

## Advisors and doers

For someone in India, it seems incredible that China can set up two hospitals with a combined total of about 2,300 beds in less than 10 days, in virus-hit Wuhan. How can it be possible? The answer is that one is a hospital already being built and scheduled to open in May. That deadline was moved forward, to all of 48 hours. Another is a hospital that copies one built (within a week) in Beijing in 2003 to deal with the SARS epidemic. But the questions don't go away. Was there no problem with land acquisition? No, because the hospital is being built on what had been gardens next to a recreation area. Wasn't time needed to invite bids for civil works and special medical equipment, and a committee to do a short-list and then pick the lowest bidder? Apparently not, because state-owned companies are doing the job. And what kind of construction technique can deliver vast new structures in virtually no time? Pre-fab structures, of course. Still, those hospitals are making headlines around the world.

So it might be a good idea for the next Economic Survey to deal with not just the many "What" and "Why" questions in economics, but also the "How". There is no other way to understand how the impossible becomes possible — as more than a campaign slogan. India struggles with budgets and procedures, and still has a major corruption problem that can send a project off the rails. China has corruption, for sure, but no other economy with a per capita income of \$10,000 is able to grow at 6 per cent, or anywhere near that rate.

How do they do it, when in five years the Kejriwal government has been able to provide about 450 *mohalla* clinics in Delhi, after it promised 1,000? The latest available railway yearbook says that the organisation has been able to spend only two-thirds of its ₹1.2 trillion investment budget in each of the two latest years. Such failures to deliver make one lose patience with the Survey's debates on first principles like the importance of exports for growth and jobs; how government interventions in markets can do more harm than good; and wealth creation through privatisation. Surely we should have imbibed such lessons long ago.

The excuses are readily available, of course. China is an authoritarian system where you can't really go to court against land acquisition or choice of contractor; where a top-down decision-making structure helps to push aside whatever roadblocks exist; and where money never seems to be a constraint. Still you have to marvel when a single shipyard in Shanghai is building close to the equivalent of India's entire fleet of destroyers, plus an aircraft carrier, hovercraft, and satellite-tracking ships — all at the same time. The Indian navy would consider itself lucky to get six technologically-dated submarines in 20 years!

Is there a solution? Yes, railway engineers of old like the metro builder E Sreedharan, builders of government companies like D V Kapur and V Krishnamurthy, and agricultural scientists like M S Swaminathan have shown how they made a difference when given a free hand. Vineet Nayyar as head of Gas Authority of India was able to build a massive gas pipeline within cost and deadline in the 1980s. The officers who are in charge of Swachh Bharat and Ayushman Bharat, and the one who has cleaned up Indore, are others who, while they may not match China's speed, can deliver. Perhaps all we have to do is to spot more like them and give them a free hand.

India's problem has never been a shortage of good advice. The Survey may well be right in arguing that India's recent growth rates are not exaggerated, as critics have argued, and that next year will see 6-6.5 per cent growth (though it is more than what other analysts have predicted). But it is almost certainly wrong in assuming that the Modi government will use its strong mandate to undertake some serious reform measures. For, unless the finance minister surprises everyone, it is fairly clear that the government's priorities lie elsewhere, in the powerful home minister's domain.

## The craft of war

India can defeat Pakistan in less than a week. But first it should define victory, know when to declare it, have decisive conventional edge, and stop flying MiG-21s

Speaking at the founding day of the National Cadet Corps (NCC) on Tuesday, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said all India's armed forces needed to defeat Pakistan was seven to ten days.

Was he talking through his hat? Can the world's fourth-largest military power defeat the fifth-largest in just about a week or so? Particularly when they are both nuclear-armed?

If the answer to all three questions is what seems an obvious "yes" to the first and "no" to the next two, we could be done with it with a 140-character tweet. We wouldn't be wasting your time, labouring over 1,200 words.

The answers, therefore, are: First that Mr Modi is no delusional nutcase. If he wasn't phenomenally smart, he wouldn't have come this far. The second and third questions have one answer: Whether or not you can win a war in seven-ten days would also depend on how you define that "victory".

The genuinely strategic issues do tend to be complex, and somewhat less fun than what prime time debates on some commando comic channels might want to make you believe. They can defeat Pakistan, and maybe with China thrown in, in half an hour, leaving time for commercial breaks. In real life, we might need to explore history, strategic and political, and some non-classical definitions of victory and defeat. That's why, this week's argument begins with Mr Modi, will go back to the two Bhuttos, father and daughter; Indira Gandhi; V P Singh; and Atal Bihari Vajpayee, and return to Mr Modi.

The central truth now is that a country or even a set of countries defeating another in the manner of World War-II is now an impossibility. We don't even have a significant instance of that happening since that war. Americans, the mightiest of all, failed in Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq. A mere regime change isn't a victory.

The Soviet failure in Afghanistan ended their ideology and military bloc. Saudi Arabia, enormously more powerful and richer, has failed to defeat a poor Yemen in almost five years. Iraq invaded Iran in 1980, hoping to take advantage of chaos in the wake of the revolution there. Eight years later, all both countries had was corpses, cripples, prisoners of war, but no tangible gains.

This is by no means an exhaustive list. You might, for the sake of an argument, find an exam-

ple here or there, such as Bosnia. But again, a regime change by a multinational force in such a small country wouldn't really count for a victory in the sense of a nation defeating another.

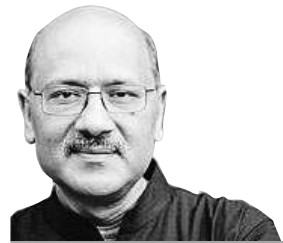
Closer home, in 73 years, marked by four large wars against two adversaries, China and Pakistan, two have ended decisively. It is easy to remember the one we won, in 1971 against Pakistan, and impossible to forget the one we lost, in 1962 to China.

The war India won, 1971, lasted all of 13 days. The defeat against China, in 1962, also came over about two fortnights of intense operations with a recess of sorts in between. This tells you something counter-intuitive to what our immediate reaction to Mr Modi's statement on the NCC Day would be. So, don't laugh at the idea that one strong country can defeat another in seven to ten days. Because our generation has seen exactly that at home, twice.

This brings us to the nub of the issue. How do we define victory or defeat when modern nations fight? In 1971, the moment Dacca fell, Indira Gandhi offered Pakistan a ceasefire in the more evenly matched western sector. The moment Pakistan accepted, she could declare victory. Similarly, in 1962, China offered India a ceasefire unilaterally, and even announced they were returning to their pre-war positions (except in some parts of Ladakh). The moment India accepted it, vowing to fight another day, China could declare victory. The Chinese knew the risk of getting into an unwinnable war of attrition if they ventured into the plains, and Mrs Gandhi, sobered by Soviet allies, also understood the relative military parity in the western sector.

A war is won, therefore, not when a country is comprehensively defeated, brought down to its knees as with Nazi Germany and imperialist Japan, or the norm in medieval era. It is won when one nation decides it has achieved its objective. To win a war now, you first have to set your objective clearly beforehand, and then have the foresight to seize the moment to declare victory. Earlier the better.

Apply this test to some other familiar situations. Kargil was a relatively tiny war and India won it only because Atal Bihari Vajpayee and his counsels defined victory narrowly and precisely as



NATIONAL INTEREST

SHEKHAR GUPTA

## Are food and political preferences correlated?



## VIEWPOINT

DEVANGSHU DATTA

In early April 2016, Foursquare predicted the Mexican food restaurant chain Chipotle had suffered a 30 per cent decline in sales between January-March 2016. Chipotle's results, released a few days later, showed sales were down 28.4 per cent. Foursquare had made similar, eerily accurate estimates earlier—it had correctly projected the number of iPhones sold on a weekend for example.

Foursquare claims to be the "most trusted independent data location platform" and it provides popular online city guides. Its data is based on app-users "checking in" at specific locations, recommenda-

tions of places to visit, etc. Its insight into Chipotle's sales, and Apple's weekend sales, was based on analysis of this data.

This is one example of how data can be mined to offer unusual, actionable insights. Another example arose from a recent survey conducted by *The New York Times* and Siena College in the US state of Iowa. When 584 Democrat voters were asked about their culinary preferences, it transpired that those who liked Indian food were more likely to vote for Bernie Sanders, while those who did not eat Indian food were more likely to vote for Joe Biden in the Democratic Primaries. Just as interestingly, registered Republicans who had been to Europe, Australia, Canada, or Mexico, or ate at Indian restaurants, were less enamoured of Donald Trump, than Republicans who had not travelled outside the US, or eaten Indian food.

Food preferences are more obviously political in India. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has associated its brand with veneration of the cow, and more broadly with vege-

tarianism. Not only do BJP governments try to ban beef anywhere they have leverage; BJP-ruled states have banned sale of meat during Jain festivals and stopped serving eggs to under-nourished children in school midday meals. The lynching of Muslims on the grounds that they are beef-eaters is also quite a popular pastime in BJP-ruled states.

Vegetarianism is generally associated with upper castes. But rising incomes over the last two decades has translated into higher meat and egg consumption. Household surveys and self-declarations in the Census 2011 suggest that meat-eating is far more prevalent than the BJP's ideologues would have us believe.

The 2011 Census data indicates that only about 30 per cent of Indians above 15 declare themselves to be vegetarian — and this may be an

over-statement made due to social pressures. The number varies a lot from state to state, and caste to caste.

There may be a correlation between the BJP vote-share and vegetarianism. India has five states with around half the population, or more, claiming to be vegetarian. These are Rajasthan, Haryana, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh (MP) and Punjab. Gujarat and Haryana are currently BJP-ruled, while Rajasthan and MP had BJP governments for years. Even Punjab has endured a BJP-Akali Dal coalition. All five of these states have stable BJP vote share, which seem to map to the number of vegetarians.

India also has eight states, where less than 10 per cent of the population claims to be vegetarian. Out of Telangana, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh,

which depresses sales and profits, which depresses investment, which depresses increases in incomes and new jobs. You don't need a Nobel in economics or even a degree from JNU to see this.

Yet this is exactly where the economy is today. Hence the test: Reduce expenditure. Tax less. And watch the economy revive. That's all there is to it. So I, at least, will judge the Budget by its efforts to keep expenditure under control. And I think it will, because the finance minister and her expenditure secretary both enjoy the confidence of the prime minister.

Of course all three will pretend that they have actually increased expenditure because that's politically required. But in reality I expect them to keep it at this year's levels.

In any case, they don't have the revenues to increase expenditure by much. That leaves borrowing to finance higher spending but from whom? So necessity may well be the mother of abstention.

**Spend less, earn more**

But Budgets are not only about expenditure. They are

Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Odisha, Jharkhand and Bihar, only Bihar has a BJP presence, as a coalition partner. The only Southern state where the BJP has a large vote share is Karnataka, where vegetarians comprise 21 per cent of the population.

We need more granular, hyper-local data to see if there is a strong overlap in votes and diet, of course. Such data could perhaps be available with food delivery firms like Swiggy and Zomato. It would be interesting to analyse this for Delhi and other metros, where there may be pin codes and, therefore, constituencies that are more, or less, vegetarian.

Would vote share map out the same way? Does more meat consumption translate into fewer votes for the BJP, and vice-versa; does lower meat consumption lead to more votes? It's an intriguing thought. Given a correlation between rising incomes and more meat consumption, acceptance of this hypothesis could also lead to Chanakya-style justifications for tanking the economy.

also about revenue, and not necessarily tax revenue.

So this is the second way to judge the Budget: What the increase in non-tax revenue is and what the sources are.

Basically, in the current context it means asset sales. This is tricky because some stupid people will talk about selling the family silver. Others will talk about the price.

But the time has long gone for getting back what has been spent. What is needed is a garage sale.

So this is the other criterion: What is the change in the policy towards asset sales? Having itself caused deflation by demonetisation and an appallingly bad implementation of GST, now the government can't say it's waiting for prices to get back up.

That's not going to happen for a few years. In any case what's fair value for public sector sheds full of useless men and machines?

The next general election is four years away. That's enough time to recover — provided the government stops spending and taxing so much.

The rest is a matter of detail.

## Days to come

## EYE CULTURE

SUHIT K. SEN

In December 2019, the International Cricket Council (ICC) mooted the proposal to reduce the maximum period over which Test cricket is played from five days to four. Its Cricket Committee is slated to meet in Dubai late March to discuss the proposal.

The committee will not take the final decision though. It will make a recommendation to the ICC's executive committee, which will further discuss the matter and take a position on the recommendation, and will pass on to the ICC's governing body. The final decision will be taken by it.

This proposal has provoked a sharp debate. Those opposed to the idea seem at this point in time to be the more vocal and vociferous. So, let us begin by looking at the logic that may lie behind this proposal. There is first, and possibly foremost, financial and commercial considerations. Some people who support the proposal say that not only is organising five-day Tests more costly, there is a possibility of losing money if a Test winds up in four, or, for that matter, three days.

Allied to this is the commercial argument, which is slightly different. This says that it is difficult to sustain interest over five days. Reducing the number to four, ideally taking in a weekend, Saturday to Tuesday or Thursday to Sunday, would help generate more interest and, therefore, help bring in more revenues.

These arguments are based to a large extent on one perception, which can be statistically tested, which is that Test matches have increasingly tended to fold up in well under five days. Is this true? Since the beginning of 2018 to the end of August 2018, 40 out of 67 Tests ended in under five days. That works out to almost 60 per cent.

Moreover, a number of Tests that ended in five days did so because playing time was curtailed, usually because of rain. This fact is a double-edged sword. The "pro-changers" can cite it to argue that five days are not really needed to decide a Test match. The "no-changers" can argue that it is precisely the need to factor in delays that makes a fifth day necessary, as back up.

The list of those who are opposed is pretty long. Indian captain Virat Kohli and One-day International vice-captain have been categorically opposed to the idea. Former Australia cricketers Glenn McGrath, Ricky Ponting and Justin Langer, now the coach of the Australian side, have also expressed their disapproval. Of the cricket boards, Australia, England and South Africa's have supported the proposal.

More to the point, a number of

the mere withdrawal of Pakistan to the Line of Control. Pakistan had initiated that war with the objective of grabbing crucial territory and forcing India to negotiate Kashmir.

Vajpayee set defeating that objective as his target and declared victory the moment it was achieved.

Both Pakistan and India claim 1965 a win. Here is the equation if we follow the parameters we've just set. Pakistan started that war, with the objective of grabbing Kashmir. It had the technological, tactical, diplomatic superiority and the strategic space and cushion to do so.

If India still denied Pakistan that moment, you can conclude who won or lost, although militarily the war was a stalemate, the equivalent of a cricket Test petering out to a dull, pointless draw. Balakot is a more complicated case.

India bombed Balakot deep inside the mainland of Pakistan to deliver a strategic and political message. That objective achieved, it had nothing more to do except brace for a Pakistani counter. Whatever the score in the air skirmish on the following morning, the Pakistanis were left with an IAF pilot and the wreckage of his plane. This enabled both sides to declare victory.

A good example where no such thing happened was Op Parakram and "coercive diplomacy" after the terror attack on Parliament. No clear objectives were set, and the build-up continued for so long that it became unsustainable. The moment to declare victory, however, had come very early in the day, on January 12, 2002, within a month of the Parliament attack, when Gen. Pervez Musharraf made his famous speech suing for peace. India missed it, and the entire venture was wasted.

The duration of a war is more a function of rhetoric than strategy. The clearest example of this is senior (Zulfiqar Ali) Bhutto vowing a 1,000-year war on India while his troops were surrendering in Dacca. His daughter Benazir renewed this in the warlike summer of 1990 (her "Jagmohan ko jag-jag, mo-mo, han-han kar denge" days).

It even provoked a weak-kneed pacifist like V P Singh, then prime minister, into asking in Parliament whether those who threatened 1,000-year wars could last even a thousand hours. That, by the way, adds up to 41 days and about 15 hours, more than the two wars, 1965 and 1971, combined.

How long you say you'd fight for — 1,000 years, 1,000 hours, or seven-ten days — is all rhetoric. The reality is simpler: Do you know how you define victory and have the foresight to seize the moment to declare it? In the India-Pakistan context, it could have come even after just an hour on the morning of February 26, 2019, or, latest by noon the following day. But for that, India had to have a decisive, deterrent conventional edge over Pakistan. If that is built in years to come, it might even be possible to defeat Pakistan in less than a week. You could even win with deterrence, without fighting. Not, of course, if you are still flying MiG-21s.

By special arrangement with ThePrint

## How to judge the Budget



## LINE AND LENGTH

T C A SRINIVASA-RAGHAVAN

Much has been said about India's twin balance-sheet problem and the Great Indian Slowdown. It's like a person getting a stroke and a heart attack at the same time.

Usually the cause is the same: Obesity caused by a fat-filled diet. This is exactly the economy's problem today, which has two major problems at this juncture. Together they have caused the enormous slowdown in growth.

The first, from which every single problem follows — like a bad diet — is that the government is spending too much on politically beneficial pro-

grammes, thus leaving less for others, and taking too much from citizens to finance this spending.

This was the UPA's *halwai* approach, formulated by a bunch of NGO bleeding hearts. They called themselves the National Advisory Council and were headed by Sonia Gandhi.

The second problem is a result of this. It's no one's case that the government should not collect tax. But the manner in which this is being done under NDA II is scaring people and depressing the business mood.

This Budget must, therefore, be judged by whether it reduces government expenditure and thus helps lift spirits by taxing less. It's been done once before in 1991 and 1997. Exit gorilla, followed by sighs of relief.

In 1991, the next general election was far away in 1996. Then as now the government was very nearly broke. Then as now the business sentiment was deeply depressed.

The formula that worked then was simple: The govern-

ment stepped back and let the private sector take up the slack. It also made a lot of positive noises that helped cheer everyone up. It used the CII and Ficci to dance, with colourful handfans, on the sidelines.

**The original sin**

Have no doubts about it. Government spending on welfare and "development" is the original sin. Anyone who endorses it is, quite simply, a fool because it doesn't work.

Quite simply, the state must not concern itself with individual welfare, only the provision of pure public and quasi-public goods like health and education. Spending on other things is a recipe for fiscal disaster.

This is because when the government spends a lot on the welfare of individuals, it also means it taxes a lot and borrows a lot. High taxation, which only the very perverse and/or very stupid people support, leaves less in the hands of citizens to spend.

This depresses consump-

# FPIs pare holdings of ₹6k crore

**With 12% surge in VIX over the week, traders bracing for volatility**

**SAMIE MODAK**  
Mumbai, 31 January

Foreign portfolio investors (FPIs), key drivers of the bourses, have lightened their holdings ahead of the Budget to be presented on Saturday. In the previous five sessions, they had liquidated shares worth nearly ₹6,000 crore. A large part of the sell-off can be attributed to the outbreak of the Coronavirus.

Market players say the possibility of savvy investors taking money off the table ahead of the Budget cannot be ruled out. On Friday, FPIs sold shares worth ₹4,179 crore, the highest single-day selloff in more than two years.

The India VIX, a barometer for market volatility, shot up 12 per cent during the week. This signals that the markets could see huge gyrations following the Budget.

The equity markets will remain open on Saturday. Experts say traders have positioned themselves for a volatile day of trade.

Going by past data, the Sensex typically witnesses huge swings and ends the Budget session lower. The Sensex has swung an average 3 per cent in the past 15 Budget-day sessions. It ended 10 of the last 15 Budget sessions lower.

Market players said that the government has to strike the right balance between keeping the fiscal deficit in control and announcing measures to revive growth.

This will keep the markets on the tenterhooks.

"The Budget is always important from a market point of view. More so this year because it will give investors a sense about what the government is thinking about the slowdown," said Abhiram Eleswarapu, head of India equity research, BNP Paribas.

"The fiscal deficit is the critical piece. The government may be thinking of maintaining the fiscal deficit targets. In that case, it will need to cut expenditure as revenue collections have been below expectations. This will help achieve fiscal deficit target but end up prolonging the slowdown. The other alternative is to not cut back on expenditure. This could mean that you miss the fiscal deficit target but that will be a solution to alleviate

consumer stress," he added. Eleswarapu said the market could see a correction if the Budget disappoints.

On the last three Budget days, market swing has been below the long-term average of 3 per cent.

Ridham Desai, head of India equity research at Morgan Stanley, said impact of the Budget on the market has declined over the years. However, it still remains a key event from the markets' point of view.

"The impact of the Budget on the market has been on a secular decline. Nevertheless, market participants still need to negotiate volatility," he said.

The government's spending plan on infrastructure and farmers, a credible fiscal deficit target and re-alignment of direct taxes (including long-term capital gains or LTCG tax) are some key factors that will impact investor sentiment, according to Desai.

Some investors are hoping that the government will offer some relaxations when it comes to stock market-oriented taxes such as dividend distribution tax, buyback tax, and LTCG.

Sanjay Mookim, India equity strategist, Bank of America Merrill Lynch, said if some of these expectations are met, it will be a positive for stocks. However, it "may not result in any significant de-coupling of India from emerging markets."



## ROLLER-COASTER RIDE

Markets have seen an average 3% swing on Budget days

Date	Intra-day swing (%)	Change (%)	PM
29-02-2008	3.0	-1.4	P Chidambaram
16-02-2009	3.9	-3.4	Pranab Mukherjee
06-07-2009	8.2	-5.8	Pranab Mukherjee
26-02-2010	2.6	1.1	Pranab Mukherjee
28-02-2011	3.3	0.7	Pranab Mukherjee
16-03-2012	2.6	-1.2	Pranab Mukherjee
28-02-2013	2.8	-1.5	P Chidambaram
17-02-2014	0.8	0.5	P Chidambaram
10-07-2014	3.2	-0.3	Arun Jaitley
28-02-2015	2.3	0.5	Arun Jaitley
29-02-2016	3.8	-0.7	Arun Jaitley
01-02-2017	2.1	1.8	Arun Jaitley
01-02-2018	2.1	-0.2	Arun Jaitley
01-02-2019	1.5	0.6	Piyush Goyal
05-07-2019	1.5	-1.0	Nirmala Sitharaman

Note: \*Difference between intra-day high and low; change is over previous day's close  
Source: Capitaline; BS Research Bureau

## ITI extends FPO closing

**SAMIE MODAK**  
Mumbai, 31 January

ITI extended the closing of its follow-on public offer (FPO) for a second time, on Friday, on account of a short-fall in demand.

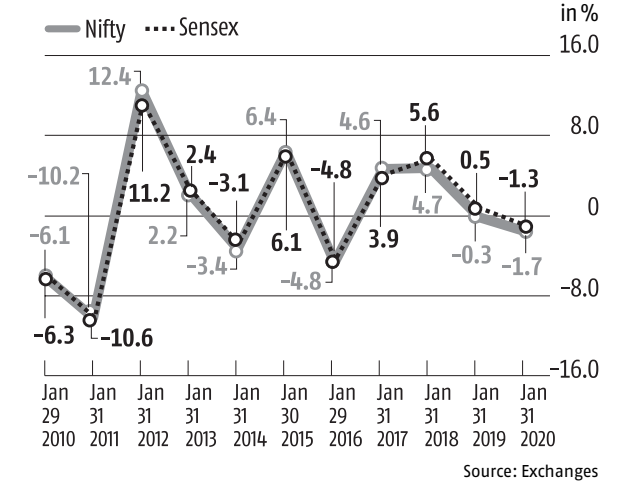
The state-owned telecom technology firm cited the banking strike for the extension. "We wish to inform you that there is an ongoing banking strike in the country and as per the Regulation 142(3) of the 2018 SEBI ICDR Regulations, which states that in case of any force majeure, banking strike or similar circumstance, the issuer may extend the issue period for a minimum of three working days. In accordance with Regulation 142(3) and keeping in mind the circumstances, the FPO Committee has decided to extend the issue period by four working days," it said in an exchange filing.

The issue will now close on February 5. It was scheduled to close on January 28.

However, the firm had decided to extend it till January 31 and had lowered the price band due to the lukewarm response by investors. As of Friday, the FPO was subscribed 58 per cent. The price band is ₹71-77 per share. ITI's stock last closed at ₹85.6 on the NSE.

Through the FPO, the company aims to raise ₹1,300 crore, which will be used to pare debt.

# Markets see worst January in 4 years as Budget looms



**RONOJOY MAZUMDAR**  
Mumbai, 31 January

The benchmark index fell on Friday, capping its worst January since 2016 as the government grapples with measures to spur the slowing economy. The Sensex fell 0.5 per cent to 40,723.49 at the close of trade, resulting in a monthly loss of 1.3 per cent, its worst such performance since July and start to the year since 2016. The NSE's Nifty, too, declined 0.6 per cent.

Local markets will remain open on Saturday, enabling investors to trade as Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman outlines the country's annual Budget as the government seeks to revive demand. Growth in Asia's third-largest economy is at its slowest pace in more than a decade. As the earnings season progresses, 14 out of 26 Nifty companies that have reported results for the quarter through December have missed analyst estimates. ITC, Hindustan Unilever, and Vedanta are posted their financial results on Friday.

Strategist view "There are a lot of expectations on the positive side from the Budget," said Sanjiv Bhasin, an analyst at IIFL Securities in Mumbai. "The recent correction in the market provided investors with a good buying opportunity," he added.

## Indices recoil as Economic Survey stokes fears of fiscal slippage

The Sensex fell 190 points and the Nifty closed below the 12,000-mark on Friday, after the Economic Survey suggested relaxing the fiscal deficit target to boost growth. The indices opened on a firm footing, but came under selling pressure in afternoon trade, coinciding with the opening of the Budget session of Parliament and tabling of the Economic Survey.

The Sensex closed 190.33 points or 0.47 per cent lower at 40,723.49. Likewise, the broader Nifty shed 73.70 points, or 0.61 per cent, to finish at 11,962.10. The Economic Survey projected revival of economic growth to 6.0-6.5 per cent in the next fiscal year, from 5 per cent estimated in FY20. Traders added that the prospects of increased government borrowing and crowding out of private sector investment spooked market participants, thereby triggering the unwinding of positions.

# SBI beats estimates, Q3 PBT surges 65.7%

**ABHIJIT LELE & SHREEPAD S AUTÉ**  
Mumbai, 31 January

State Bank of India (SBI) put up a better-than-expected show during the December 2019 quarter (Q3FY20), on most operational parameters. The exception was on the loan growth front, possibly on account of the overall slowdown in the economy.

Good recovery from the Essar Steel stressed loan account provided an impetus to the Q3 performance. However, gains were restricted due to the DHFL account turning bad. The stock rose 2.5 per cent to ₹318.55 at close on Friday, even as the benchmark Sensex fell 0.5 per cent.

The bank posted 22.4 per cent year-on-year (YoY) growth in net interest income to ₹27,779 crore. Profit before tax surged 65.7 per cent from the year before to ₹10,970 crore, much ahead of Street expectations.



## STELLAR PERFORMANCE

Corporation tax cuts boosted net profit (in ₹ crore)

	Q3FY19	Q3FY20	% change
Net interest income	22,691	27,779	22.4
Net profit	3,955	5,583	41.2
Gross NPA (%)	8.7	6.9	
Net NPA (%)	4.0	2.7	

Source: Results filing; compiled by BS Research Bureau

In a Bloomberg poll, analysts had pegged these two metrics at ₹25,587 crore and ₹9,046 crore, respectively. Net profit grew 41.2 per cent to ₹5,583 crore, driven partly by the lower corporation tax rates.

SBI Chairman Rajnish Kumar said the performance on all parameters was satisfactory. "A large housing finance company (DHFL) account slipped into the non-performing asset (NPA), or bad loan category. There was also recovery

(around ₹11,000 crore) in Q3 from resolution of a large steel company (Essar Steel). The economic slowdown is impacting the profit, though not the profitability," he added.

The bank's corporate loan book declined by about 0.5 per cent YoY. The retail (to small lenders) book grew 9.7 per cent, a bit lower than the 12.5 per cent growth in Q2.

A 17 per cent YoY rise in the foreign loan book helped advances grow

6.8 per cent to ₹23 trillion, also lower than the 9 per cent growth during Q2.

The recovery from the Essar Steel account led to the bank adding back the accrued interest and provisioning made earlier. It had provided 100 per cent provisioning on its balance sheet for loans given to Essar Steel.

With this, operating profit surged 44.3 per cent YoY to ₹18,223 crore, against analysts' expectation of ₹15,595 crore. Net interest margin for domestic operations improved by 62 basis points (bps) over the year to 3.59 per cent.

Though, in absolute terms, the provisioning increased by around 21 per cent YoY, its credit cost (provisioning as a percentage of the loan book) fell to 1.8 per cent, from 1.98 per cent in the earlier quarter. In fact, this was the lowest in many quarters despite higher slippages or loans turning bad.

Cyrus Dadabhojy, vice-president at Centrum Broking, said: "Slippages,

excluding the stressed housing finance account, are in line with expectations."

On a yearly basis, fee income rose 19.3 per cent to ₹5,635 crore and deposits by 9.9 per cent to ₹31.1 trillion.

The share of the low-cost current and savings accounts in total deposits declined to 44.7 per cent at the end of December, from 45.2 per cent a year ago.

Gross NPAs (or non-performing assets) fell to 6.94 per cent (as a proportion of advances) in Q3, from 7.19 per cent in Q2 and from 8.71 per cent a year before. The net NPA ratio at 2.65 per cent was also down 130 bps YoY and 14 bps sequentially.

Besides slippage in the DHFL account (₹7000 crore), the bank also recognised NPAs from its agriculture portfolio worth ₹2,900 crore. Debt-waiver schemes impacted recoveries and renewing of loans in the sector, the chairman said.

▶ FROM PAGE 1

# A design for wealth creation

Among the reforms that the Survey advocates to boost "wealth creation" in India is the end of unnecessary and counter-productive intervention by the government in the economy.

Here the Survey highlights the Essential Commodities Act (ECA) in particular, using research that shows that the imposition of stock limits had "no effect" on price volatility of onions over the past year, but that 76,000 raids under the ECA were conducted during 2019 of which under four per cent led to convictions.

Thus, the main effect of the ECA was to harass traders and to dis-incentivise inventory-keeping. Similar policies which had counter-productive effects

included the Drugs Prices Control Order of 2013, which the Survey said increased the prices of drugs sold through hospitals.

Highlighting the sharp increase in major subsidies in the Budget, led by the growth in the food subsidies, the Survey pointed out that "the intervention of government has led to a disconnect between the demand and supply of grains" and argued that farmer support needs to be realigned towards incentivising farmers to diversify their production away from foodgrain.

The Survey also argues in favour of integrating India with world markets deeply enough that "network products" such as electronics and automobiles

are assembled in India for world markets. In this context it dissents from general government policy by pointing out that recent free trade agreements have in fact benefited India, finding that on the average Indian exports to its FTA partners has increased more than imports. The Survey reiterated in this context that policy measures "should focus on reducing input tariffs and implementation of key factor market reforms".

Other chapters of the Survey focused on the growth of entrepreneurship, on dealing with cronyism, and privatisation. On entrepreneurship, the Survey found that a 10 per cent increase in the registration of new firms in a district

led to a 1.8 per cent increase in the district's output. It argued also that the anti-corruption moves since 2011-12 had led to a reduction in cronyism that was visible in the data on, for example, related party transactions of firms receiving natural resources.

In spite of its justification of fiscal slippage, the Survey also pointed out that the root cause of the slowdown was low private investment. It blamed that on risk aversion in scheduled commercial banks (SCBs) following the non-performing asset crisis. But it also gestured at government borrowing as a problem, saying that the "easy investment in G-secs" was a complementary factor and that SCBs "chose to invest thrice the

amount in G-secs in the current year as compared to the previous year, while reducing their credit off-take by more than four-fifths".

In terms of policy prescriptions for the financial sector, however, the Survey has been relatively restrained. Instead of arguing again for greater private control, Subramanian instead suggests leveraging big data algorithms by pooling data held by public sector banks, and by increasing employee ownership to give them more of a stake in the PSB's performance. The CEA also devoted a chapter to seeking to refute the finding of his predecessor, Arvind Subramanian, that India's GDP was overstated.

## Neemuchwala...

He was elevated as CEO in February 2016. Under his charge, Wipro took various steps to realign its business operations for faster growth.

Its West Asia business was restructured; the Indian business was reorganised by carving out a separate unit for state-run undertakings and government organisations, from the enterprise business.

And, divesting its low-margin data centre business. While being affected by client-specific issues in the retail and health care divisions, Wipro has seen a fair amount of contract wins in the large deals space. In September 2018 came its largest-ever outsourcing contract, worth \$1.5 billion, from Align Solutions. A year after, it bagged a \$300-million deal from ICICI Bank.

Yet, in recent years, growth was subdued as compared to peers. Revenue

from IT services was nearly \$7.6 billion in 2016-17 and \$8.1 bn in 2018-19.

This was a far cry from the earlier target of becoming a \$15-bn entity, with operating margin of 23 per cent, by 2020. During FY17-19, the operating margin also declined from 18.8 per cent to 17.9 per cent.

However, the market capitalisation rose to \$22.2 bn in FY19, from \$19.3 bn in FY17. Analysts, nevertheless, said Neemuchwala took all the right steps.

"Given the macro headwinds and company-specific issues, Neemuchwala has given a strategic direction. His realignment efforts will definitely give dividends to the IT firm in the coming quarters," said Pareekh Jain, an IT outsourcing advisor and founder of Pareekh Consulting. Bhaskar Ghosh of Accenture is seen as a strong contender as the next CEO.

## IBM elevates Krishna as CEO

Krishna joined the technology major in 1990 after graduating from Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Kanpur, in 1985 and completing his PhD

from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in electronics & computer engineering. Vishal Misra, professor at Columbia University

and co-founder of cricinfo, who has known Krishna for close to 20 years, said the long-time IBM-er is "very level-headed and very skilled with people".

## President sets the tone for a...

The President's appeal comes as India has reported the worst unemployment rates in 45 years, with consumption at a low and dwindling tax collection.

Not only had India refused to sign the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) in November over fears that such a pact would harm domestic industry, there are demands to review its existing free-trade agreements as well with Asean member states. Kovind said the govern-

ment was committed to attaining the goal of making India a \$5-trillion economy. He did not give any timeline, which until now has been 2024, but the Economic Survey for 2019-20, tabled in the Lok Sabha, said it was 2025.

Protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act and National Register of Citizens marred the President's speech. MPs of the Congress and some other opposition parties wore black-arm bands as a mark of protest. At least three Trinamool Congress MPs wore white shirts with the slogan "No CAA, No NRC, No

NPR" painted in red, and the rest stood up to raise similar banners when the President spoke about the CAA.

After the President referred to the CAA in his speech, ruling National Democratic Alliance MPs applauded for half a minute, followed by cries of "shame shame" from some opposition MPs.

Congress President Sonia Gandhi and the leader of the opposition in the Rajya Sabha, Ghulam Nabi Azad, refused their designated front-row seats and joined party MPs in the fifth row of the Central Hall.

## THE COMPASS

# Tech Mahindra's deal wins keeping Street sentiment positive

**RAM PRASAD SAHU**

Tech Mahindra delivered a better-than-expected performance in the December quarter, led by traction in its largest vertical — telecommunications. The company reported 5.1 per cent growth in revenues at \$1.3 billion.

Growth was largely driven by revenues from AT&T, which helped the telecom vertical post 9 per cent growth. Telecom accounts for about 43 per cent of the company's revenues.

The firm indicated that growth in the manufacturing vertical (second-largest) has stabilised, while in the financial services space, it has started gaining some traction.

For the second quarter in a row, the firm reported deal wins of over \$1.3 billion. While the September quarter wins were led by AT&T, the firm won a \$900 million deal in the financial services space. Though the company indicated that deal pipelines remain healthy, analysts believe similar deal wins (in terms of deal size) — especially in the telecom vertical — may not go through.

Given the deal wins, analysts believe that the compa-

ny will be able to post healthy growth rates over the next couple of quarters.

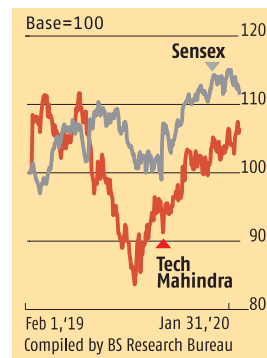
For the company to achieve double-digit growth (estimates at 11 per cent dollar revenue growth) in FY21, the pace of 5G launches, as well as growth in the non-telecom verticals, will be important.

On the margins front, the company reported a 30-basis-point dip to 16.2 per cent on a sequential basis, broadly in line with analyst estimates.

While a record utilisation rate and favourable currency helped, the lower margins were on account of transition costs related to the AT&T deal and uptick in sales, general and administration expenses, as compared to the low base in the September quarter.

Though the company is looking to keep utilisation levels high through automation and improved delivery mechanisms, margins could come in muted, especially in the current quarter (March), given the transition costs from the large deal wins over the last two quarters.

Going ahead, the Street will keep an eye out for deal wins and margin trajectory. Valuations at just over 13x its FY21 earnings estimates are reasonable.



Base=100  
Compiled by BS Research Bureau

## Bol's pre-tax profit rises to ₹119 cr in Q3



**NPA provisioning declined to ₹3,773 crore in the quarter**

**ABHIJIT LELE**  
Mumbai, 31 January

Bank of India reported profit before tax of ₹119.6 crore for the December quarter, on Friday.

In the same period last year, it had posted a pre-tax loss of ₹6,728 crore. Net profit stood at ₹105.5 crore, against a net loss of ₹4,738 crore in the year-ago period. The lender's stock closed 2.6 per cent higher, at ₹67.75, on the BSE.

Net interest income rose 23.6 per cent year-on-year to ₹4,119 crore. Gross non-performing assets (GNPAs), as a proportion of advances) was 16.3 per cent, compared to 16.31 per cent in the comparative period a year before.

The Reserve Bank of India's estimate of GNPAs was ₹1,117 crore higher for FY19, Bank of India stated. NPA provisioning declined to ₹3,773 crore in Q3, from ₹9,179 crore last year.

Provision coverage ratio, including cumulative technical write-offs, stood at 77.15 per cent, compared to 76.8 per cent in Q3FY19.

Capital adequacy ratio (CAR) stood at 14.2 per cent, while tier-1 CAR stood at 11.17 per cent on a stand-alone basis, in the quarter under review.

# Coronavirus reaches UK, now 22 nations affected

▶ WHO DECLARES GLOBAL HEALTH EMERGENCY

▶ TOLL CROSSES 200, CASES NEAR 10K-MARK

▶ DOW SLUMPS OVER 500 PTS ON VIRUS FEAR

AGENCIES  
31 January

The UK confirmed its first two cases of novel coronavirus on Friday, while the US and Japan advised citizens to avoid travelling to China. This came hours after the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak a global health emergency.

"The main reason for this declaration is not what is happening in China but what is happening in other countries," the WHO said, raising concerns over the effects it would have if the virus spreads to countries with weaker health systems.

Cases around the world rose to 9,950, surpassing the number officially reported during the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) epidemic. The death toll in China has climbed to 213. The country announced it will send charter flights to bring back its citizens from Wuhan who are overseas.

Dow fell 519 points in intra-day trade. The S&P 500 and Nasdaq were also in the red.

In India, the government banned exports of all kinds of



Air India crew on a B747 aircraft at the IGI Airport before its departure to Wuhan (left); a quarantine facility set up in Manesar by the Army for the 300 students being brought back



PHOTOS:PTI

personal protection equipment, including clothing and masks used to protect people from air borne particles. The move assumes significance as there could be a spurt in domestic demand for such products.

Meanwhile, Air India's 423-seater jumbo B747 plane took off from the Delhi airport at 1.20 pm on Friday to evacuate Indian nationals from Wuhan, officials said.

Five doctors from Ram Manohar Lohia Hospital and one paramedical staff was onboard, they said. An Air India spokesperson said another special flight may fly from Delhi airport on Saturday to evacuate Indians from Wuhan.

All Indian ports have been asked to scan people disembarking from ships. Advisories were issued to shipping liners.

## India unit of SAIC warns of sales hit

Chinese automaker SAIC Motor's India unit, MG Motors, expects sales in the country to be impacted in February because of disruptions caused by the coronavirus, a spokesperson said. Disruption in supply chain from European, Chinese and other Asian suppliers would impact the automaker. PTI

## Blow to Dems in Trump trial, prez likely to be acquitted



US President Donald Trump

BLOOMBERG  
Washington, 31 January

The most consequential day in Donald Trump's impeachment trial has begun in the US Senate, with Republican leaders likely to muster enough votes to block witnesses and rapidly move to acquit the president.

The decision by Senator Lamar Alexander of Tennessee, a Republican who had been considered a potential supporter of testimony, to vote against new evidence largely dashed Democrats hopes of prevailing. His announcement is a victory for Trump's legal team and, especially, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, who had been steering the trial to a quick conclusion after two weeks of debate and questioning. The Senate began on Friday with House prosecutors and Trump's defence each delivering two hours of arguments.

## Telegram CEO criticises WhatsApp over security

Messaging app Telegram's founder Pavel Durov launched a scathing attack on rival WhatsApp alleging that the latter's systems are not as secure as made out to be.

In a blogpost titled 'Why

using WhatsApp is dangerous', Durov said WhatsApp marketed end-to-end encryption as some magic incantation that alone is supposed to automatically make all communications secure.

"However, this technology is not a silver bullet that can guarantee you absolute privacy by itself," he said.

WhatsApp declined to comment on the allegations made by Durov. PTI

## Jeff Bezos adds \$13 bn to his fortune in 15 mins



BLOOMBERG  
New York/London, 31 January

Jeff Bezos just became a whole lot richer.

Shares of his Amazon.com surged 12 per cent to \$2,100 in extended trading late on Thursday in New York, after the

largest US e-commerce company reported fourth-quarter results that smashed Wall Street estimates.

Bezos, already the world's richest person, added \$13.2 billion to his fortune in 15 minutes. At the current price, his net worth would be about \$129.5

billion, according to the Bloomberg Billionaires Index.

Bezos, 56, owns about 12 per cent of Amazon's outstanding stock, making up the bulk of his fortune. His ownership of closely held Blue Origin accounts for about \$6.2 billion. The late surge on Thursday added more than

\$90 billion to Amazon's market value, pushing it above \$1 trillion.

His ex-wife, MacKenzie Bezos, 49, also had reason to celebrate, as she owns about 4 per cent of the Seattle-based retailer. She started the day as the world's 24th-richest person, with a \$37.1 billion fortune.

ii

## PEOPLE

Bhajan singer Munna Master – Muslim by faith, Hindu by art

iv v

## THE GOOD LIFE

Music and art events in Mumbai and Delhi

vi

## SPORTS

Mourning Kobe Bryant

vii

## WIDE ANGLE

Preparing for a pandemic

1 FEBRUARY 2020

Business Standard

## WEEKEND



## Pathbreakers

India's next sports champions are being handpicked and groomed from tribes in far-flung corners of the country, find Nikita Puri and Kavita Chowdhury



It's evening at the Loyola High School in Mundgod, a town in north Karnataka located 385km from Bengaluru. Rizwan Bendigeri and Lakshmi G M, both athletics coaches, watch intently as a muscular young boy launches himself into the air, kicking up a cloud of dust beneath his feet. He runs for about 100 metres, swivels, and returns to his position to repeat the exercise. He does the routine over and over again.

This is Sajid Yargatti, 13, who till recently would watch legendary athlete Usain Bolt on YouTube on loop on his mother's phone. "Someday I'll break Bolt's record and win a medal for India," declares the boy, as he spells out his name on the dirt ground.

Yargatti is from Kengalgiri, not far from Mundgod. He's a Siddi, a member of a reclusive, marginalised community that is said to have descended from Africa's Bantu tribes. First brought to India by trading Arabs in the seventh century, and the Portuguese and British later, the insular community has lived largely in and around the forests of Karnataka, Gujarat, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh.

Aspiring Bolt-challenger Yargatti's dream of breaking records for India is one shared by many, but this is an especially uphill task for those who live on the fringes. Leaving behind everything they have known, some of these young Indians are now hot in pursuit of their goal of becoming champions of tomorrow. And the residential "schools" they live in are already making their today better than their yesterdays.

Yargatti is part of a team of nine children that a Bengaluru-based non-profit called Bridges of Sports is mentoring. They will be nothing less than India's next "Olympic champions", believes the organisation's founder, Nitish Chiniwar. He started the non-profit in 2017, and is not alone in the quest to find India's next champions.

Ooty-based Karan Singh's Indian Track Foundation has been focussing on track athletics since it was founded in 2018. Singh has been working with a group of 10 children handpicked from tribal belts in Jharkhand (like Daltonganj and Latehar). These children, all between 10 and 15, live under the same roof as Singh and his family, and are homeschooled.

A former professional runner himself, Singh, who also founded Delhi's Indian Track Club, left behind city comforts in 2018. His goal: to create from scratch an environment to train children who display the potential to be Olympic medal winners in middle- and long-distance running.

Singh chose to relocate to Ooty for multiple reasons. Athletes who train at higher altitudes (Ooty is at 2,240m above sea level) tend to have more red blood cells, which aids in better oxygen delivery to the muscles, which puts them at an advantage when they run in the plains. Other reasons include "the



simple, safe and humble lifestyle of Ooty; its supply of organic produce; easy access to uncrowded public stadiums and grounds; and the plain goodness of fresh mountain air."

Most of the children in Singh's programme, even those who haven't been brought to Ooty, are from the Munda tribe or have Birhor blood. "Their ancestors were hunters or worked on the land and that's a definite advantage," says Singh. But that's just one of the many parameters they have to meet.

Singh has two coaches on the ground in Jharkhand who keep an eye out for talent. Once the scouting folks and Singh are convinced of a child's potential, his or her parents are roped in. If all goes well, the child is brought to Ooty, to live and train with Singh.

Bridges of Sports finds talent by holding annual contests in the district. Over the last two months, 90 children have made it to a longlist from 500 participants. The next step to ensure a promising batch in

the new academic session is to sift through this longlist. Before being accepted into the programme, these children will be tested on many levels, including endurance, core strength, and what coach Bendigeri calls "pheapde mein dum" (lung capacity).

It's easier to shape raw talent that's been brought up far from cities: there's minimal unlearning required and minimal distractions to wean them off.

Since establishing the Adibasi Rugby Foundation in Kolkata in 2013, former national rugby player Sainen Tudu often finds himself telling his students, "As adivasis we have the ability to hunt wild animals — how difficult can rugby be? It's as much about mental strength as it is about physical tenacity." From picking "two leaves and a bud" with their parents on *chai bagans* (tea estates) in north Bengal, these rugby-playing girls have used the sport as a passport to explore a world beyond tea gardens.

Sport has helped change lives at Bhubaneswar's Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences too. A residential school that offers free education (from primary classes right up to post-graduate) to children from tribes across Odisha, this institution was founded in 1993 by Achyuta Samanta, currently a member of Parliament from Kandhamal. It has since gone on to be

noticed for its sports programme after a team of 12 boys from Odisha's tribes (including the Bondas and the Lodhas) won the International School Rugby Tournament in 2007 in London. The "Jungle Crows" had played rugby for barely a few months before they made the finals and thrashed the seasoned South African squad, the Langa Lions, 19-5. (The story has been captured in the sports biopic *Jungle Cry* starring actor Abhay Deol; the film's trailer was released in Cannes last year.)

The institute coaches some 5,000 tribal children across 33 sports. Years of training have begun to bear fruit: the Indian team which scripted history last June in Manila by clinching the first ever international women's 15s victory over Singapore in the Asia Rugby Women's Championship Division 1 had five

IT'S EASIER TO SHAPE RAW TALENT THAT'S BEEN BROUGHT UP FAR FROM CITIES: THERE'S MINIMAL UNLEARNING REQUIRED AND MINIMAL DISTRACTIONS



(Clockwise from far left) The Adibasi Rugby Team from Kolkata; archers at the Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences; athletes at the Bengaluru-based Bridges of Sports; Karan Singh of the Indian Track Foundation (ITF) with his students; ITF's Walter Kandulna in his village and later as a star athlete; Prem Siddi who trains with Bridges of Sports

girls from this institute. In fact, the penalty kick that helped the girls claim the bronze issued from Kalinga's Sumitra Nayak.

Besides medals in kho kho at the recent Khelo India Youth Games, the institute's Nitya Majhi, a Class X student, bagged a bronze medal for the country at the 2019 Commonwealth Judo Championships last September.

But one's genetic inheritance can only take one so far, emphasise Chiniwar and Singh. Without an enabling ecosystem, many potential athletes who cannot even finish school become what Chiniwar, a former motorsports engineer, calls "sports dropouts". "You know, they have no footpaths or pedestrian walks in Iten (Kenya), but tracks instead, because of the running culture that has slowly been built over years. People run for the love of running, and not necessarily to win medals," says Chiniwar.

Back at Mundgod, Nayana Kokare, 16, sits apart from her fellow athletes. While everyone else practises hamstring-strengthening jumps into a sandpit, Kokare is doing ankle weights because of an injured knee. She refused to go home to Hangal (near Mundgod) last year, choosing instead to not miss a day of training while she prepped for her board exams. Her coach had to pull her out and take her home on a day-trip during Dussehra.

Among those training in the sandpit is Sushmita Siddi, 13, a tiny but strong athlete whom coach Bendigeri refers to as "chhoti si jaan". Last November when she qualified in the district-level semis in a race in Karnataka's Mandya where everyone was far older, several people attempted to get her to join their academies. "When they asked for her phone number she gave them mine," laughs Bendigeri.

Nayana Kokare doesn't see herself as anything more than an athlete in training, but little Sushmita Siddi sees in her a role model. "I want to be like Nayana," she says, a simple statement that hints at the birth of a promising sports culture.

These young athletes wear injuries such as bruised knees, cuts on the lips, scratches on foreheads and the like as badges of honour. When Renuka Kharia, native of Alipur Dooars in north Bengal and who plays in the scrum half position at the Adibasi Rugby Foundation, bruised her face, she decided it was best not to tell her family. "Tudu Sir says these injuries make us tough," she says.

Mala Soren, captain of the Adibasi Rugby Team of Kolkata, says it takes a while to get these shy girls to tackle opponents, a necessity in a contact sport like rugby. "To teach them how to do a lower body tackle, I ask them to fall back on memories of being angry with someone to instil the aggression needed," she says.

▶ CONTINUED ON PAGE 8

TALKING POINT



SHUMA RAHA

## Harmonies of Basant

The lanes are narrow, winding, and flanked on both sides by old, crumbling houses that seem to want to careen into the road. There are hole-in-the-wall shops and vagrant dogs that sniff hopefully at you. It's a shabby place — one of India's many overcrowded, down-at-the-heel urban localities that could do with some sprucing up. The yellow winter sun doesn't quite reach the dank gutters here. Yet there's a riot of sunny yellow shimmering around Delhi's Nizamuddin Basti today. It is Basant Panchami, the day that marks the arrival of spring. And decked out in bright yellow, the vibrant colour of spring and the renewal of life, people are making their way to the dargah of 13th century Sufi saint Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya, where Basant Panchami has been celebrated for over 700 hundred years. Legend has it that when Hazrat Nizamuddin's beloved nephew Taquuddin Nuh died, the saint sank into a state of prolonged grief. The poet Amir Khusrau, who was Nizamuddin's follower, desperately wanted to cheer him up. One day, Khusrau saw a group of women dressed in yellow and carrying yellow mustard flowers, singing as they went by. They told him that they were going to the temple to celebrate the festival of spring. Khusrau then decided to dress up similarly in a yellow saree and went to the Hazrat and began to sing. Amused by his costume and his antics, the saint is said to have finally broken into a smile. And since then, the celebration of Basant Panchami, which is essentially a Hindu rite, became a tradition in the order of Hazrat Nizamuddin.



WIKIMEDIA COMMONS / PINAKPANI

To come to the Nizamuddin dargah on this day is to witness a soul-stirring sight. The place is aglow with boys and men dressed in yellow scarves, kurtas and bandanas, women in yellow odhnis, little boys holding sprigs of mustard blooms, baskets with masses of marigold and sunflower petals being carried into the shrine...Then the qawwals break into joyous vernal songs to the beat of dholaks and fistfuls of golden flower petals are thrown up in the air.

Standing in the crowded courtyard before the shrine, and feeling the flower petals fall like benediction on your head, you marvel at this remarkable spectacle of India's multicultural ethos, the so-called Ganga-Jamuni *tehzeeb* that melds Hindu and Muslim traditions into one syncretic whole. Standing here is to understand that the old school-textbook maxim of India's "unity in diversity" is not an empty phrase; it is to understand that our shared cultural identity is open and porous and is as vibrant as our individual religious identities; and it is to understand that the essential inclusiveness of our culture continues to manifest itself in heartening ways.

The history of India is alight with this cultural give and take — the motifs of bell and chain and elephant heads sculpted by Hindu artisans into Islamic architecture, Hindu craftsmen creating Muharram *tazias* and Muslim carpet makers threading the forms of Hindu gods and goddesses into their weaves... Indeed, from the clothes we wear to the foods we eat to the language we speak, everything bears the stamp of our interlinked traditions.

This is what makes the divisiveness of our times so monstrous and tragic. The othering of communities is not unprecedented in this country. But in earlier, unenlightened times, there were men like Sant Kabir to shine the light. A major figure of the Bhakti movement, Kabir said, "*Koi jape Rahim, Rahim/Koi jape Ram/Das Kabir hai prem pujaari/Dono ko parnam* (Some worship Rahim/Some worship Ram/Kabir worships love/And respects them both)." In another age, a Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was martyred because he would not favour one over the other.

Sadly, there is no messiah of tolerance today who speaks the language of universal love. No compelling voice has emerged to lead us out of the recreated narrative of hate. At the Nizamuddin dargah one hears murmurs that the Basant Panchami celebrations have become much less exuberant in the last few years since religious polarisation has alienated many. What a pity it will be if long-held traditions of inter-faith harmony wither away because brute majoritarianism seems to have become the order of the day.

Shuma Raha is a journalist and author based in Delhi

#NowTrending

## 0 captain, my captain

NIKITA PURI

**Who:** It's hard to keep tabs on all the developments in India but you have to have taken up residence in a cave in, say, Australia if you haven't followed this story. And it's an unedifying one: of the extraordinary pace at which four airlines — Indigo, Air India, SpiceJet and GoAir — banded to ban comedian Kunal Kamra after a video of him heckling infamous television anchor Arnab Goswami began trending on social media.

This unleashed a tidal wave of memes with parody accounts of auto and bus driver federations lining up to announce they were banning Kamra too, for six months, like the flock of four were doing. More importantly, the incident also raised the question of whether due process of law was followed before announcing the ban on Kamra. This development

gave social media a new hero, Rohit Mateti, the man who captained the Goswami-Kamra flight earlier this week and who has written to his airline Indigo's management expressing his discontent at how rules were circumvented to ban someone. In the strange times that we live, the simple act of wanting to hold the rule book up is now an act of remarkable courage.

**What:** In a detailed (and politely worded) letter to his bosses, the captain's letter lays bare the fact that due process was effectively dropped out of the plane mid-air sans parachute in the case of Kamra versus Goswami, which morphed into Kamra versus the airline brigade.

Mateti says he was disheartened that his airline had acted solely on the basis of social media posts, with no consultation with the pilot, as the rule book outlines. The captain may or may not have

meant others to read between the lines, but it's impossible not to do so. "Moving forward, am I to understand that the bar for interpretation of a disruptive passenger is lower/different when it comes to high profile cases?... I would like a clarification from the airline as this leaves a lot of room for ambiguity," reads the letter.

The video of Kamra heckling Goswami makes for unattractive viewing, even if one accepts that Kamra was giving Goswami a taste of his own bitter pill. This is also a "medicine" that Goswami's reporters use generously: see the face of someone opposing the channel's politics and fly in for a brutal tackle (politicians Shashi Tharoor and Tejaswini Yadav are some who've been caught unawares by Goswami's team).

In times as divisive as these, after nine years of service, Mateti's actions are bound to be read as an act of rebellion, even if



they weren't meant to be.

**How:** The running joke on social media is that the now-famous Indigo's captain might be forced to jump ships, or airlines. And blessed be the airline that takes on the weight of both Kamra and the captain. But the fact remains that incidents such as these have now reignited a debate around how long one can work with a company to pay for *roti, kapda and makaan* if it goes against personal principles. Good folks on social media are already sending out feelers to reporters in

Goswami's Republic who cannot align themselves with their employers' politics anymore.

We agree with the poet Walt Whitman when he writes in *O Captain! My Captain!* that that particular fearful trip is done. But that's where our stories diverge. What our captain, blessed with a strong backbone, needs is solidarity from his crew and passengers as he holds up the rule book. There are many among us who will feel content and proud if occasion rises for us to hear his name on a flight announcement.



SANJAY K SHARMA

# An equal music

Bhajan singer Munna Master is Muslim by faith and Hindu by art. Amrita Singh meets the musician recently named for a Padma Shri

**T**he winding roads of Bagru, a quiet village about 32km ahead of the Pink City in Rajasthan, are unusually agog with excitement. The village was thrust into the public eye after the government released this year's list of Padma Shri awardees on the eve of Republic Day last week. Munna Master, 61, who has spent his entire life in Bagru, was at the local *gaushala* (cow shelter) when he heard he was one of the chosen ones. Born Ramzan Khan — he changed his name to Munna Master on all official documents in 2007 for astrological reasons — Munna is a *namaz*-offering bhajan singer.

Munna Master lives in a modest two-bedroom house in the village's "Muslim *mohalla* (neighbourhood)" with his wife, mother and six children. A traditional wooden door with big rusty rings for doorknobs opens into a sandy courtyard that is empty save for two plastic chairs. The white-washed walls of his house are bare. There is no ornamentation to be seen anywhere, unless one counts the washing machine in a corner.

One of the two dingy bedrooms houses awards and certificates won by his son Feroz Khan. The young man, an assistant professor at Banaras Hindu University (BHU), was recently at the centre of a controversy, being forced to resign from the Sanskrit Vidya Dharam Vigyan (the department that offers bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees in the studies of ancient Indian texts, Sanskrit language and literature) because of vehement student protests. The students believed that a Muslim could not teach them Hindu dharma and scriptures and threatened to fast to death. The university stood by Khan but he now teaches Sanskrit at its Faculty of Arts.

Though unaware of our impending arrival, Munna's wife and family gave us a warm, beaming welcome. "We can't believe

this has happened. We're still in shock," his wife says. Munna Master was at the *gaushala* when I arrived at his house and quickly made his way back from there. "*Kya baat hai! Humari charcha Delhi mein bhi ho rahi hai.* (How wonderful! People are talking about me even in Delhi)," he exclaims with delight.

Munna has been singing bhajans for about 30 years now, a family tradition that began with his father, Gaffur Khan. A literary and musical man, Khan's influence on Munna was tremendous. Khan told him stories from Hindu mythology and recited the poems of Tulsidas, Surdas and Mirabai among other Hindu mystics, which made

Munna accompanied his father whenever the latter went to sing bhajans at the local temple. His father was a locally celebrated man and Munna wanted that for himself too. At home, he would be trained vigorously by his father, who wanted him to carry forward the family tradition of singing bhajans. And Munna obeyed, being a staunch believer in "*parampara*" (tradition).

Even today, Munna's eyes light up with admiration and fascination as he remembers his father and speaks about his own love for Hindu mythology and poetry. As a young boy, he devoured the Hindu epics, became well-versed with Indian history and studied Sanskrit at the Government Shastri Sanskrit Mahavidyalaya in Mahapura, Rajasthan.

"How will a person who lives in India learn about its glorious past? I am not saying one must read the Vedas but the study of Sanskrit is imperative," says Munna. Works like Kalidasa's epic poems *Kumarasambhavam*

and *Raghuvamsa* form essential reading for him. So important is the study of Sanskrit in this household that all six of Munna's children (four sons and two daughters) have studied the language. "I have been asked why I didn't encourage my children to study Urdu instead of Sanskrit because I am Muslim. But that doesn't bother me. After all, knowledge is for everyone. Why bring religion into it?" he says.

That logic may seem tenuous from a practising Muslim, but Munna sees no contradictions. And certainly there have been strong exemplars of a syncretic practice, legendary Muslim singers of bhajans and bhakti (just think Mohammad Rafi). Munna claims, "I have never been discriminated against by either Muslims or Hindus for doing this." To the urban dweller of today, the statement may seem disingenuous. But in Munna's village, where a community of Hindus and Muslims has grown up together —

often literally — devotion, faith and passion seem to genuinely co-exist.

"The reason for today's communal strife is a lack of education. No community wants to learn about the other. But whatever one's religion may be, we should know about the traditions of the country we live in." Munna pauses to take a phone call with a composed "Jai Shri Ram" (Glory to Rama). "If someone greets me with 'Jai Shri Ram', I return the greeting. What's the harm?" he responds to my unasked question.

Munna's bhajans breathe life and melody into the village, a priest at a village temple says. "No event at the temple is complete

without Munna Master's voice." Munna's strong, clear voice echoes in the temple, without a mic, not only at major events but also on a daily basis. As he sings a self-composed bhajan called "Chanda ki chandni", the priest walks up to him and garlands him. Singing and playing the harmonium, Munna is content, lost in melody and lyricism.

Munna Master has been performing in different cities across the country for more than 10 years, his latest being at the home of an affluent resident of Jaipur. "I have sung bhajans before thousands of people," he says proudly. His own compositions are now available in the compilation *Shri Shyam Surabhi Vandana*, a book of bhajans about Krishna and *gau seva* (cow service).

The latter is an equally important preoccupation for him. Munna opened a cow shelter called Ramdev Gaushala in 2001, headed by Champa Lal Choudhary, the founder of Gau Seva Parivar Samiti, an organisation that maintains eight *gaushalas*. Every day, Munna visits the shelter once in the morning and again after lunch. "I am an old man with nothing to do. And there is nothing better than *gau seva*," he smiles. He takes care of 850 cows in a massive, clean cow shelter along with people from the local community and members of the Gau Seva Parivar Samiti.

Munna earnestly believes that the Padma Shri is a result of his devotion to *gau mata*. "I believe in God because look at what this devotion has got me. Now I can finally build a nice house in Bagru."

Look at Munna Master, dressed in a *kurti-pyjama* and colourful turban, and you're unlikely to be able to identify his faith. His name is neutral as well, disguising caste and religion. And his is a syncretic music, one that refuses to fall into the trap of established, often simplistic binaries.

John Stratton Hawley is a professor of religion at Barnard College, Columbia University. In the research that he has undertaken over several decades, the septuagenarian professor's focus has been largely on the religious life of north India and Hinduism. In 2016-17, he was a Fulbright-Nehru Fellow, principally resident in Vrindavan, a small town of about 75,000 people in Uttar Pradesh and just about 160 km south of New Delhi.

That year, however, was not when Hawley made his first visit to Vrindavan, a town that boasts of hundreds of temples and where Krishna, the Hindu god and incarnation of Vishnu, is supposed to have spent his childhood. His first visit to Vrindavan took place in the fall of 1974, when he was 33 years old, in pursuit of a dissertation that had first brought him to Benares, now Varanasi. Many more visits followed. But the year-long fellowship as a resident at Vrindavan was remarkable.

One of the outcomes of that fellowship is this book, which is unique in every way. *Krishna's Playground: Vrindavan in the 21st Century* is a rich and highly nuanced exploration of the evolution of a town associated with a playful child-god like Krishna and the contradictions that a modern, 21st-century planning of such a town can throw up. You will come across many books on Vrindavan (in Sanskrit, it means a forest of basil plants), its temples and the devotees of Krishna, who throng the narrow streets of that town. But none that brings out so tellingly the interplay of diverse issues such as the idea of a town, the onslaught of unplanned modernisation and the need to maintain the integrity of the ideas that gave birth to a town. In the process, Hawley makes the need to preserve the consciousness of Krishna a central imperative that no future architect undertaking the planning of Vrindavan can ignore.

Hawley's fascination with Vrindavan and Krishna has its roots in his childhood memory of his father who on Sunday mornings would announce his decision to "skip church and get his religion on the golf course". Young Hawley would wonder how on earth anyone could treat religion as a game. Religion was "work, real work — the ritual, the morality, even the music".

But Vrindavan and Krishna changed all that. Krishna's apparently playful exploits and his amorous behaviour with the Gopis or women cowherds of the town were as stunningly epiphanic as his daring acts that were the manifestation of good triumphing over the evil. But the big difference was that unlike in traditional religion, the idiom of interaction with Krishna as a child-god in Vrindavan was of love, affection and fun. The young scholar was quickly drawn to Krishna and Vrindavan, his abode, and he realised his father was not all that wrong.

Not surprisingly, Hawley draws a contrast between Krishna in Vrindavan and Krishna in later years, for instance, at the Kurukshetra battlefield advising Arjuna on the ways of the world or even later in Dwaraka. In his view, Krishna in Vrindavan inspires love and affection from his devotees, but Krishna in later years inspires allegiance. For the Krishna devotee, however, this contrast is immaterial. Indeed, so dominant are the images and exploits of the child-god Krishna in Vrindavan that they guide and influence even the terms of engagement between Krishna in Kurukshetra or in Dwaraka. Krishna is seen mostly as an incarnation of Vishnu, one of the Hindu trinity of gods. Vishnu is the preserver, while the other two, Brahma and Shiva, are creator and destroyer, respectively. As the preserver, Vishnu or his incarnation Krishna has become the most accessible of all gods for all devotees. Krishna in Vrindavan sets the tone for that relationship of love, but that equation remains largely unchanged, unlike what the author would like to believe.

# Paradise threatened

A unique book explores the competing tensions between religion and modernity in Krishna's fabled playground, says A K Bhattacharya

But the book is much more than just the contrast between Krishna as the inspirer of love in his childhood and the inspirer of allegiance in the role he plays in later years. Each of the seven chapters in the book has a specific theme that explores the interplay between Krishna and the town of Vrindavan. The pathetic state of the Yamuna is brought out poignantly and the author is concerned that if the river is allowed to die because of years of neglect, Vrindavan may lose its character as the repository of Krishna's love. The contrast between the old and the new town of Vrindavan, brought out in another chapter, is no less significant.

The author does not mince his words when he describes Vrindavan's recent obsession with concrete monstrosities such as the skyscraper temple. His criticism that the Vrindavan Chandrodaya Mandir cannot become the future of the town is valid and the fear that such structures can sound the death knell for the spirit of Vrindavan is genuine. In another moving chapter, Hawley brings out the relief, joy, disappointment and resignation of the large number of widows in the town, who were left with no choice other than to seek refuge in Vrindavan. Once again, he touches on the theme of contrast by bringing out how the old Vrindavan had kindled hope among the widows by offering them refuge there and the new Vrindavan may well have different ideas.

As important and towering as Vrindavan is Shrivatsa Goswami, the author's friend and guide, who introduced him to Vrindavan. With meticulous care and empathy, Hawley illustrates the complex relationship between Goswami and Vrindavan. As the author's mentor, Goswami shows both courage and creativity in facing the changes that are taking place in Vrindavan.

Yet, the author does not hesitate from doubting if the strong winds of change have not weakened Goswami's resolve to protect and preserve the inherent character of Vrindavan. But there is a difference. The author is unrelenting in his criticism of the inefficiency and insensitivity of the officialdom and the political leadership involved in Vrindavan's redevelopment projects. But for Goswami, the



TOWERING FAITH: A concept photo of the Vrindavan Chandrodaya Mandir, which will be completed by 2024

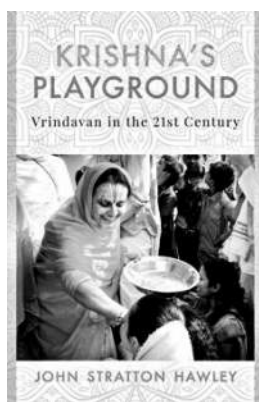
author shows greater understanding, and understandably so. "For me, and for generations of students after me, the sight of Shrivatsa in Radharamanji's temple is the sight of Vrindavan itself," he observes.

*Krishna's Playground* brings out another contrast, which is quite relevant for Vrindavan and its development as a modern town. In Hawley's view, the idea of Vrindavan as the abode of Krishna as a child should always remain a central element in any planning that is undertaken to develop the town. The adjoining Yamuna river and the many spots in different parts of the town that revive memories of the adorable, fun-loving child-god should not be subordinated to the usual imperatives of development. His fear is that the spirit of Vrindavan, which is so central to the idea of Krishna, should not be the casualty of any development undertaken in the 21st century.

Hawley's concerns are not to be

brushed aside as an orientalist scholar's fulminations against civic bodies keen on widening the roads and rebuilding old structures in the name of development. Parliamentarians and municipal commissioners engaged in redeveloping Vrindavan would do well to read Hawley's magisterial survey of the town's architectural strengths and weaknesses and the spirit of Krishna associated with different monuments in and around the town. With no pedantry and with no jargon, the book is a delightful and easy read.

Yet, there is pessimism at the end of the book. What Vrindavan stands for is under threat — both the physical world it created and the idea of love it propounded. With a deep sigh, which you can almost hear, the author concludes: "Has Vrindavan really been plowed under? Are efforts to redeem it simply for naught? If so, that's likely true for the planet. Vrindavan is the sign of our times."



**KRISHNA'S PLAYGROUND**  
VRINDAVAN IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Author: John Stratton Hawley

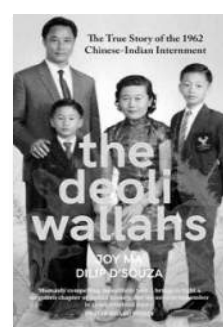
Publisher: Oxford University Press

Price: ₹895

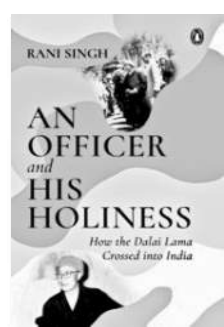
Pages: 362+XVIII

EACH OF THE SEVEN CHAPTERS IN THE BOOK HAS A SPECIFIC THEME THAT EXPLORES THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN KRISHNA AND THE TOWN OF VRINDAVAN

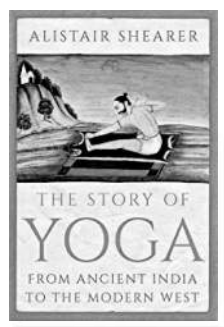
## OUT NOW



**THE DEOLI WALLAHS**  
Just after the 1962 Sino-Indian war, Chinese Indians were interred in Rajasthan. One of the children born in captivity there tells the little-known story of this detention centre.  
Joy Ma & Dilip D'Souza  
Macmillan  
₹650, 193 pages



**AN OFFICER AND HIS HOLINESS: HOW THE DALAI LAMA CROSSED INTO INDIA**  
The Dalai Lama's escape from Tibet into India was the result of a carefully calibrated operation. The niece of the political officer in charge of that rescue recreates the journey from her uncle's diaries and other sources.  
Rani Singh  
Penguin  
₹499, 256 pages



**THE STORY OF YOGA: FROM ANCIENT INDIA TO THE MODERN WEST**  
A cultural historian follows the transformation of an ancient Indian spiritual discipline into a \$20 billion-a-year global wellness industry.  
Alistair Shearer  
Penguin  
₹799, 421 pages

**THE LOTUS YEARS: POLITICAL LIFE IN INDIA IN THE TIME OF RAJIV GANDHI**  
A journalist covering politics from Indira Gandhi's time offers a first-hand account of a tenure that began in hope and ended in disaster and disillusionment.  
Ashwini Bhatnagar  
Hachette  
₹499, 120 pages

## VERSE AFFAIRS



UTTARAN DAS GUPTA

## Poetry at Shaheen Bagh

At the Shaheen Bagh metro station on the magenta line, one has to cross a metal footbridge to reach the South Delhi neighbourhood that has become synonymous with protests against the contentious Citizenship (Amendment) Act or the CAA. A friend who went with me to the area — one of our several visits — on Sunday, January 19, pointed out how the footbridge was ill-lit. "Compare this to the metro station at upscale Jor Bagh, which has far less human traffic than this area," she said. "See how well-lit and clean that is — even infrastructure delivery has class distinctions."

On the night of our visit, the crowds were bigger than usual. They had probably been drawn by a poetry event scheduled for that evening. Those who were scheduled to read were Saba Azad, Hussain Haidry and Aamir Aziz. The narrow lanes of the densely populated area, which suffers from a lack of civic amenities, were chock-a-block with hundreds and thousands of people making their way at snail's pace towards the enclosure where women of the area have blocked the G D Birla Marg — which leads to Noida — to protest against the CAA. Even as we joined the crowds, we could hear slogans of "Azadi" and Aziz's popular poem: "Yeh Hai Jamia ki Ladkiyaan" (These are the girls of Jamia).

Jamia alumnus and former Jamia Nagar resident, Aziz, had earlier written poems such as "Acche Din Blues", critiquing Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 2014 Lok Sabha election promise of "acche din (good days)", and "The Ballad of Pehlu Khan", the dairy farmer lynched by cow protectors in Haryana in 2017. His latest poem is a celebration of the spirit shown by some women students of Jamia Millia Islamia, the central university in South Delhi that was invaded by armed police officers on the night of December 14 last year. The students celebrated in Aziz's poems had stood up to a group of policemen attacking their university comrade.



At Shaheen Bagh — or similar protests across the country, such as at Park Circus in Kolkata — women have emerged as the face of the protests. According to some news reports, this has prompted Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Adityanath to demand: "Why only women, where are the men?" But, he seems to be missing the point entirely. In an article for *The Wire*, reporting on the Republic Day celebration at Park Circus, Jadavpur University professor Kavita Panjabi writes: "A republic truly comes of age when its women too claim it... When millions of women begin to insist that the state is a matter of *res publica*, a public affair, and not the private estate of rulers to decree... then it marks the turning point in the history of the nation."

In another poem Aziz claims: "Sab yaad rakha jayega" (Everything will be remembered). A translation he posted on social media threatens those unleashing violence on peaceful protestors: "Everything will be remembered, / My friends who were murdered by your lathis and your bullets... / It will be remembered how you conspired to break the nation... / how we desired to unite the nation." The Shaheen Bagh protests have continued through the bleakest midwinter for more than a month. The protesters have been described as being in the pay of the Opposition, of conspiring to "break" the nation. But the spontaneity and courage of the women and children will also be remembered.

Another poet present at Shaheen Bagh on January 19 was Hussain Haidry, who has written "Hindustani Mussalman (Indian Muslim)". In it, Haidry transcends all divisions in the religion of Islam through his devotion to the religion of the nation: "Bhai, what kind of Muslim am I? / Am I Shia or I'm Sunni? / Am I Khoja or I'm Bohri? / ...Am I rebel or a mystic? / Am I devout or sophisticated? / Bhai, what kind of Muslim am I? / I know I'm an Indian Muslim."

In his essay "Why I Write", George Orwell claims: "One cannot see the modern world as it is unless one recognises the overwhelming strength of patriotism... Christianity and international Socialism are as weak as straw in comparison with it." Haidry seems to recognise this fact almost instinctively. As the CAA and the protests against it are centred around the issue of nationality, one cannot help but admire such an approach.

The writer's novel, *Ritual*, will be out this month

THE WINE CLUB



ALOK CHANDRA

Wine and food pairings

We all know that wine goes best with food — the question is, which wine with which food?

Five hundred years back, wine was quaffed mostly by Europeans (which in those days still included the British!), who used it to wash their baked/boiled/roasted meats down (accompanied by bread and cheese and potatoes). The cuisine was largely dry and bland, so the classical matches were “White wines with white meats (chicken, fish, seafood)” and “Red wines with red meats (beef/lamb/venison/pork)”.

And that’s the way things largely stayed for a few hundred years. The wealthier you were the better the quality of the food and wine, but given that Europe was emerging from a “Little Ice Age” (1600 to about 1800), most wines were low alcohol and thin, and couldn’t have been very good.

Around 1500 CE Europeans had discovered the sea passage to India and Southeast Asia, and suddenly not only spices like pepper and cardamom but the cuisines of the Coromandel Coast and Indonesia started hitting the tables of the nobility. Sommeliers were hard put to find which wines matched curries flavoured with these exotic condiments.

Let’s first understand the taste profile of wines, in terms of body, acidity, and tannins (bitterness):

- A Sauvignon Blanc is light-bodied but has good acidity
- A Chardonnay has more body but less acidity
- A Pinot Noir is light to medium-bodied, with low tannins
- Cabernet Sauvignons are full-bodied and have high tannins



Apart from its characteristic ripe guava aroma, it is vibrant, with intense lemongrass and fresh ginger notes that highlight the core of citrus and pear flavours

The food-pairing mantra today recommends either Complementary or Congruent Pairings and sometimes the same cuisine can be paired with different wines.

**Complementary pairing:** Where the acidity complements the creaminess (okay, fats/oils) in the dish — for example a Sauvignon Blanc with a cheesy pizza, where the wine’s acidity cuts through the cheese. Or one could pair a Rosé with mildly spicy Indian food.

**Congruent pairing:** Where the wine and food profiles match — for example salads or seafood with Pinot Grigio or even a Chardonnay; alternatively have a Merlot with that dish of noodles and stir-fry pork.

And remember, Indian palates have a lifetime of gobbling spicier cuisines than European ones, so have a different tolerance level. European wine writers tend to recommend a Riesling or even a Gewürztraminer with relatively spicy Indian foods, whereas Indian palates would find a cooled red wine going just fine with such dishes.

My recommendation: to pair the wine with the sauces or spices, not the meats or vegetables under those condiments, and don’t be afraid of getting creative — there are as many wines as cuisines out there, and taste preferences are so personal that it’s no use generalising.

**Wines I’ve been drinking:** The Saint Clair Sauvignon Blanc is a classical Marlborough white from New Zealand — made famous not even 20 years back by Cloudy Bay, with which the Saint Clair’s vineyards share a boundary.

The 2018 vintage (90 points from Wine Spectator) is priced in Bangalore at ₹2,988 at retail and well worth the price: apart from its characteristic ripe guava aromas, it is vibrant, with intense lemongrass and fresh ginger notes that highlight the core of citrus and pear flavours, finishing with a hint of lime zest. Just yummy.

Alok Chandra is a Bengaluru-based wine consultant

(Clockwise from left) Buddy Guy; Larkin Poe; Jimmy Vaughan



Music in Mumbai

Festival-goers in the city can look forward to sampling diverse musical traditions in February, writes Ranjita Ganesan



(Clockwise from above) A Bharatanatyam dance recital from the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival last year; neo-fusion rock band Kabir Cafe; the all-woman Moroccan group Hadarrattes Souiriyattesis; Making the World; Kings Squad



THE VISUAL ART INSTALLATIONS THIS YEAR WILL EXTOL THE VIRTUES OF ‘UNITY IN DIVERSITY’, DUE TO THE CURRENT STRIFE IN THE COUNTRY

MAHINDRA BLUES FESTIVAL

You don’t choose the blues,” says guitarist Rudy Wallang of the genre he and vocalist Tipriti Kharbanger of Soulmate have mastered over the last decade and a half. “The blues choose you.” When the Mahindra Group decided to launch a blues festival in India in 2010, the Shillong-based band — by then two albums old and a fixture at various major gigs — was the first to be contacted.

“The simplicity and honesty of it” is what drew Wallang to the blues, and while songs typically involve playing only three chords, revealing your heart and soul in them is incredibly difficult, he observes. The success of Soulmate and the emergence of blues events have encouraged more musicians in the country to become possessed by the blues. At the Mahindra blues band hunt this year, Quiet Storm, a band from Jowai, Meghalaya won.

Musicians in towns across India have taken to the form, which first developed from the experience of black slaves in white America who poured both pain and hope into song. Growing up in Bhopal, Rohit Lalwani listened to the Chicago, Texas and Memphis blues, and recruited a bassist and drummer to his amateur band in a town where familiarity with the genre was scant. Very often, the appeal of the genre itself is so strong, it becomes the subject. Lalwani’s Lal and the People sing about having a “bad case of blues”.

Arinjoy Sarkar, who used to play pop tunes on his guitar in his early teens, found the sound he was looking for when Amyt Dutta, a Kolkata-based blues veteran, introduced him to B B King. Sarkar’s blues trio won the band hunt two years ago for compositions such as “Cold Cold Cold” and “Don’t you leave me behind”. Lalwani and Sarkar will be part of a Homegrown Blues Collective, set to debut at the Mahindra Blues Festival this year.

They will play alongside established names such as Soulmate, Ehsaan Noorani, and Loy Mendonsa. Also sharing that stage is Kanchan Daniel, a psychology professor who took to writing blues songs some years ago after fighting off cancer.

Buddy Guy, a stalwart of the Chicago Blues generation, participated in the festival several times, enthused by the idea of taking the blues to new shores. He is headlining this year, too, along with other international acts Keb Mo, Kenny Wayne Shepherd Band, and the young duo Larkin Poe. For Mahindra, the idea to promote blues was born of a desire to connect with communities in the Mississippi Delta in the United States, where the blues originated and where the company sells its tractors. Jay Shah, vice president of cultural outreach at Mahindra, says audiences in Mumbai have warmed to the genre. “In this city, people struggle with a smile on the lips. It fits with the spirit of the music.” The band hunt attracts talent from cities such as Surat and Kalimpong. Likewise, young American blues artists spotted by Buddy Guy’s club Legends in Chicago are invited to play in Mumbai.

While the budding Indian blues artists are making a name for themselves, they are still modest enough to be replying individually to YouTube comments. Their following is limited but intimate. They have to record and produce their own albums, and shoot videos at home. “The hard part is it is still very DIY,” says Sarkar, who has been releasing one video a month. “The good part is you are independent and free to do what you want.”

The Mahindra Blues Festival will take place in Mehboob Studios, Mumbai on February 8 and 9

SAMA’A: SUFI MUSIC FESTIVAL

The pursuit of a connection with the divine, as exemplified by Sufi music, marks all religious cultures. It is why the mystical school of thought is an ideal go-to for the divisive times in which we live, says Suvamalata Rao, head of Indian music programming at the city’s National Centre for the Performing Arts (NCPA). She is the curator of the annual Sufi music festival Sama’a, which will include traditional presentations from Bengal, North Africa, Rajasthan and a contemporary band from Mumbai this year.

Wisdom from Tantric, Sufi, Bhakti and Buddhist philosophies informed the wisdom of Baul fakirs of Bengal, who shared it in song. Parvathy Baul, among the rare women leading the continuation of the art, will sing some compositions that date back to the 15th century. Using spoken word to explain the songs, Baul hopes to invoke the same contemplation among listeners which she experiences while performing.

Hadarrattes Souiriyattesis, an eight-member, all-woman group of musicians from Morocco, will sing traditional songs, made up of zikhrs or chants that gain in speed and eventually induce a trance-like state. The women — described as “a library of old songs” — came together to preserve the music of the Hadra ritual which involves clapping and playing small cymbals and drums.

A desire to show that mystical ideas are relevant even today inspired Neeraj Arya to form the band Kabir Cafe. Where the Mumbai-based band will set the 15th-century poet Kabir’s verses to modern music, ghazal singer Mohammad Vakil will take a more traditional approach in performing the Sufiana writings or kalams of poets from various backgrounds including Amir Khusrau, Guru Nanak and Meerabai. Trained by his uncles, the renowned Hussain brothers of Jaipur, Vakil notes that the future of the Sufi form is safe. “The search for the creator is eternal. So this music will never end.”

NCPA Mumbai will host Sama’a from February 7-9

KALA GHODA ARTS FESTIVAL

Another woman-led group is set to play at the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival. What is believed to be the first all-female Hindustani Carnatic music group, formed by the master tabla player Anuradha Pal. Conversely, a Bandra-based community choir, KOKOMO, will bridge the gap between western classical music and various ethnic styles from around the world. Like every February, the crescent-shaped precinct in south Mumbai will throb with other events too. Among them are a *dastangoi* performance of Munshi Premchand’s “Idgah” for children, Irani and Kashmiri food walks and the release of a volume on Kaifi Azmi marking the poet’s centenary year.

While remaining otherwise apolitical — because the festival relies on various governmental authorities for permissions — the visual art installations this year will extol the virtues of “unity in diversity”, in response to the ongoing strife in the country.

KGAF will unfold at various venues in Kala Ghoda from February 1-9

# Truths and myths

A major retrospective of French artist Gérard Garouste invites you into a theatrical and often fantastical world, writes **Veenu Sandhu**



PHOTOS: DALIP KUMAR



(Clockwise from left) Gérard Garouste and his painting *Pinocchio and the Dice Game* (2017); *Mask of the Dog (Self-portrait)* (2002); *Blind Booksellers* (2005); *The Sarcophagus* (2012); and visitors at the exhibition

Pinocchio has aged. But he hasn't stopped lying, as his long, pointy nose tells us. And somehow, in his story has entered Stéphane Mallarmé's poem, "A Throw of the Dice", and also impressions from Talmudic literature in the form of the wave and the boat that are now playing on a green table at which he is seated. As he looks out at the beholder with a glint in his eye, he seems to say: "Look what I did." Pinocchio's face is the face of the man standing before me: Gérard Garouste, the artist behind this curious assemblage.

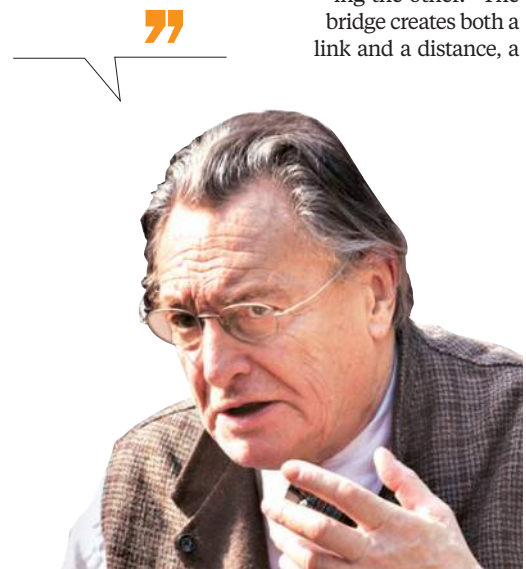
It is difficult to describe Garouste. He is an interpreter of stories and texts, religious, classical, mythical. He is an interpreter of interpretations. A painter, a sculptor, a thinker, a philosopher, a playful imp and a creator of often fantastical works. He is counted as one of the leading figures in French art, and what we have here is the biggest exhibition of his work outside Europe: about 50 paintings that span nearly 40 years of his artistic life, from 1980 to 2019.

Drawing from Christian and Hebrew texts and cultures, literary greats such as Dante, Cervantes, Goethe and Kafka, and his own experiences, Garouste has created a mammoth, complex and thoroughly enjoyable body of work, largely in oil.

The title of his retrospective, "Gérard Garouste — The Other Side", which is showing at the National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA) in New Delhi, comes from a work he created in 1999-2000. "It's a theme

I often use," says Garouste, who was born in 1946 and lives and works in Paris and Normandy. The painting depicts a larger-than-life figure standing on one bank of a river with his fingertips touching the other. "The bridge creates both a link and a distance, a

**"I WAS SHY AND HARDLY SPOKE. MY WHOLE PERSONALITY WAS BUILT ON THE FACT THAT I USED TO DRAW"**



## GAROUSTE HAS A PROPENSITY, SOMEWHAT DEVILISH, OF PUTTING FACES OF KNOWN PEOPLE IN HIS PAINTINGS

new point of view when we cross it, if only to see the side from which we came," reads its description.

In Jewish philosophy, Garouste explains, the idea of going to the other bank is fundamental. It's about crossing over to look for your destiny. The idea was fundamental at a personal level too "because the beginning of my own life, the early years, was such a disaster," he says.

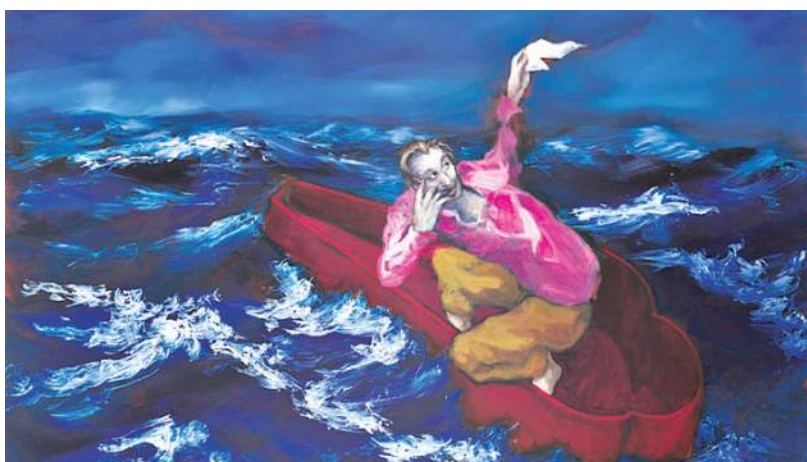
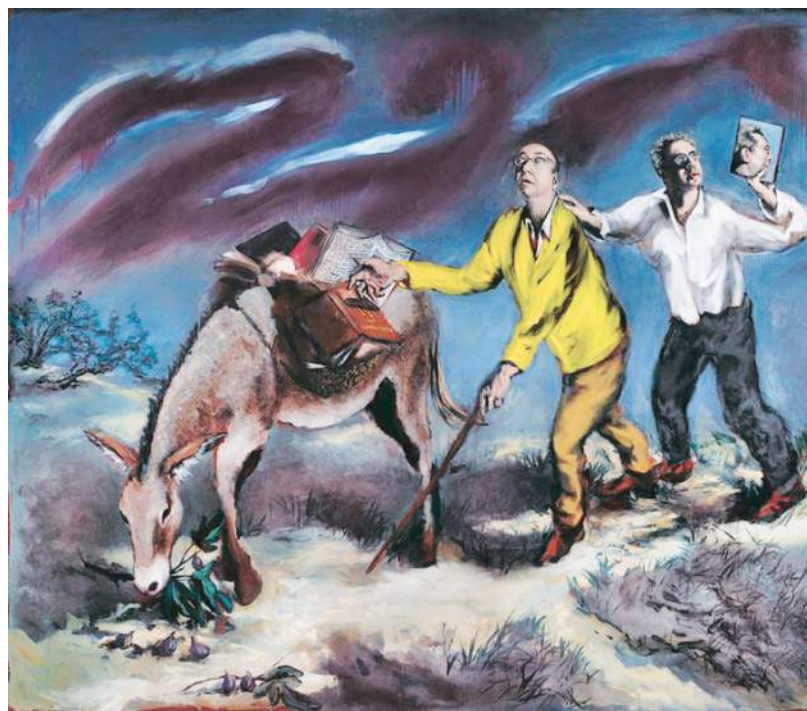
His father was a violent man. "I was frightened of him. And on top of that, I was bad at everything in school. I was shy and hardly spoke. My whole personality was built on the fact that I used to draw." So while his classmates were learning to read, write and use their minds, "the only thing I was doing was developing my skills with my hands". His works too focus a lot on the hands. In the exhibition is a painting of a student whose feet go backwards but whose hands are very visible.

The traumatised childhood led to mental health problems. "I was often institutionalised in psychiatric hospitals," he says. We are now sitting outside in the sun on one of NGMA's lawns, not far from the schoolchildren he has spent the morning talking to about his works. "One of the great gifts of spending time in psychiatric hospitals is that it helps you discover the myths and associate with them to uncover the truth," he says.

Another recurring theme is that of the double: the Classicist and the Apache; the Bible and the Talmud; Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. He talks of a dream he once had in which a voice told him that there are two types of people: the Classicist and the Apache. Classicist, as in someone who is correct and succeeds at everything. "Someone like Emmanuel Macron," he says with a laugh, and explains: There is a bit of the classic in each of us, which makes us straightforward and proper. But we also have an Apache part, which is about madness, poetry and the intuitive things of life. "Macron is more classicist and I am more Apache." More laughter.

Garouste also has a propensity, somewhat devilish, of putting faces of known people in his paintings. Besides the many works where he himself is the subject — whether as Pinocchio, Tintin, a diabolical buffoon or a man caught in a fantastical setting — there are faces of his friends, acquaintances and also of Kafka.

In one painting, the face of the woman is that of his gallery owner's wife. "She is



someone who is very correct and I have shown her as very correct. But behind her head there is a whole orgy going on," he says, the glint he painted in Pinocchio's eyes reflected in his own.

Oft-depicted also in his paintings is the donkey, an animal usually seen in poor light. "That's part of the Greco-Latin thinking," he says. "But my donkeys are not painted in the Greco-Latin spirit. I see them from the Hebrew perspective." The three letters that make up the word "donkey" in Hebrew also make up the word "matter". Just like the letters in "messiah" are the same that compose the word "mind". So in Jewish tradition, the image of the messiah arriving on the donkey to redeem the world at the end of days actually means the triumph of mind over matter, he explains.

Garouste has closely studied the Hebrew texts and obsessively pondered their meanings. Born a Christian, he embraced Judaism later in life. "The par-

adox is that my family hated Jews and, like my parents, I didn't like Jews either." It was when he went to middle school and came across people from different faiths and ended up with Jewish friends that he realised how prejudiced his parents' attitude was. His wife is also Jewish. She is present in the exhibition, too, as part of a triptych that also features the artist and their two sons. The inspiration for this work is a mindboggling puzzle from the "Logic Room" he would frequent as a child at the Paris Science Museum. "This room was full of little stories, each of which ended with a question. You had to work out what reasoning the story was based on."

Garouste's paintings also invite you to do that. So, go, visit and find your own stories.

*'Gérard Garouste — The Other Side' can be viewed at the National Gallery of Modern Art, Delhi till March 29, 2020*

## Us, them and the balancing act

VEENU SANDHU

Two phonographic records launched into space by NASA in 1977 with messages from earthlings to the aliens who might perhaps discover them one day have helped revive an elegant cultural space in Delhi that went silent about a year ago. These sound files, which are hurling through space some 13 billion miles from earth carrying information about the human species, are the inspiration for Jitish Kallat's immersive installation currently on display at Bikaner House.

Located on the India Gate hexagon and spread over an eight-acre plot, this bungalow was once the residence of the maharaja of Bikaner. After its renovation in 2014-15, the Rajasthan government, which owns it, had turned it into a vibrant space for arts and culture. But a change of power in the state towards the end of 2018 stalled all activities.

Two major exhibitions from the Nature Morte gallery — Kallat's "Terranum Nuncius" and "The Idea of the Acrobat" showcasing the works of 12 artists in different media — mark the reopening of the space. Kallat's works — the NASA project-inspired photographic and sound installation titled *Covering Letter* and the 60-foot *Ellipsis*, his largest painting to date — are displayed in the older building where programming has resumed. The group show can be viewed in a space that once housed offices but has now been renovated as a new Centre for Contemporary Art.

"We were invited some time in 2018 to put up a show here, but then the government in Rajasthan changed and all the work at Bikaner House stopped," says Nature Morte Director Peter Nagy, who has co-curated the exhibitions with



Manish Nai, *Untitled*, 2017 (used cloth and wood)

Aparajita Jain. Things got moving again sometime in August last year.

The Centre for Contemporary Art is a maze of rooms, each big enough to accommodate artworks of scale. Among them is Bharti Kher's *An Absence of Assignable Cause* (2007), a life-size sculpture of a sperm whale's heart, its surface marked by innumerable moss-green bindis of varying sizes — a Kher trademark. The work, which has been exhibited around the world, is on display in India for the first time.

In the room near the entrance is displayed Dayanita Singh's series, *File Rooms*, which tells the story of inheritance and loss, divisions and inequalities, through the lives contained in files: revenue files, court files, income tax files... In a nook not far from it is L N Tallur's *Antilla 5* in bronze, cement and terracotta tiles. A mismatched mix of traditional and modern, it is perhaps a take on one such opulent house in Mumbai.

An elegant wooden staircase leads up to the floor above. In the lobby, a series of photographs by Shilpa Gupta make a comment on the heightened state of fear we live in today. In each portrait, the figure is shown swivelling as though in panic, the source of its fear remaining invisible.

Further down is a powerful work by Reena Saini Kallat — *Verso-Recto-Recto-Verso*. Using the tie-and-dye method on cloth dyed blue-black, she has reproduced the preambles of countries in conflict: India and Pakistan, US and Cuba; North and South Sudan; North and South Korea... Missing from these preambles are some words — people, liberty, sovereign, equality, human dignity, equal rights, unity, integrity. Written in Braille and rendered in yellow dots, these are illegible to both the sighted and the blind, and act as a metaphor for our collective amnesia.

In the older building, Jitish Kallat's installation, *Covering Letter*, which has travelled from Mumbai, is displayed in a dark room. You can hear a soft murmur of people as they walk around it. From above, recorded greetings in 55 languages — the message from earth to the aliens — play. In a circle are arranged 100 photographic transparencies carrying various images of the human race and its activities, of flowers and animals, of scientific and cosmological diagrams. These appear and disappear, then appear again.

In a divided time, when one section refuses to engage with the other, when the fault lines are deep, this is the artist's attempt to present us as one — as a collective planetary species to the unknown other that's perhaps somewhere out there in the cosmos.

*The exhibitions are open at the Centre for Contemporary Art at Bikaner House, Delhi till February 19*





# HE'S GONE. HOW?

Dhruv Munjal mourns Kobe Bryant

How? I've been asking myself the same question over and over again. How? How can Kobe Bryant be gone? Heroes are supposed to be immortal. They don't die. They are supposed to outlive everything. They are supposed to be by your side, in trial and triumph. They are supposed to inspire you. They are supposed to offer you an escape route from the harsh realities of life and transport you to an unseen world filled with magic, hope and possibility. Heroes don't die. Not like this, anyway.

As writers, we are often discouraged from painting godlike portraits of athletes. We are reminded of their human tendencies, of their faults and frailties, of their vanities and vulnerabilities. Kobe was human like the rest of us, but in this time of immeasurable shock and sorrow, it is impossible to be truly objective — terrible moments like these tend to bring out the fervid fan in the most unsympathetic of us.

That's why they — admirers and detractors alike — poured out on to the streets of Los Angeles when the news of his death broke, shaking their heads in disbelief, sobbing as if they'd lost a member of their own family. He was family. For 20 years, Kobe flew over rims and took an entire city with him, thrilling audiences with a dynamism so raw that you could actually feel it from the other side of your telly.

That's why Nick Kyrgios strode out wearing a Kobe top for his match against Rafael Nadal at the Australian Open. That's why Neymar flashed a "2" and a "4" after scoring for Paris Saint-Germain against Lille. That's why Novak Djokovic almost broke down while talking about his "mentor". That's why Los Angeles Clippers head coach Doc Rivers *did* break down while discussing how Kobe's loss had affected him. That's why all across the world of sport, they paid heartfelt tributes, inside stadiums and outside them, on jumpers, shoes, caps and scarves. This is a man who touched lives wherever he went. And now he's gone. How?

He was so good that he was identifiable all across the globe by just his first name. He was always Kobe. Just like Tiger, Roger and Rafa — a pantheon of sporting megastars embodying athletic perfection of the rarest and purest kind. He rushed out of the tunnel with an energy so breathless that he could bring a whole arena to an absolute standstill. He played with a competitive fire so fierce that opponents shuddered at the

**He was so good that he was identifiable all across the globe by just his first name. He was always Kobe. Just like Tiger, Roger and Rafa — a pantheon of sporting megastars embodying athletic perfection of the rarest and purest kind**

thought of facing him. He worked tirelessly and endlessly, elevating his game to a level that enabled him to score with that buzzer-beating last shot. The last shot wasn't his destiny; it was his hard work. And now he's gone. How?

He arrived in the post-Jordan age where everyone and everything operated in the great man's shadow. But he was able to emerge from that shadow, with a film star-like magnetism and street fighter-like panache. He could win games on his own. He could win titles on his own. He could intimidate the hell out of teams with just his intensity. He could battle potentially career-ending injuries in his 30s and come back and win again. He could score 60 points in his last-ever NBA game at the age of 37. He could walk on water. He could run for President. He was the Jordan of the post-Jordan age. And now he's gone. How?

This was a man who was taking to life after retirement with such joy, passing on knowledge and praising players who had passed him — in this case, LeBron James who had surpassed him on the all-time NBA scoring chart only a day before the tragedy. This was a man who was ready to give back to the people who had made him, by buying



**FOR 20 YEARS, KOBE FLEW OVER RIMS AND TOOK AN ENTIRE CITY WITH HIM, THRILLING AUDIENCES WITH A DYNAMISM SO RAW THAT YOU COULD ACTUALLY FEEL IT FROM THE OTHER SIDE OF YOUR TELLY**

his shirts, singing his name and revelling and exulting in the on-court sensation that he was. This was a man ready to spur on a new generation of players — many of them young girls — after inspiring the current one playing in the NBA. This was a man committed to making his daughter a bigger star than he himself ever was. She won't become one. She's gone as well. How?

How will basketball cope with this? How will we cope with this? He was my desktop wallpaper for the longest time, a portrait of him leaping into the Los Angeles night sky, eyes fixed on the rim, legs whirring, shoulders pumping and biceps bulging. Listening to the audio of *Dear Basketball* — his Oscar-winning animated short film — was a ritual. On bad days, it lifted your spirits, raised the hair on the back of your neck and made you feel alive. For those few minutes, you felt like Kobe. You could own the world like him. You could fly like him. You could beat the buzzer like him. You could be NBA champion like him. I may never be able to watch — or listen

— to it again. Only because he's gone. How?

How will we remember him? He was flawed, as the rape charges from 2003 would testify. Other times, he was ruthless and inconsiderate — he once dragged his mother to court only because she wanted to auction some memorabilia from early in his career. But in later years, he seemingly mellowed, playing the role of doting father and quintessential family man. He used choppers to get around so that he could spend more time with his wife and four daughters. He loved being a "girl dad", once even saying that he'd have five more girls if he could. His youngest one — only seven months old — will never know the kind of greatness her father epitomised. Only because he's gone. How?

How can we go back to watching basketball again? How can we go back to watching the Lakers again, knowing that there will be no Kobe courtside at the Staples Centre ever again? LeBron has lost his hero, an entire generation's icon. I'm tempted to say that he's in a better place now, but I'm quite sure he's not. There was no better place for him than the basketball court, and now he'll never set foot on one again. Because he's gone. How?

## CHESS #1386

By DEVANGSHU DATTA

Fabiano Caruana produced a standout performance to take the Tata Steel with a round to spare. "Don Fabi" scored 10 points from 13 rounds for a 2945 performance with an incredible unbeaten plus seven result. Magnus Carlsen (8) came in second with Wesley So (7.5) in third. Two young GMs, Jordan Van Foreest and Daniil Dubov (both 7), shared fourth-fifth.

Caruana gains 20 Elo for this result. He would be the obvious favourite for the Candidates, which starts on March 15 in Yekaterinberg. The even younger Alireza Firouzja finished on 6.5 after leading the field for a while. Viswanathan Anand also scored 50 per cent. But Caruana acknowledged that their personal encounter proved crucial with the American's luck turning after he won from a lost position. After that, he gave no chances, knocking off win after win.

In the Challengers, David Anton Guijarro (8.5/13) won, qualifying for next year's Masters. He was followed by Nordibek Abdusattorov, Pavel Eljanov and Erwin L'Ami (all 8) in a tight finish. Suryasekhar Ganguly (7.5) and Nihal Sarin (7) will both gain some Elo.



The Gibraltar Open ended with a seven-way tie and a tiebreaker was played out among the four toppers. Andrey Esipenko, Wang Hao, Daniil Yuffa, David Paravyan, Maxime Vachier Lagrave, David Navara and Mustafa Yilmaz (all 7.5/10). The first four played a tiebreaker which was won by Paravyan. Aryan Chopra, Murali Karthikeyan, R Praggnanandha and Krishnan Sasikiran (7 each) all landed in the top 20. Pragg beat Veselin Topalov in a stunning game. Tan Zhongyi (7) was the best-placed woman player.

Speaking of ratings, there's a scandal brewing in the Ukrainian Federation. Two professional coaches, FM Ihor Kobylanskyi and GM Iuri Shkuro are respectively in the Top 10 of the World Rapid and Blitz ranking lists. If you don't know these names, don't be disheartened. Even Ukrainian players don't know them! Kobylanskyi is 50, while Shkuro is 37, so they're not exactly prodigies. Both have gained the system by organising events where they play weak opposition and log perfect scores.

**The diagram, White to Play (White: Pragganandha Vs Black: Topalov, Gibraltar 2020) saw the prodigy launch a stunning attack. White played 23. Nf6+!! gxf6 24. Rd1!** [This intermediate move is necessary since 24. exf6? Qd4+ exchanges queens. Now if 24. — Qc7 25. e6 Kh8 26. Rd3 and Rh3 wins but white must avoid 26... Re3? Rd8!].

**Play continued 24. — Nxe5 25. Rxd8 Rfxd8 26. Qxf6 Ng6 27. h4! So white's a queen ahead for rook and minor piece. He continues to attack with pawn thrusts and finished powerfully with 27... h5 28. Rf1 f4 29. g4! Rd3 30. gxh5 Rg3+ 31. Kf2 Nxh4 32. Qxh4 Rxc4 33. Re1 (1-0).**

Devangshu Datta is an internationally rated chess and correspondence chess player

## BS SUDOKU #2962

1			9					
4					1			
	3		7			9	5	
			2			7	3	
7	2							
		8	9		1	2		
	9				6	4	8	
	4	3		5		6		
								2

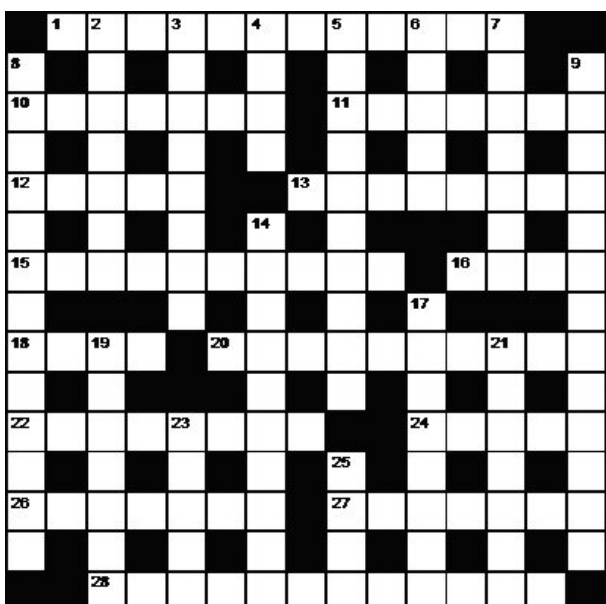
Easy: ★★  
Solution on Monday

### HOW TO PLAY

Fill in the grid so that every row, every column and every 3x3 box contains the digits 1 to 9

SOLUTION TO # 2962

1	9	6	2	5	3	8	7	4
2	5	7	8	6	4	1	3	9
4	8	3	7	1	9	6	5	2
5	7	2	9	8	1	4	6	3
6	4	9	3	2	7	5	1	8
8	3	1	6	4	5	2	9	7
3	2	4	1	7	6	9	8	5
7	1	5	4	9	8	3	2	6
9	6	8	5	3	2	7	4	1



## THE BS CROSSWORD #3302

### ACROSS:

- Get into grave debt (4,4,4)
- Authorise a backward middle east nation (7)
- Mac turns up with most of the gay city for a drink (7)
- Infer that it's better! (5)
- Where false teeth are readily available (2,1,5)
- The man responsible for the grind! (10)
- Fade out, not wishing to hear (4)
- It indicates a source of English degree (4)
- What it costs, generally, to get there? (5,5)

### DOWN:

- Pack twelve in a box (7)
- Depressed countenances of those with uncultivated tastes (8)
- Spy Russian finally joining a vessel (4)
- Used for short intervals of

### time (6-4)

- Just given the cartographer a job (2,3)
- It may cause a loss of liquidity (7)
- Pompous, pi matrons left in disarray (4-9)
- A matter of little importance for underage children (5,5)
- One who enjoys high living (8)
- Reveals how one is being less reserved (5,2)
- Flower arrangement looks a bit like bananas (7)

### 23 Medicos, for example, in grounds (5)

- Figure out rules affecting initial meetings (4)

### SOLUTION #3301



# Preparing for a pandemic

A new strain of virus is airborne. Veer Arjun Singh reports on the debate that follows the inevitable outbreaks

**O**ur guard is up. Security officials in protective suits, some equipped only with face masks, are India's first line of defence at major airports. They are armed with thermal guns, a non-contact, infrared thermometer to screen passengers. Thermal imaging cameras that detect heat in a crowd back them up at strategic checkpoints. The protocol directs officials to identify and isolate people arriving from China who record a body temperature above 100.4 degree Fahrenheit and quarantine the ones who have more pronounced symptoms of a general flu — a cough, body ache, shortness of breath, etc. More than 40,000 people at 21 major airports have been screened, over 200 have been tested and at least one person in Kerala has been infected with a new strain of coronavirus, a pathogen from a known family of viruses, which had killed over 200 people and infected more than 8,000 people in 18 countries — most of them in Wuhan, the epicentre of the outbreak in China — at the time of writing this report.



**'2019-nCoV IS LIKE THE FLU. AND IT'S CAUSING DEATHS MUCH LIKE SWINE FLU (A SUBTYPE OF INFLUENZA A DENOTED H1N1) DID INITIALLY'**

**KIRTI SABNIS**  
Infectious Disease Specialist & HIV Physician, Fortis Hospital, Mulund & Kalyan, Mumbai

The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends that the new outbreak be called "2019-nCoV acute respiratory illness" and has declared it a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) at the second meeting of its International Health Regulations Emergency Committee. Novel coronavirus, or nCoV, causes an infection of the upper respiratory tract. But its source and virulence remain elusive.

What we have learned from the related MERS-Cov (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome coronavirus), which caused 854 deaths, and SARS-Cov (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome coronavirus), which killed 774 people, according to WHO, is that the source of 2019-nCoV may remain uncertain, a definitive cure may never be found and a preventive vaccination may not see the light of day. Most pharmaceutical companies shelved the development of vaccines for both SARS and MERS after the outbreaks were contained. The priority remains to contain this one, too.

But the new strain that is likely to have first surfaced in mid-December in Wuhan has already surpassed the number of confirmed cases during the MERS outbreak in 2012 (2,494) and the 17-month-long SARS pandemic between 2002 and 2003 (8,098), according to WHO figures. Even if it is more contagious, the only silver lining is that 2019-nCoV appears to be less fatal. Its case-fatality ratio of 2 per cent is below 9.5 per cent in SARS and much lower than 37 per cent in MERS. But like other viral outbreaks, 2019-nCoV could mutate to become more lethal.

"It's like the flu. And it's causing deaths much like swine flu (a subtype of influenza A denoted H1N1) did initially," says Kirti Sabnis, Infectious Disease Specialist & HIV Physician, Fortis Hospital, Mulund & Kalyan, Mumbai.

Over 200 people died in India during the swine flu outbreak in 2015. This time, hospitals across the country have been directed by the government to isolate any patients exhibiting symptoms of Influenza-like Illness (ILI).

"Suspected patients are supposed to be kept in negative-pressure rooms, which allow air to flow in but not escape," says Sabnis. Hospitals can also keep the patients in rooms that have separate air-conditioning ducts.

"At least there should be a minimum distance of one metre between two beds in a hospital," says Rajiv Dang, senior director and head of department, internal



People exiting the Chennai International Airport on January 30. The government is screening passengers coming from China for 2019-nCoV at 21 major airports

REUTERS

medicine, and medical director, Max Hospital, Gurugram. There's no doubt that a contagious outbreak of the magnitude that China is facing could put serious pressure on India's ailing health infrastructure. India, like China, is also at a greater risk of an epidemic because of a high population density.

Worse still, the outbreak that is fast spreading around the globe seems difficult to contain. "An infected person may not even show any symptoms but still be a carrier," says Dang. A 10-year-old boy in Wuhan on Wednesday tested positive for the infection even though he appeared healthy.

The infection appears to be spreading through person-to-person contact and through droplets excreted while sneezing and coughing. Researchers estimate that the infection could stay alive within a host body for about 14 days. But the Indian health ministry has directed health officials to quarantine suspected cases, who have been to Wuhan in the last two weeks, for 28 days.

But in case 2019-nCoV continues to spread further, and faster, in the absence of clinical data on treatment, doctors will have no choice but to treat it symptomatically. "Patients could have breathing difficulties or have high fever and they will be treated accordingly. But there's no anti-viral that could be administered," says Sabnis.

**V**irus mutations are inevitable. Even WHO recognises that a new outbreak is not a question of if but when. It monitors seasonal flu infections around the world, analyses clinical data and publishes recommendations to deal with them every year. Even so, between

## VIRAL FACTS

- ▶ 2019-nCoV is a highly contagious strain from the family of MERS and SARS and has spread faster than both.
- ▶ It has killed over 200 people and infected more than 8,000 in 18 countries.
- ▶ WHO has declared it a Public Health Emergency of International Concern.

250,000 and 650,000 people die in a year of the many strains of influenza globally.

Twice a year, WHO predicts the flu strains that are likely to be active during the winter seasons in the northern and southern hemispheres and recommends pharmaceutical companies to create a new flu vaccine. It says the vaccination takes two weeks to come into effect. In India, it means one shot every September for children older than six months and all adults.

But a considerable body of evidence argues against the yearly shot even as health departments of most developed countries recommend it. Most notably, Tom Jefferson, a British epidemiologist based in Rome, who works with the non-profit Cochrane Collaboration, has campaigned extensively to review the effectiveness of flu vaccinations through randomised clinical trials. He recently also sued Roche, the company behind the antiviral Tamiflu (oseltamivir) for claims that it can slow down the flu epidemic. Tamiflu is widely administered in India during the treatment of swine flu.

"We only recommend the flu shots to the most vulnerable lot — people over the age of 65 and suffering from critical illnesses who have a weakened immunity," says a Delhi-based ENT specialist, who did not wish to be named. "It's a waste of money otherwise. It does not work on anyone else," he adds. Many general practitioners advise against the flu shot, especially for children.

Yatin Mehta, chairman, Institute of Critical Care and Anesthesiology, Medanta — The Medicity in Gurugram argues that while the flu shot is not perfect, it saves many lives every year.

"I have administered it to myself, my nursing staff and even my children. It helps the immune system in fighting particular strains and does not have any major side effects," he says. There's no reason to not take it, he says. The specialists from Max and Fortis quoted above agree with Mehta's assessment. WHO estimates that the flu shot, which it says helps against some Influenza A and B strains (including H1N1), was about 40 to 60 per cent effective in 2018-19.

Researchers say that even if creating vaccination for 2019-nCoV follows a different trajectory than it did during SARS and MERS outbreaks and is more effective than the generic flu shots, it will take at least a year before it completes human trials.

After 100 years of the 1918 Influenza pandemic, dubbed Spanish Flu, which killed somewhere between 50 and 100 million people or one-third of the world's population at the time, it appears that a strict protocol to contain viral infections remains the only effective tool in the face of an approaching pandemic.

## Modern villages

A foundation dreams of creating self-sustaining villages to reverse urban migration, writes Geetanjali Krishna

**I**t has been 72 years since Mahatma Gandhi fell to Nathuram Godse's bullets. However, till date, his dream of empowering villages to become self-sufficient little republics is far from being realised. Which is why at a time when Indian cities are bursting at the seams from rising migrant populations, the work of the Swades Foundation bears mentioning.

At the heart of their work in rural Maharashtra lies the aim of developing "dream villages" — self-contained units with good infrastructure and livelihood opportunities to enable migrants to reverse their decision. In order for their intensive, 360-degree intervention model of development to work efficiently, Ronnie and Zarina Screwvala, co-founders of Swades, focus on a small geography — the Raigad district of Maharashtra.

"We'd been running SHARE, a small NGO that undertook projects mainly centering around water and sanitation since 1999," Screwvala says. However, in 2013 after his wife Zarina and he sold their television company UTV, to Disney, the couple realised that providing clean drinking water and sanitation was only a piece in the puzzle. "Rural development has to be holistic; unless community health services, schools, livelihood opportunities, and water and sanitation aren't upgraded simultaneously, the

overall quality of life of beneficiaries doesn't improve," he says. This is how they developed an unusually intensive model of rural development, which hinges on four key verticals — health and nutrition, education, water and sanitation, and economic development. Their impact has been discernable in the 2,513 villages Swades has been able to reach in Raigad.

Consider the case of 57-year-old Abdul Gaffar Rahatvilkar, who used to be an oil rig worker in Kuwait. He returned to his village in Raigad, learnt innovative farming techniques at Swades and today reaps a lush crop of beans from his small farm. He now mobilises fellow farmers to adopt farming techniques that provide lucrative output in smaller plot sizes. Like him, 27,086 farmers have learnt to implement new farming technologies to enhance yields at low costs through Swades. All in all, Swades' interventions have benefitted over 550,000 people thus far.

"It's been a challenging journey," says Screwvala. Their very first task was to create a professional team which could run Swades like a corporation and not an NGO. Since its inception, Swades has trained over 1,000 community volunteers and over 300 full-time staffers to



Swades Foundation co-founders Ronnie and Zarina Screwvala; vegetable farming in Raigad district in Maharashtra

work at the grassroots. Building trust with the community was another challenge, especially as the Swades model entails that each beneficiary household buys in to the project with a small monthly amount. But the toughest task remains to create projects with a sustained, permanent impact. "Our strategy is to hand over a project to the community only after every household agrees to contribute a monthly amount towards the maintenance and the community forms a special committee to operate and maintain it," he says.



PHOTOS: SWADES FOUNDATION

Developing community heroes, people who have used their training with Swades to motivate, enable and empower others, is a conscious effort in this direction. Also, Swades has identified 300 "dream villages" — communities they hope will soon become independent and self-sustaining, allowing them to exit.

Swades works on an initial endowment made by the Screwvalas and individual, corporate and institutional donors. Tata Trusts is a major funding partner. Others include Australian Aid, Oracle, ONGC and IL&FS. The Foundation matches each donation made by its partners. Future plans include expanding to other districts (they have already started working in Nashik). However, they already spend between ₹120 and 130 crore per annum, necessitating an

ongoing search for more partnerships. "We also want to document our impact," says Screwvala, "in order to refine our model and make it easily replicable."

Meanwhile, Manali Sawant, a Swades hero, has set up her village's first vermicomposting unit and has a ready-made market within her community. Young widow Vidya Kule has become a community health worker at Swades and ensures her community gets the medical treatment they need. Among the million people Swades aims to lift out of poverty in five years, they show that Gandhi's dream of Swades can still be realised, one dream village at a time.

To learn more, visit [swadesfoundation.org](http://swadesfoundation.org) or follow their YouTube channel

# WHEELS OF FORTUNE

Small sedans, large SUVs and sporty saloons — Mercedes-Benz, Audi and BMW have the year ahead planned out, writes Pavan Lall



The Audi Q8



The BMW 8 Series Gran Coupe



The Mercedes-Benz A-Class limousine

A majority of automotive players would now be focused on engine overhauls, meeting BS VI standards and tackling a slowing economy. Unless, that is, they belong to the club of German luxury players who sell small volumes but sit at the top of the auto heap, given their obvious advantage in terms of longevity and technical expertise.

Even so, the climate would appear rather dull for a market that sells a little less than what Thailand does in terms of volumes, and for vehicles that have to contend with the added obstacle of being branded “sin products” — luxuries rather than necessities. But these global automotive leaders are unfazed.

Mercedes-Benz, the current market leader amongst the German trio that includes BMW and Audi, says it is seeing 2020 as a bounce-back year, relatively speaking. The product that it hopes will help it achieve its target is one that has never been here before. It is the Mercedes-Benz A-Class limousine, which is essentially a stretched out, modernised sedan version of the erstwhile A-Class hatch. It is expected to account for as much as 10 per cent of the company’s volume in India. It could also effectively redefine the entry-level sedan segment for the entire luxury pie, given that its price is expected to be north of ₹40 lakh.

Martin Schwenk, Mercedes-Benz’s India managing director and chief executive, sees the new year as being one that will renew customer excitement that may have been suppressed

due to various reasons. The other car that Mercedes has already launched this year is the GLE, its new SUV that was unveiled recently. “There will be at least a dozen more launches in 2020, with a mix of electric cars, new models and refreshed variants,” Schwenk says. The company is also looking to pivot its strength on a family of electric vehicles called the “EQ”, which stands for “emotional intelligence”. It will roll these out in India in phases.

Schwenk says that internationally there are around 10 EQ-model cars, most of which, if not all, will be brought into the Indian market.

Though India remains a relatively small market volume-wise, the German luxury carmakers acknowledge the significance of having a strong brand presence here, says Suraj Ghosh, principal analyst (powertrain forecast), IHS Markit. “So they continue to bring on their A-games here — whether by refreshing their product portfolio or by introducing the latest in technology.”

Ghosh goes on to add that after experiencing strong headwinds in 2019, this year will be important for the luxury carmakers as they look to bounce back despite uncertain economic conditions. “One positive factor is that the luxury car segment is expected to remain more or less unaffected by the upcoming emission norms and stricter safety regulations since they have already been operating in compliance with similar regulations in advanced markets,” he says.

If Mercedes-Benz is going to bet big on a smaller sedan, its arch-rival, Volkswagen-owned Audi, believes the way forward is to

go even bigger. Its most recent launch was the Q8, a car that former Audi CEO Rupert Stadler had joked about when quizzed several years ago during a motor show. That was when the Audi Q7, its largest car then, was being introduced in India. “Do you think you can go bigger?” he was asked. He had smiled and replied, “Q8”, not realising he was being prescient.

Stadler’s since gone from the company, but the Q8 is proof that Audi can push its limits and that it sees size as an intrinsic value proposition for Indian luxury buyers — regardless of poor infrastructure, narrow roads and all the headaches that come with a large, unwieldy vehicle in a still developing ecosystem of roads and highways.

Balbir Singh Dhillon, head, Audi India, says that while SUVs have always been the company’s strength, its sedans are catching up. In absolute terms, Audi’s current volume split is 55 per cent SUV and 45 per cent sedan. “Our focus for 2020 will clearly be on the C and D segments,” Singh says. That means luxury buyers will see the Q8 launch followed by the new A8 sedan and another half a dozen assorted vehicles.

This is perhaps less than Mercedes-Benz’s 12 products, which will include the EQ C, an electrically charged version of its luxe cars, and the recently launched GLE SUV, which had replaced its former ML SUV.

Now for BMW. The Bavarian automaker, which last year launched what can safely be called the best-rated mid-level sedan in the world (the 3 Series), does not

have such an impressive pipeline of products to churn out this year. But that doesn’t mean it won’t have at least one ace up its sleeve. Officials at the company say that this year will see the Munich-based player launch the new 8 Series Gran Coupe — a pure-play four-door sports car that’s built on a long wheel base, with extra-large windows and sky roofs. It will be priced well above ₹1.5 crore.

While BMW may have been more restrained with its strategy this year, in the past it has deployed novel tactics that have included blurring the line between premium and luxury, using sharp discounts when required and bringing in smaller products like the X1 in 2010 when no one else had the gall to attempt the same. All of which means that it is a mistake to underestimate BMW. Who knows what else it might have in its arsenal.

Rudratej Singh, president and chief executive officer, BMW Group India, says, “The year 2019 was not easy for the Indian automotive industry because various macroeconomic and structural conditions shook its foundations. Despite this, the BMW successfully reached new consumers with the BMW 3 Series and the BMW X1.” He points to the healthy order book for the BMW X7, which is sold out for months.

So where does the luxury car market seem to be heading this year? “The second quarter of the year should see consumers perk up. Once we get past the transition to BS VI and the industry is surer about the rules going forward, we are confident we will see growth return in the second part of 2020,” Schwenk says.

The overall challenge will be this: Given last year’s low base, 2020 could bring the numbers back to black, albeit marginally, as the anticipation of new products and festivities drive the sales, says Ghosh. However, the challenges of higher taxation and lower spending by high net worth individuals will remain.

While that may be true, car aficionados in India will not be deprived of seeing the best the world has to offer.

▶ CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

## Pathbreakers

Daughter of tea garden labourers in Jalpaiguri in north Bengal, Urshila Khariya, 18, never imagined she’d play rugby, a game no one in her village had even heard of. Or step into a plane, leave alone to play that obscure game. Khariya now dons a number 5 jersey and plays in the scrum half position. In six years, she has played on the national team in places as far away from home as Dubai. And taken too many flights to remember.

She grins that what she likes best about the game is “Maar khao, phir doosre ko maaro. Mazaa aata hai. (You get bashed up and then it’s your turn to bash them up. It’s a lot of fun.)”

Of course, it takes effort, consistency and funds to keep these ventures going. Tudu runs his foundation out of his fitness academy in Kolkata (Tudu Fitness). Born at the Indian Institute of Management Bangalore’s social incubation programme, Bridges of Sports is aided by corporates such as BookASmile (a BookMyShow charitable arm), the Infosys Foundation, and Reliance Foundation besides the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation. Singh of the Indian Track Foundation acknowledges the role of his board, and both individuals and organisations, in helping to get his foundation off the ground.

Hurdles exist not just in the form of finances and infrastructure. Tribal belts in Jharkhand have begun to recognise Singh’s good intentions and efforts after seeing their 14-year-olds such as Walter Kandulna and Aakancha Kerketta win medals at both state and national level. At the India Cross Country National Championships in Warangal this January, Kandulna bagged the gold, and Kerketta won the 2000m silver at the Tamil Nadu Open State Meet in Erode in October 2019. The Siddis of Junagadh, Gujarat, who have been less receptive to the Foundation’s efforts, are next in the scouting plans for 2020, says Singh.

Despite the prospect of a better future the idea of their children moving away unnerves parents. Even after he had convinced parents to let their children leave their villages in north Bengal, coach Tudu took the precaution of informing panchayat elders and the local police that the Adibasi Rugby Foundation had taken the girls under its wing.

The story echoes in Mundgod, too. Chiniwar and Bendigiri have been trying to reassure

Nayana Kokare’s parents that she’ll be safe when she travels to the Racers Track Club in Kingston, Jamaica, the academy that Bolt trained at and which is headed by the champion’s coach, Glen Mills. This trip is dangled as an added incentive to students to stick to the programme: Chiniwar intends to send two of his best athletes to the Kingston academy every year. Ravikiran Francis Siddi, 18, is the other young athlete who hopes to make it to Kingston this year along with Kokare.

Poverty, societal restrictions, family pressure — many of these athletes have overcome great odds to do what they love. “Everyone my age has got married in the village but this game has given me confidence,” says Monica Majhi, 20, who is a second row forward (lock position). The rugby player goes home to

the Chuapara Tea Estate every year to appear for her graduate college exams and hopes to join the army. Her younger sisters back in the village idolise her.

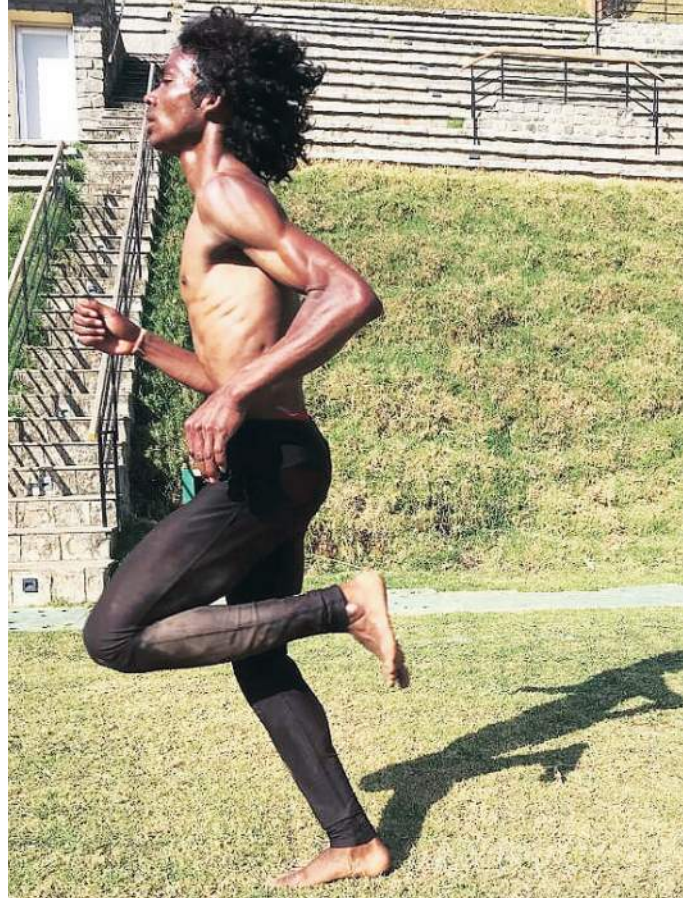
On Tudu’s rugby team of 15 is a single mother, and two others who also work as domestic help. The young women have beaten the Haryana team twice consecutively in the national league, in 2018 and 2019.

These young athletes have embraced a life that entails plenty of sacrifice for potentially dazzling rewards. Diets are strict for Singh’s students and they are weighed every day. “We have to keep track of the smallest of details to ensure maximum efficiency. We keep detailed records of how the body is changing while training to ensure the athlete is at their prime during an event,” explains Tenzin C Zongpa, a sports scientist based in Mundgod with Bridges of Sports.

Anything with sugar, masala and oil is off most of these athletes’ tables. “Sir (Tudu) does not let us even eat Maggi. These restrictions are relaxed only on the day we win matches. That day I am allowed to feast on *pani puri*, my favourite,” confides Urshila Khariya.

And even as Ravikiran Siddi, currently in Pune to train with a Jamaican coach, has been put on an unforgiving diet comprising no-masala meat, 18 eggs and loads of greens every day, Chiniwar suspects the boy sneaks in a bar of Dairy Milk on rare occasions.

Meanwhile in Mundgod, which Chiniwar hopes will be India’s Itea, a scarlet sky dominates the forested landscape in which he hopes will train runners of all kinds — from sprinters to middle- and long-distance athletes. The only exception among them is a javelin thrower who trains with them in the absence of a javelin coach. As his fellow athletes wrap up their training, local boy Siju Philip, who is training for a marathon, keeps going around the ground, running without pause. His lean silhouette moves steadily in the twilight long after the sun sets. For young people like him, the race has just begun.



▶ (Far left) Young footballers during training at the Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences; Patras Barla, an athlete at the Indian Track Foundation, Ooty