: MLA in Kerala

SUSHMITA DEV: Mahila Congress president

RAJA BRAR: Lost against SAD’s Harsimrat Badal in Bathinda

RAJIV SATAV: Former MP from Hingoli in Maharashtra

VIJAY INDER SINGLA*: PWD minister in Punjab

OMKAR SINGH MARKAM: Tribal affairs minister in MP government

PARESH DHANANI: Leader of Opposition in Gujarat assembly

(*Eden and Singla are children of former Congress MPs but benefited from Rahul’s support nonetheless)

“The leadership played a big role in spotting and nurturing them. All are from the younger generation,” the leader says.

Senior leaders who have fallen out of favour narrate a different story. “While his chosen few have complete access, others have to often wait for hours and even days to meet him.”

If Gandhi has had limited success in forging frontline leaders, his track record in picking and sticking with his inner circle at work hasn’t been a whole lot better. A combination of Congress leaders who are in favour at the moment as well as key members of his office, who are typically not politicians, form his circle of closest advisers. But this club has an invisible revolving door. Election defeats are known to spur the door into turning, and sometimes people fall out of

favour rather abruptly. Besides, many hand-picked members have proven underwhelming, displaying none of the political savvy of the advisers that former Congress chief and Rahul’s mother Sonia Gandhi surrounded herself with. This also casts a shadow on Rahul’s eye for talent and his inability to back the chosen ones through thick and thin.

Kanishka Singh, who was at one time seen as Gandhi’s closest aide, is nowhere as influential as he used to be.

G Mohan Gopal, who was made the chairman of Rajiv Gandhi Institute of Contemporary Studies, was seen to be among Gandhi’s closest advisers. Coming under heavy fire within the party after the 2014 elections, his stock is said to have dipped considerably.

K Raju, a retired IAS officer, runs Rahul Gandhi’s secretariat and is the chairman of INC’s SC department. He is currently under heavy fire from within the party for the 2019 results. Sam Pitroda, the Gandhi family friend with a knack for poorly timed statements, is going strong in the inner circle. Praveen Chakravarty, who headed the data analytics team and whose advice on key matters of the campaign was said to have been heeded by Gandhi, finds himself precariously perched in the inner circle. Madhusudan Mistry, CP Joshi and Meenakshi Nataraajan are among those who once held sway in

the inner circle but no longer do.

Some have quietly withdrawn. Janardan Dwivedi, a self-proclaimed course corrector of the party, resigned as the party’s general secretary last year.

“Congress was never a cadre-based party or a party that cared for talent. It used to bank on regional stalwarts for electoral success in different states. Some have been sidelined, others are working towards selfish ends,” says political analyst JP Shukla.

This contrasts with the BJP. Barely a month after its victory in Lok Sabha polls, party president Amit Shah has already set up a panel for fresh membership drive that will be conducted between July 6 and January 31.

“That a booth-level worker cannot just aspire but also become a chief minister or a central minister can happen only in the BJP. More than 80% of our office-bearers are from humble backgrounds,” says Bhupendra Yadav, BJP general secretary. He cites a number of examples to back up his claim: Tripura CM Biplab Dev was a BJP booth-level worker, Maharashtra CM Devendra Fadnavis started as a ward member, Amit Shah was a booth-level worker and so were Himachal Pradesh CM Jai Ram Thakur, Jharkhand CM Raghubar Das, Haryana CM Manohar Lal Khattar, Union ministers Narendra Singh Tomar, Nityanand Rai and Nitin Gadkari, among others.

The Congress leader who spoke on the condition of anonymity says the lack of a steady pipeline of grassroots leaders is one of the biggest challenges the party is facing.

“At one time there were just two secretaries in the Congress and yet it was the biggest party in India. Today there are at least 100. The biggest problem is that they have never been an ordinary worker so they do not understand his trials and tribulations,” the leader adds.

Says Shashi Tharoor, Congress MP from Thiruvananthapuram, “The Congress has always recognised merit and hard work and has never shied away from pushing forward individuals to key positions irrespective of whether they came from political pedigree or not. My own career of over a decade in Indian politics has been a lived experience of this reality.”

Tharoor was widely known as a writer and UN diplomat long before he joined politics. For others with political ambitions, despite good intentions, Congress remains a difficult choice. ■

prerna.katiyar@timesgroup.com

Rahul Gandhi has nurtured and groomed many leaders like me who come from a humble background. At the same time he gives a lot of space to each one to function”

Jothimani S, Karur MP



“My father is a daily wager. What more proof does one want to understand that non-dynasts too get a chance in Congress?”

Ramya Haridas, Alathur MP



There is a Drought, but People are Still Happy to Watch Cricket

Amitav Ghosh on his many concerns – migration, climate change, metamorphosis of words and the power of stories – that telescope in his new novel *Gun Island*

by Charmy Harikrishnan

Amitav Ghosh returns to the tide country of the Sunderbans in his new novel *Gun Island*. Half earth and half water. We chance upon characters whom we met 15 years ago in the ebb and flow of *The Hungry Tide*. The young cetologist, Piyali Roy, is now greying at the temples and still carrying in her the terrors of a storm that slammed into her on an island. There's a cameo by the frail but formidable Nilima Bose who runs an NGO. There's even a dolphin that reappears. The little boy Tutul, who sat in the prow of his father's boat, is now a young man who calls himself Tipu. But Ghosh pre-empts any attempts at calling *Gun Island* a continuation of *The Hungry Tide*. Leaning back in his chair in a black shirt and dark blue trousers, a small scowl forming above his white French beard, the 62-year-old says: "There are some characters who overlap but that is about it. There isn't much of a connection between the books. When you have lived with these characters for a long time, they don't really go away. They are still somewhere in your head and at some point they come back. That was certainly the case with this. These characters just returned."

Gun Island moves between two lands that sway in the waters: Sunderbans and Venice. Sunderbans poses a question through a 17th century fable of and shrine for Bonduki Sadagar, the "gun merchant", who is driven out of Bengal and takes a journey through lands mysteriously named as Taal Misir Desh (Sugar Candy Land), Rumali Desh (Land of Kerchieves), Shikol Dweep (Island of Chains) and Bonduk Dwip (Gun Island), pursued by the snake goddess Manasa Devi. Venice provides the answers. Between Sunderbans and Venice, the novel stretches like a slithering riddle.

In 2016, after his mammoth Ibis Trilogy was published, Ghosh was at his study in Brooklyn, trying to write an article on Venice, when suddenly links between India and Italy opened up. "I had been re-reading pre-modern Bengali poetry, especially the legend of Chand Sadagar and its many iterations. I wondered, What is the meaning of these legends. Where do they come from and where do they lead? I guess that is how this novel really started off." Sadagar, the merchant, is a recurrent figure in Bengali folklore. "I don't think merchants really figure as folkloric characters anywhere else. Certainly, not in India. It is a very curious thing, particularly because Bengalis are not known as traders. There isn't any legend of Bonduki Sadagar, though. That's *mera*."

It is not often that Ghosh warns a writer not to give away spoilers for one of his books, but he does so this time. For, in this novel, one word holds the secret to the legend – *bonduk*, gun. It links two faraway islands, it is a word that has travelled along the Silk Route, it is a word that holds in it the origin story of a city. Here, Ghosh is in his elements.





Sadagar, the merchant, is a recurrent figure in Bengali folklore. I don't think merchants really figure as folkloric characters anywhere else in India. There isn't any legend of Bonduki Sadagar, though. That's *mera*



India's Merchant of Venice

A sadagar's story that winds its way into Venice – this could be India's version of *The Merchant of Venice*, a riposte to William Shakespeare's play. But Ghosh's Venice is not Shylock's nor Antonio's. Ghosh imagines 17th century Venice – which is around the time the Shakespearean play about the Venetian merchant and the Jewish moneylender was being staged in England – as a place where Indians could have been living. "I am sure there were Indians in Venice at that time. It was an incredibly cosmopolitan place. Venice became rich by trading with Constantinople. One of its major trades was in spices, and where did the spices come from? So there was a lot of back and forth. There were a significant number of people from Kerala who were travelling to Syria on a regular basis. And Syria is not far from Italy," says Ghosh.

People are still taking that route. Ghosh points to contemporary Venice "where almost the entire working class is from Bangladesh". At the launch of his book in Delhi, he further elaborated: "Everywhere I looked, people were speaking Bangla. I was speaking my childhood language on the streets of Venice."

In the age of Global Positioning System – where everything and everyone is tagged, tracked and even targeted – people are on the move, clambering on refugee boats, crossing boundaries. In *Gun Island*, Rafi and Tipu, a Muslim and a Dalit, move from India to Italy. These are people at the margins, dispossessed. "I spent a lot of time in Italy, visiting migrant camps, trying to understand what was it that made them move," says Ghosh. "Their stories are similar to Rafi's and Tipu's. They come from Bangladesh, go through India, Pakistan, Turkey and Iran. They sit in the back of a truck for days, not able to even look outside. At night, they are allowed out and given a few chapatis. Reports of migrants who come off the boats always say they are Syrians or Africans. If you look closely at the newspaper pictures, you will see that most of them are South Asians."

Ghosh was in Palermo, Sicily, one day when a refugee boat came in, crammed with migrants, most of them South Asians. They came out on to the pier. "There they were, 10 feet from me. And I was thinking if I just take another step, I could be coming in that way. That was the strongest sense I had – that their stories were my stories."

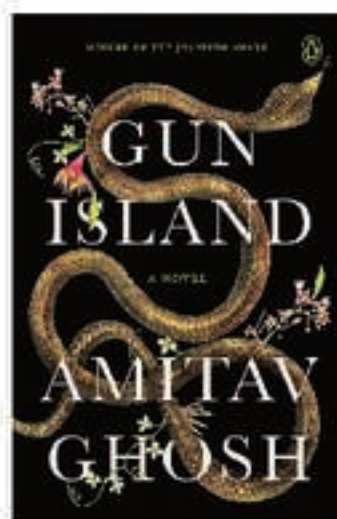
It is not just people. Sea serpents and spiders are moving. Dolphins and whales are seeking new seas. "There is a huge displacement of people, of animals, of ecosystems. The entire natural world, as we know it, is being completely transformed in ways that are

really worrying," says Ghosh. Piyali says in *Gun Island*: "We are in a new world now. No one knows where they belong any more – neither humans nor animals."

Temperature touched a scalding 48 degree Celsius in Delhi last week, a cyclone churned the Arabian Sea and parts of India have been hit by drought. "There are two sets of things you can do," says Ghosh, who has been persistently warning about climate change, especially in his book *The Great Derangement*. "One is to reduce emissions. The other is to prepare to deal with drought and excessive rainfall. You can strengthen yourself in the face of what is obviously a global climate emergency. Are we doing enough? No, none of us is doing enough. Drought is the most important thing happening in India right now. But people are still happy to watch some cricket match. I think it just goes to show that any of us who thought that human beings are reasonable or rational really has to think again. We are none of those things."

Ghosh makes another point: Refugees are turning centuries of European project on its head. "If the coolies' colonial masters... knew everything about them... the countries of the West... now knew very little about the people who were flocking to them," he writes in *Gun Island*.

Ghosh says the huge demographic interventions Europe put in place completely changed the two Americas and Australia. "They exterminated 90% of indigenous populations and transported millions of people from Africa, later from Asia. The scale of these demographic interventions was staggering and it was undertaken by states," he says. Meanwhile, Europe, he writes, strived to preserve "the whiteness of their own metropolitan territories.... This entire project had now been upended".



Fear of the Migrant

But it is not just Europe that fears the migrant. Isn't the fear of the migrant at the heart of the National Register of Citizens in India? "Yes," says Ghosh. "The migrant issue has overturned the politics of the Western world. It has been happening in India for a long time, especially in the East. For the Shiv Sena in Mumbai, too, it has been a big issue. But the great demographic upheaval is going on. In Goa, the working class now is almost completely from the East. So is it in Kerala and Karnataka."

There is also the specific fear and rejection of the Muslim migrant, which is what India's Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, too, underlines. "It is a terrible thing," says Ghosh, but elides the point. "When I was in Italy, I met a lot of young men from one district in Punjab in Pakistan. They started migrating in 2015 after a flood in Jhelum. Fifteen-twenty years ago, if you were displaced by the flood, you would go to another town, but now they go to another part of the world. Economy and ecology and technology are driving them across borders. Even the person who is displaced by the flood has a mobile phone. It is a game-changer. Bangladesh has a high internet penetration. People know more about the world. It becomes a motivating factor in this movement."

If in *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh pulled back, at the last moment, from relaying the real horrors of the Marichjhapi massacre, in *Gun Island* he doesn't quite put his finger on the religion of the majority of the refugees, Islam, and how the fear of the migrant in Europe is very much situated in Islamophobia. At one moment in *Gun Island*, he touches on the Islamophobia that has seized parts of the West – when the rare books dealer Dinanath Datta's Bluetooth speaker switches on and Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan's *Allah Hoo* pours through the aisle of an American airliner, with ominous overtones – but it only freezes the passing fear of a business class Hindu passenger, not the bone-rattling dread about her identity that a poor migrant Muslim feels on a strange sea and a stranger shore.

I spent a lot of time in Italy, visiting camps of migrants. They come from Bangladesh, go through India, Pakistan, Turkey and Iran

Island & The Tide

After reading *Gun Island*, I went back to *The Hungry Tide* and then again returned to *Gun Island*. It pales before the *Tide*. It doesn't draw you into it like the sinking mud of the Sunderbans did in *The Hungry Tide*. It doesn't bruise you like the spores of the mangroves did 15 years ago. Instead it carries you on a light, occasionally exhilarating, ride on the serpentine scales of a riddle. Even the characters – from Datta, who seeks to untangle the mysteries behind the Bonduki Sadagar story, to Cinta, the Italian academic who is like an intellectual sutradhar of the novel – are almost one-dimensional, mere keys to unlocking the puzzle. They are just ciphers to decipher the mystery. *Gun Island* is a minor work in Ghosh's oeuvre even though it affords Ghoshian pleasures in no small measure.

I believe in the power of stories. Fiction exceeds facts. So much of life is like that. It exceeds anything that we can write factually about it



Ghosh draws on the energies of old folktales to talk about contemporary concerns. Which is why this novel, with its goddesses, snakebites and spiders, intimations and chance meetings, could upend the expectations of those who have been reared in the fastidiousness of realistic fiction. Ghosh couldn't care less. He said at the book launch: "Writers have always given voice to non-humans. When did we begin to suppress these voices?" Cinta echoes that: "Only through stories can invisible or inarticulate or silent beings speak to us; it is they who allow the past to reach out to us."

Gun Island is an affirmation of stories, of their continuous reclamation and renewal. Like Cinta, who exclaims, "It is" never "just a story," Ghosh says, "I believe in the power of stories. Fiction exceeds facts. So much of life is like that. So much of life exceeds anything that we can write factually about it." Has he become more aware of the irrational elements in life over the years? "There has always been that aspect in my head. Maybe it has come more to the forefront of late"

In the end, there is both hope and despair. "The world that we are heading towards is a very dark place, but something is salvageable. It really depends on what we do now," says Ghosh. "When you look at the realities that surround us, you recall what the German philosopher Martin Heidegger said in 1966: 'Only a god can still save us.' And we have reached there now." ■

FEAR

IN THE AIR

Anxiety about planes and flying is more common than we think. New initiatives are emerging to help Indians surmount the fear

:: Nehal Chaliawala & Vatsala Gaur

The work of a senior executive at a technology services provider can be hectic. It would involve meeting tight deadlines and working late nights to take care of the grievances of clients. Amit (name changed on request) was up for the challenge. The career of the 42-year-old techie at an innovation lab in Bengaluru was booming. But there was a bugbear. His work involved visiting clients, domestic and overseas, and Amit cannot handle flying.

The mere thought of sitting in an enclosed metal tube hurling above the clouds at 800 km per hour, 35,000 feet above ground was overwhelming. What if something went wrong, Amit often wondered. After all, he cannot stop the plane and walk out of it, like in a car or a train. The fear of flying or aviophobia

forced him to pass on several opportunities that could have given his career a stratospheric trajectory.

Things came to a head in March 2019 when Amit had to go to Madhya Pradesh on an urgent personal errand and flying was the only option due to time constraints. He reached the airport and cleared the security checks. But when it was time to board, Amit's legs froze. The techie watched helplessly as the plane left without him. That was when he decided he had to kill his fear of flying.

"I was very disappointed with myself. I wondered if I could ever fly comfortably," he says.

According to the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), close to 40% of people experience some form of anxiety regarding air travel. This does not even include the number of people who do not fly because of their fear of flying, ICAO had said in 2007. Considering that close to 140 million passengers flew in India during 2018, according to the Directorate General of Civil Aviation, Amit would be just one of the millions of Indians who face anxiety while taking commercial flights. While some try to cope with it by popping anti-anxiety pills before boarding or trying to find sol-



SCARE FACTOR

40% of people experience some form of anxiety regarding air travel

1 in 3 has some degree of fear of flying

1 in 6 is unable to fly due to fear of flying



27

is average age when people develop this fear

Anticipatory anxiety before flying is often worse than fear when flying

Turbulence and irrational fear of heights is the most difficult part for many

Fear of flying can cause in-flight panic attacks



ace in some other way, there are people who are terrified to even step into an airplane.

There aren't enough studies to shed light on the number of people suffering from aviophobia. Moreover, people who have such a fear do not come forward as they are worried people might perceive them as weak. In India, where people are stigmatised to talk about even depression and other such conditions, this anxiety is likely to be laughed off as a ridiculous notion.

Clubbed under the category of general anxiety disorder, aviophobia is curable and depending on the severity of the condition, it may take a few weeks or a few months to get cured. "Aviophobia is a specific kind of a phobia which is a manifestation of an anxiety disorder and one in four people all over the world suffer either from depression or an anxiety disorder," said Samir Parikh, director at Fortis National Mental Health Program.

"The cure may range from giving doses of serotonin, mild sedatives that they can pop as pills as well but the most effective therapy is cognitive behaviour therapy," Parikh said.

The West has long identified this flying anxiety. Airlines see this as an opportunistic gap they can plug. British Airways has been offering its Flying with Confidence course for 33 years now that has helped close to 55,000 people, a spokesperson for the airline said. The one-day course includes sessions with pilots and clinical psychologists who explain the technical side of flying and share techniques to relax and manage anxiety. The course concludes with a dedicated flight to help "customers put the theory into practice". Airlines like Air France and Virgin Airlines also offer similar programmes.

Amit's search for a solution took him to SOAR, a US-based company started by a retired airline pilot that offers a similar service. SOAR says one in three people have some degree of fear of flying, while one in six are unable to fly at all due to this fear.

The SOAR app was informative and had textual instructions. This was not practical for Amit. That was when he learnt about Cockpit Vista in an article.

Mumbai-based Cockpit Vista is a one-of-its-kind flight anxiety solution provider. Wing Commander (retired) K Dinesh, who founded Cockpit Vista, says fear of flying is a form of common anxiety that emerges essentially from distrust of aircraft, pilots, the extremely opaque protocol of controlling an aircraft and poor understanding of the aviation industry as a whole. While weather-related turbulence could be the most common trigger, other triggers can range from the suspicion of having a fake pilot to even the knowledge of being flown by an all-women crew, he says. The wing commander has listed some 233 types of flight anxieties that can befall a person prone to developing them.

MISHAP SHEET

“Every disaster gives birth to a number of anxious passengers,” says Dinesh, adding that troubled passengers are “jetsetters”, celebrities and the affluent – those who have a lot to lose if something goes amiss once they have boarded a flight.

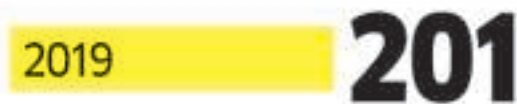
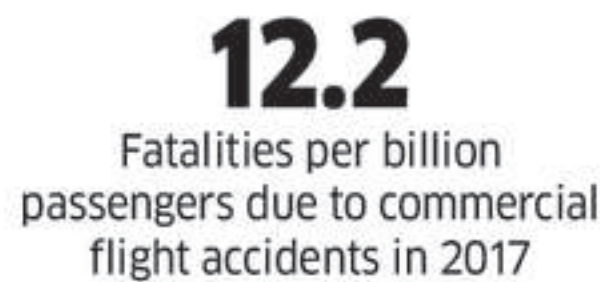
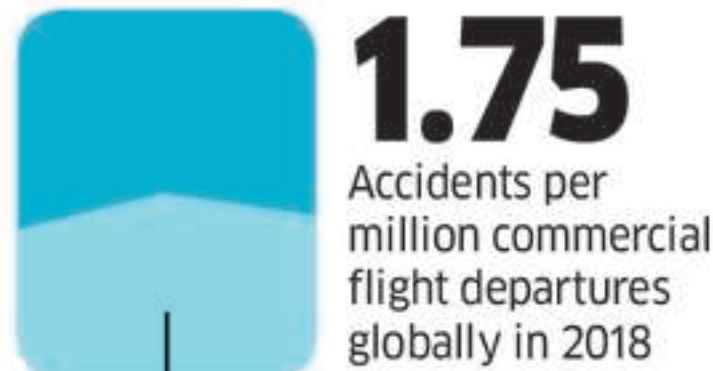
That aviation accidents get a large amount of publicity also spooks traveller with a fragile psyche. Even aviation experts and enthusiasts still shudder at the mention of the 2010 Air India Express crash in Mangaluru, where the aircraft overshot the runway, fell down a hillside and burst into flames, killing 152 on board. This was the deadliest aviation disaster in India. Incidents such as global aviation agencies grounding Boeing 737 Max 8s – after the deadly crashes of aircraft of Lion Air and Ethiopian Airlines – also heighten the fear factor.

Sometimes, even unruly passengers are those with a flying anxiety, says Dinesh. The International Air Transport Association (IATA) has said in 2017 there was one unruly passenger incident for every 1,053 flights. In 2016, one such incident took place for every 1,424 flights.

Cabin attendants would concur. A former Jet Airways cabin attendant who does not want to be named recalls she once had to deal with a middle-aged woman passenger who started screaming bloody murder at a famous politician. “We spoke to her, heard her out, offered her refreshments and calmed her down.” She admits that usually this is what the crew does when they confront difficult people on board. However, if the person resorts to physical harm to fellow passengers or himself or any of the crew, he can even be chained, according to a latest rule.

Later, other passengers said she was behaving in a similar fashion at the airport too. “Even though she did not cause any harm to fellow passengers, it took some time for her to calm down,” the attendant says, adding the passenger became unruly due to her fear of flying.

“Aviophobia is just the tip of the iceberg,” says Gauthamadas Udipi, a specialist in neuro behavioural medicine, based in Chennai. “Passengers suffering from this fear are known to be afflicted by a general panic disorder and are often haunted by



Source: ICAO & SOAR

“Every disaster gives birth to a chunk of anxious passengers”

K Dinesh, founder, Cockpit Vista



“Aviophobia is just the tip of the iceberg that hides a deeper problem of panic disorder”

Gauthamadas Udipi,
a specialist in neuro behavioural medicine



visuals of being trapped in an aircraft or an elevator,” said Udipi adding that other manifestations of this disorder could include mood swings, depression etc.

Airlines train their pilots, cabin crew and ground crew to handle passengers having an anxiety attack. IndiGo is going a step further and planning to start a programme to alleviate the fear of flying, akin to what British Airways has. “We are considering the pros and cons of having such a programme,” says Summi Sharma, vice-president of learning and development at IndiGo.

Dinesh, who spent 23 years of his life flying MiG 21s, decided to understand and treat this disorder in 2016. His choice to start this enterprise was fuelled by his need to address the issue while a market opportunity bolstered it.

The former flight engineer uses a process that is similar to that of the British Airways’ programme. He starts by explaining to candidates the technicalities of flying. He then uses a flight simulator to give a demonstration.

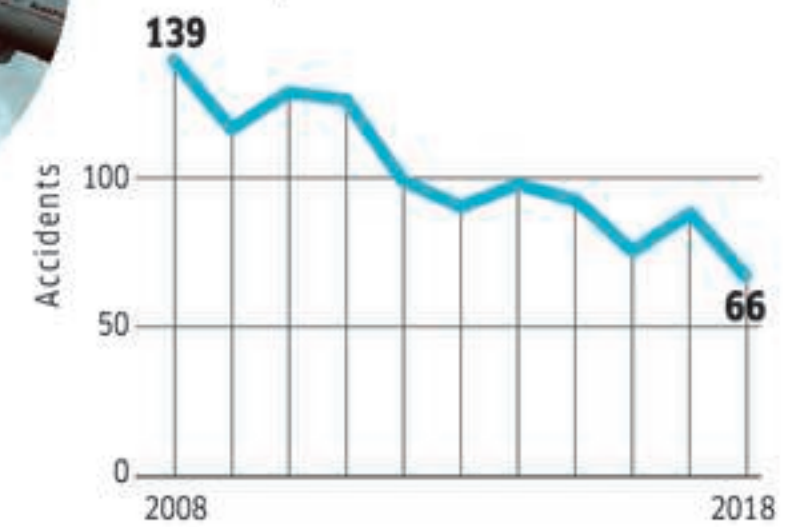
As many as 19 touch screens adorn the mock aeroplane at Cockpit Vista. Remodelled bus seats serve as cockpit seats while passengers sit on remodelled car seats. The candidates get front-seat view to how a pilot would handle a situation. Dinesh slips into the role of a shrink and tries to get a candidate to open up and talk more about their predicament. This helps him gauge their state of mind.

Dinesh has helped over 100 people overcome their fear in the past three years. He now gets about 10 enquiries a month and is able to convert most of these into sessions.

Inside the mock cockpit, Dinesh runs his guests over the technicalities of flying, stressing on all the controls put in place to make sure a plane takes off, cruises and lands safely. “Once a passenger is willing to accept information, he can trust the aircraft.” He even lets people fly the virtual aircraft to help them realise how a phenomenon like turbulence – which can ruffle even a calm passenger – is

ACCIDENTS

Scheduled commercial flights in airplanes above 5.7 tonnes



FATALITIES

Scheduled commercial flights in airplanes above 5.7 tonnes



Source: ICAO

easily handled by the pilot.

After a simulated flight, the passengers head to one corner of the cabin where Dinesh has tucked away a kettle, tea bags and cookies. Over tea, Dinesh continues to assuage their fears and doubts.

Dinesh charges ₹10,000 for this three and a half hour programme. Often after a session, his clients ask him to assist them on their maiden flight. This handholding exercise would cost a passenger ₹5,000 more, apart from the fare.

The British Airways’ programme starts at ₹27,000 for a batch of more than 10 people and could go up to ₹1.36 lakh for smaller groups. Air France charges ₹53,000.

Though this anxiety can largely be described as a psychological phenomenon, at its extreme, it can become a medical condition. Unfortunately, in India while there are psychologists to cater to pilots’ mental wellbeing, specialised care to deal with passengers suffering from such a disorder is glaringly absent. ■

nehal.chaliawala@timesgroup.com

British Airways, Air France and Virgin Airlines offer programmes that help people get over their fear of flying. In India, IndiGo is planning to launch a similar course

BHARAT CHANDA



Spell Check



Meet the Indian-American siblings Shourav and Shobha Dasari, whose startup is honing winners in spelling bee, the ultimate contest for children of the desi diaspora

:: Indulekha Aravind

"This is absolutely historic!"
 "This was impossible!"
 "The spelling bee is changed forever!"

On May 30, incredulous ESPN commentators were grappling to find the right words to convey just how dramatic the last few hours of this year's Scripps National Spelling Bee in the US had been. One could forgive the hyperbole: for the first time in the history of the 92-year-old contest, there were eight cochampions, after the judges ran out of words that would have been difficult enough to eliminate some of them.

Spelling bees are what Americans like to describe as a "uniquely American" pastime to determine the best speller of them all. The Scripps National Spelling Bee, the Olympics of these contests, might be open only to those under 15 years of age, but it's no child's play. To become one of the elite spellers who get to take home a \$50,000 (₹34 lakh) cash prize, it takes hours and hours of dedicated preparation over many years – two to three hours every weekday and up to five hours on Saturdays and Sundays. As the 2018 documentary *Breaking the Bee* puts it, "These kids have put more time into spelling by the time they are 13 than most of us put into anything our entire lives." This is the regimen that helps contestants get familiar with most of the 472,000 words in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, any of which might be thrown at them. Not to forget that they are competing with over 11 million others to get to the top.

This year, six of the eight winners and 38 of the 50 finalists had another tool to help them in the high-stakes competition – they were all customers of SpellPundit, a startup launched by two Indian-American siblings.

Shobha and Shourav Dasari, children of engineers from Andhra Pradesh who migrated to the US 13 years ago, were themselves spelling champs. Shourav, 16, went up to fourth place in the National Spelling Bee while his 18-year-old sister, heading to Stanford this fall, is a three-time semifinalist. Launched in January 2018, their online resource promises to help participants learn words more quickly and accurately, for an annual fee of \$600 (₹41,000).

The usual way to prepare for "bees" is by manually compiling lists of words from the dictionary, learning them and then getting people, usually family members, to quiz you. In contrast, SpellPundit offers a couple of advantages, says Shourav on a Skype call from the Dasaris' home in Texas. "It has 99.9% of the words that could be asked in the Spelling Bee which takes a lot of pressure off the spellers because that means they don't have to go through the entire dictionary, making lists." The siblings also found that it was faster and more effective for the contestants to type the spelling of each word and to test themselves than someone reading out the words and quizzing them. It elimi-



Word Wizards

SpellPundit is a spelling bee tutorial startup launched in January 2018

Its founders are Texas-based Indian-American teenagers Shobha Dasari, 18, and her brother Shourav, 16

The online resource promises a more efficient, faster way to prepare for spelling bees

Six of this year's eight National Spelling Bee winners are SpellPundit customers

Customer base soared after the 2018 winner Karthik Nemmani mentioned he had used the startup

nates the need for a second person to help you prepare. "Through quizzing, one can do 100 or 200 words an hour. With SpellPundit, I could do close to 1,000 words per hour," says the bespectacled adolescent. What's more, the company has a money-back guarantee if a word that pops up during the National Spelling Bee is not on SpellPundit's lists.

From the first 25 customers who signed up through word-of-mouth marketing, the startup now has over 2,000, says Usha Dasari, Shobha and Shourav's mother. The fillip came when last year's winner, Karthik Nemmani, mentioned that he had used SpellPundit. "After that, business skyrocketed," says Usha, who uses her software engineering experience to maintain the website.

It seems appropriate that SpellPundit should have been launched by members of the very community that has come to be closely associated with spelling bees. Indian-Americans have won the US National Spelling Bee every year on the trot since 2008 and this year was no exception, with six of eight winners from the community. Of the last 39 winners, 31 are Indian-Americans, beginning with Balu Natarajan in 1985. For a community that makes up just under 1% of the US population, that's quite an achievement.

The South Asian dominance of spelling bees has also attracted the attention of documentary filmmakers and researchers like Shalini Shankar, an anthropologist at Northwestern University and author of *Beeline: What Spelling Bees Reveal about the New American Childhood*. "Primarily, first-generation immigrants who came as STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) professionals enter their children into these contests," says Shankar. There are also

two other popular spelling bees run by the South Asian community – the North South Foundation and the South Asian Spelling Bee – which act as launchpads for the National Spelling Bee.

Shankar adds that it has become extremely difficult to make it to the National Spelling Bee without a coach or someone dedicated to helping a speller prepare. "Increasingly, elite spellers are going into coaching once they age out of competition, and monetise their years of knowledge to train other aspiring spellers," she says. SpellPundit is one example of such a business.

While SpellPundit's success has attracted a lot of attention, not all of it has been positive. "If spelling is ever going to work again: do something about SpellPundit... The proprietors of this year-old behemoth of an entity have catastrophically damaged the game with their omniscience..." lamented former National Spelling Bee finalist Jacob Williamson in his blog.

Shourav has a different take. "If the level of competition goes up, that can't be a bad thing. The better training there is, the more competitive it is and the more exciting it is for those who are actually competing."

As for the eight-way tie, the 16-year-old says that could have been avoided by ramping up the difficulty level and not repeating words that had come up at regional levels. "There's always going to be several thousand words a speller doesn't know – it's up to the organisers of the bee to find out what those words are and use them." For SpellPundit, as Usha puts it, having multiple winners was a good problem to have. "It was good for business." ■

Raising Rosé

Italy's fresh but dark cerasuolo d'Abruzzo wine shows why one should not judge a rosé by its colour



however, the wine, in popular imagination, meant the clear summer blues in the south of France. Provence with its pinot noirs was rosé country and it still produces some of the best.

However, the huge interest in the category in the US and the UK means that other rosé styles are emerging from unexpected estates and regions.

For instance, earlier this year, Mouton Cadet, the leading Bordeaux wine producer, announced the release of its 2018 Mouton Cadet Rosé made from merlot, cabernet sauvignon and cabernet franc (different grape varieties). Clearly, the phenomenon is getting more pervasive.

Madhulika Dhall who runs the La Cave chain of wine stores, told me about how almost every big wine producer she has met at global fairs such as the Vinexpo in Bordeaux or Prowien in Germany in the last two-three years have a rosé category to showcase.

"However, in India, most people only think of sweet and cheap rosés though well-made ones are neither cheap nor necessarily sweet at all," she says.

Part of the problem is traditional associations with brands such as Mateus Rosé – the sweet frizzante from Portugal that is popular in India too but has ruined palates, in my opinion. In India, options of rosés are limited, with most restaurants listing just about two to four of these.

However, this summer, if you are travelling, you can try interesting and better wines in this category.

The cerasuolo apart, try the rosés from Argentina made from the trending malbec, a grape that you associate with tannic reds than rosés. Or you can try the unusual London Cru made with pinot noir by the Cliff Roberson winery that was launched just six years ago in the United Kingdom, which is emerging as a new wine-making region.

Some of the most iconic rosés need not necessarily be drunk young and fresh since they have a great potential to age. Domaine Tempier Bandol – the iconic Provencal rosé – is one example as are some of the quality Rioja rosé from Spain. Then, wine experts like Jancis Robinson recommend the newly emerging roses from the area around Montpellier.

In the end, whatever you drink, just do better than judge a rosé by its colour. ■

The writer looks at restaurant trends, food history and culinary cultures

:: Anoothi Vishal

It's dusk and the sea is stormy. However, inside Trabocco Punta Cavalluccio, a restaurant inside an old fishing hut (trabocco) set on a wooden pier, the evening's service is proceeding calmly. There is fresh seafood on the table – oysters, clams, octopus carpaccio, sea bass, even babbalucci (snails cooked in tomato sauce) – all washed down by the excellent, dry local wines.

We are in a small village in Abruzzo in south-east Italy, bounded by the Gran Sasso mountains and the Adriatic Sea.

Abruzzo may be lesser known than other Italian regions such as Tuscany, Piedmont or Veneto. But these days, it seems to be at the centre of a wine renaissance.

Newer styles of wine are being created from ancient, local grape varieties, to give us fresh, easy to drink yet quality wines.

Of these, one of the most interesting is a rosé style called the cerasuolo d'Abruzzo, which, in 2010, became Italy's newest DOC (rules on area of production and winemaking).

The cerasuolo, so dubbed after cherries, whose deep red colour it shares, is a rosé that does not look like the stereotypical blush trending on Instagram since two-three years.

This rosé is made from montepulciano grapes that also go into the Montepulciano d'Abruzzo – the more well-known red wine from this region commonly found even on

Indian wine lists as a sort of a medium-priced, medium-quality drink.

The cerasuolo d'Abruzzo, on the other hand, is a far more interesting wine produced by limited contact of the grape skin with the juice. Even a few hours of contact gives this wine a darker colour than the

pretty pink most rose drinkers seem to expect. However, do not judge a rosé (or any other wine) by its colour. Most cerasuolos that I try are fresh, dry and express the fruit and herbs of the landscape. In short, these are delicious summer wines without the disgusting cloying sweetness of badly made rosés.

Many of these wines are relatively high on alcohol – I tried those with 13.5% ABV (alcohol by volume), which is at par with many Bordeaux or Amarone reds. That is because of the region's unique terroir that influences its winemaking.

The sea and the mountains are just 40 km apart in Abruzzo. So the sea air warms even the vineyards on high altitudes, leading to higher alcohol content in the wines.

However, when you taste the cerasuolos, you do not feel the alcohol – the wines are still zesty and fresh.

Pretty is as Pretty Does

What wines such as cerasuolos prove is that it is not necessary to dismiss rosé just as a pretty phenomenon without character or quality. The world over (except India perhaps), rosés are in fashion because of their



(Above) Rolling vineyards in an Abruzzo village. (Above) The cerasuolo grapes

visual appeal.

Actors Angelina Jolie and Drew Barrymore have posed with their rosés. The wine from Jolie's Château Miraval vineyard in France has even won an award. Then there are Instagram accounts such as @YesWayRose that sell all sorts of pink merchandise from being an account devoted to rosé. All of this seems to have sparked the interest of millennials in rosés. There was 64% growth in rosé category in the US in 2018, according to Nielsen State of the Wine Industry Report.

Much before the rediscovery of the rosé,

Most cerasuolos are fresh, dry and express the fruit and herbs of the landscape



Trabocco Punta Cavalluccio restaurant in Abruzzo



A bottle of the darkish cerasuolo d'Abruzzo

Vancouver Vignettes



The city's waterfront



Totems at Stanley Park



Sea life at Vancouver Aquarium

Surrounded by mountains, forests and the Pacific Ocean, the city in British Columbia is also a playground for art, food & adventure sports

:: Neeta Lal

It is easy to be smitten by Vancouver. Forests, mountains, beaches and the ocean are its wallpaper. Gorgeous waterfronts, unique parks and art and culture enclaves add to the Canadian city's allure, while a thriving culinary scene (rivaling those of London and Paris) makes it a compelling stop for travelling gastronomes. There is cultural depth too – a world-class symphony orchestra, live theatre, cinema, folk music and museums of every kind.

Unsurprisingly, the city of nearly 675,000 residents in British Columbia silhouetted against the North Shore Mountains and the Strait of Georgia elicits paeans from celebs.

British travel writer Jim Perrin described Vancouver as "a world-class city with ocean attached". American sportscaster Mark Jones remarked that "everyone wants a part of Vancouver: families from Shanghai, high-achievers from Mumbai, filmmakers from LA [Los Angeles], CGI designers from London – and anyone in

Canada who is a bit fed up with the cold. No Ontario blizzards, no LA smog, no Hong Kong chaos. Just mountains, sea, big skies and wide streets."

The city derives much of its charm from how immersed into nature it is. Forays into the great outdoors located at its doorstep – Cypress Mountain, Grouse Mountain and Mount Seymour – can be sweetly rewarding.

I venture just a little further north to the Whistler Blackcomb resort in one of the largest ski areas in the world.

Adrenaline-fuelling activities such as snowboarding, moun-

tain biking, zip trekking, snowmobiling, heli-tours, kayaking and canoeing and golfing are on offer here.

Over 230 parks pepper Vancouver like confetti. The VanDusen Botanical Garden with its Elizabethan hedge maze, Dr Sun Yat-Sen Classical Chinese Garden inspired by the gardens of Suzhou in eastern China and the big daddy of them all – the Stanley Park, a glorious conglomeration of 1,000 acres of forest, wetlands and beaches.

Nestled between Coal Harbor and Sunset Beach, Stanley Park marks an astonishing transition from urban hubbub to five-star biodiversity, all within minutes.

One moment I am on a freeway surrounded by the city's vertiginous skyscrapers and the next moment I am inhaling pine-scented air amid exquisite Douglas firs, spruces, hemlocks and a 1,000-year-old red cedar known as the Hollow Tree.

The park's Brockton Point entrance is marked by nine towering totem poles carved by native artists depicting traditional themes: thunderbirds, bears and wolves.

As I strolled along the park's seawall, guide Ryan Silverthorn explained that Stanley Park counts as among the world's largest urban parks. The nine-km seawall pathway follows the outline of the penin-

sula along the water with views of beaches and a vibrant sea life. Orcas (killer whales), seals, and grey whales pay visits in summer, I am told.

Vancouver Aquarium, located within the park, is a fascinating showcase of eclectic fauna: rescued sea otters, porpoises, critters, butterflies and turtles, along with British Columbia's renowned salmon, cold-water corals and giant octopuses. I felt like a child watching wondrous displays around every corner – engaging with starfish, jellies, anemone, rays, fishes, eels and other mesmerising marine creatures.

To Cross a Bridge

Incredible as it sounds, the most popular tourist attraction in the city is, well, a foot-bridge. Every year, more than 800,000 visitors cough up nearly 48 Canadian dollars to stomp across the extremely wobbly 450-foot-long and 230-foot-high Capilano Suspension Bridge.

An impressive feat of engineering, some claim the bridge can support the weight of 50 Boeing 747 aircraft. Others say 96 full-grown elephants can cross it in one go. Such claims notwithstanding, there is no doubt about the bridge's fun quotient. As I traversed the shaky bridge holding tight its

railings, my frazzled nerves were soothed somewhat by the sonorous soundtrack of the Capilano River gurgling below. Still giddy from the bridge walk, I followed it up with another adventure:

the Cliffwalk trek that follows a granite precipice beside the Capilano River along a labyrinth of narrow cantilevered bridges, stairs and platforms through a dense rainforest. With 16 anchor points on the cliff bolstering the structure and two glass platforms, Cliffwalk is not for the faint-hearted. But what was stopping me?

A Patch in the Sea

Situated south of the downtown peninsula beneath the Granville Bridge, Granville Island is not technically an island but a patch of land poking out into the inlet. An erstwhile industrial district, it now stands repurposed as a marketplace selling everything – from brooms to artisanal chocolate. To get to the island, we drove through the city to the south end of Hornby Street. As I disembarked from the car on the busy cobbled street studded with restaurants and cafes, I was immediately drawn to the fun vibe of the place. Shoppers bustled about while street performers and musicians played foot-tapping tunes. We negotiated our way around theatres, craft studios, artisan workshops, a brewery, and a saké house to soak in the atmosphere.

Granville's throbbing heart, though, is a covered market brimming with culinary treasures. Over 150 artisans and food vendors compete for business here hawking exotic produce. Purple potatoes anyone?

Or blue cabbages? I volleyed between racks of desserts, charcuterie, cheeses and sausage resisting the urge to wolf down everything in sight. I passed by heaping cartons of raspberries, strawberries, sampled slivers of freshly smoked salmon even as precocious seagulls patrolling outside in search of food entertained me with their antics. ■

The writer is a Delhi-based journalist



The Capilano Suspension Bridge is a major tourist attraction



The ski jumping stadium in Whistler

Moon Mania

India will launch its second moon mission on July 15, aiming to land a rover near the southern pole – an area unexplored so far. Only the US, Russia and China have made successful lunar landings. Here are six successful moon missions that have helped earthlings get closer to their lone satellite

Luna 2 (USSR)
 Launched: September 12, 1959
 Lunar impact: September 14, 1959

The first spacecraft to land on another celestial body transmitted information that helped scientists confirm the earth's only permanent natural satellite has no magnetic field and that the radiation levels on its surface wouldn't pose any threat to a future manned expedition. On October 4, the USSR's Luna 3 probe took the first photographs of the far side of the moon.

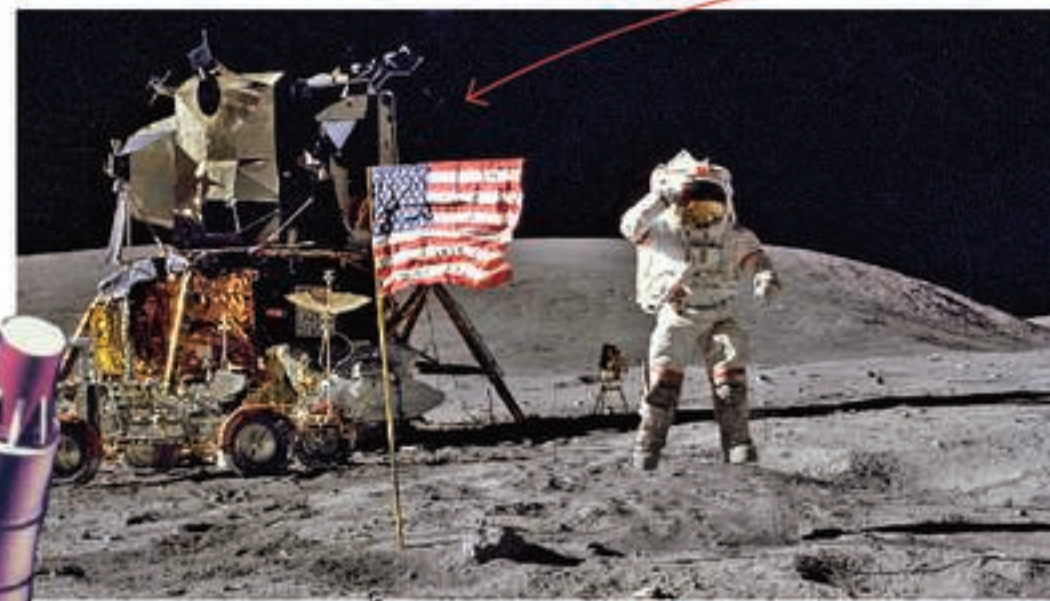


Apollo 8 (USA)
 Launched: December 21, 1968
 Lunar landing: December 24, 1968

Astronauts Frank Borman, James Lovell, and William Anders were the first humans to orbit the moon. They returned to earth on December 27.

Ranger 7 (USA)
 Launched: July 28, 1964
 Lunar impact: July 31, 1964

NASA's spacecraft went in with cameras blazing and captured more than 4,000 photos in the 17 minutes before it smashed onto the surface. Images from the Ranger missions, particularly Ranger 9, showed that the moon's surface was rough.



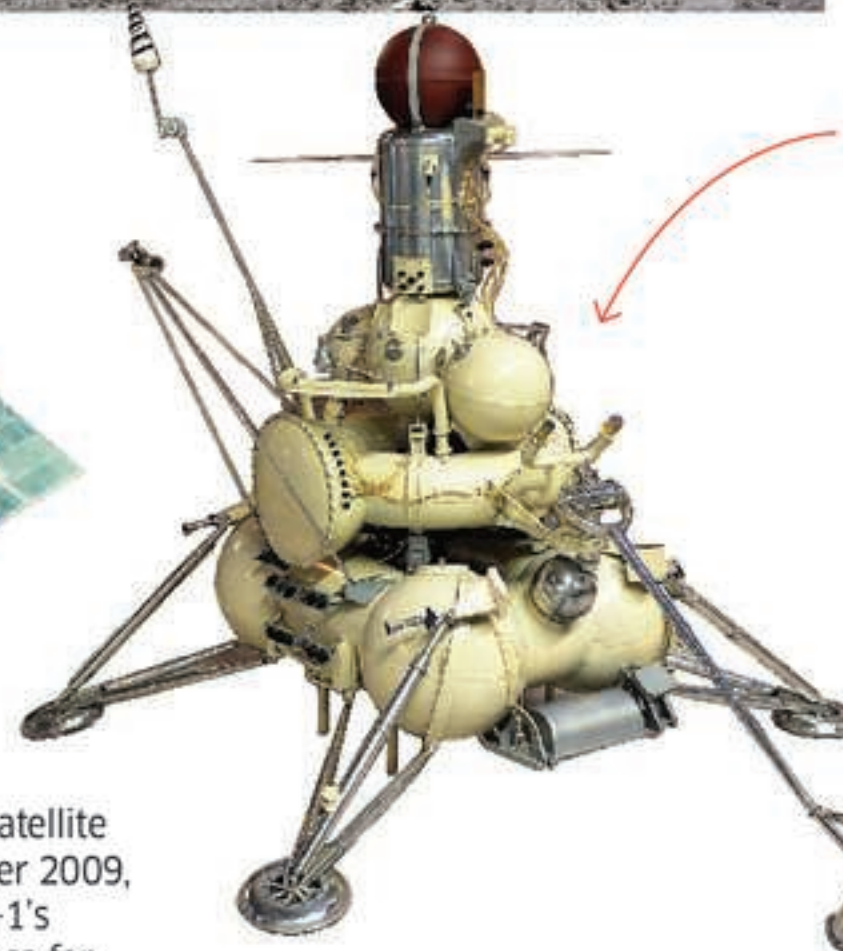
Apollo 11 (USA)
 Launched: July 16, 1969
 Lunar landing: July 20, 1969

Neil Armstrong and Edwin Aldrin became the first men to land on the moon. They returned on July 24 with 20 kg of samples.



Chandrayaan-1 (India)
 Launched: October 22, 2008
 Contact lost: August 29, 2009

Chandrayaan-1 was India's first satellite to leave earth's orbit. In September 2009, results from one of Chandrayaan-1's instruments helped detect evidence for water on the moon.



Luna 16 (USSR)
 Launched: September 12, 1970
 Lunar landing: September 20, 1970

Luna 16 was the first robotic mission to land on the moon, collect samples of dust and rock, and return those samples to Earth. Luna 16 was also the first spacecraft to land in the lunar darkness. After collecting dust and rock samples, the spacecraft was launched back into space 26 hours later. It returned to earth on September 24.

THIS WEEK, THAT YEAR

June 16-22



June 16, 1963
 Soviet Cosmonaut Valentina Tereshkova becomes the first woman to travel into space. She returns to earth after 48 orbits and 71 hours on the Vostok 6.

June 17, 1885

The Statue of Liberty, a gift from France to America, arrives in New York as 350 pieces packed in more than 200 cases.



June 18, 1815
 An army under the command of the Duke of Wellington, with the help of Prussian army, defeats the French army under Napoleon Bonaparte

near Waterloo in Belgium. Bonaparte subsequently abdicates his throne, surrenders to the British and is exiled to the remote island of Saint Helena.

June 19, 1991

Drug lord Pablo Escobar surrenders to Colombian police and is lodged in his luxury private prison, La Catedral, which featured a football pitch, giant doll house, bar, jacuzzi and waterfall. A new constitution prevents his extradition to the US.



JAWS



June 20, 1975
 Steven Spielberg's thriller Jaws debuts in theaters, starting the era of summer blockbuster and a genre of action-thriller movies.

June 22, 1986

Diego Maradona scores two goals to lead Argentina past England and into the semifinals of the World Cup. The first goal was a handball that the referee did not notice and has come to be known as the Hand of God goal.



SOURCE: NASA.COM, SPACE.COM, PLANETARY.ORG, NATIONALGEOGRAPHIC.COM, ISRO.GOV.IN, NEWS AGENCIES

SOURCE: FXCM.COM, KESAB.ASN.AU, ONTHISDAY.COM

WEEKLY VECTOR

Most Peaceful Countries in the World

Global Peace Index, 2019, has found the world is less peaceful now that it was in 2008



ICELAND
01



NEW ZEALAND
02



PORTUGAL
03



AUSTRIA
04



DENMARK
05



CANADA
06



INDIA
141

Source: Institute for Economics and Peace

Follow us on @magazine_et | Write to us with feedback etmagazine@timesgroup.com

GIRNAR[®]
MY CHAI MY TIME

Also buy online at www.chaichai.in

This father's day,

**make a drink
for your dad**

Happy Father's Day

16th June '19



Instant Premix Tea
Just add hot water

