

THE MARKETS ON FRIDAY

		Chg#
Sensex	29,916.0	▲ 1,627.7
Nifty	8,745.5	▲ 482.0
Nifty futures*	8,723.1	▼ 22.4
Dollar	₹75.2	₹75.0**
Euro	₹80.5	₹80.6**
Brent crude (\$/bbl)**	25.7**	26.2**
Gold (10 gm)**	₹41,169.0	₹835.0

*(March) Discount on Nifty Spot; **Previous close; # Over previous close; ## At 9 pm IST; ### Market rate exclusive of VAT; Source: IBA

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ECONOMY & PUBLIC AFFAIRS P17 NEW DEFENCE PROCUREMENT POLICY TO BOOST INDIGENISATION

ECONOMY & PUBLIC AFFAIRS P17 KAMAL NATH RESIGNS AHEAD OF TRUST VOTE



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CORONAVIRUS EFFECT CITIES GRIND TO A HALT

From Maximum City to Millennium City, the impact of the deadly coronavirus on life and business has been uniform. Although there's no complete shutdown order yet, the country is already in a state of a virtual lockdown.

ARNAB DUTTA, SUBHAYAN CHAKRABORTY, AVISHEK RAKSHIT, SAMREEN AHMAD & RAJESH BHAYANI track the pulse of the market in the country.

- CASES CLIMB TO 236 IN INDIA AS 63 MORE TEST POSITIVE P22
- MAHARASHTRA ORDERS OFFICES TO SHUT DOWN TILL MARCH 31 P22
- POLITICIANS IN SELF-QUARANTINE AFTER ATTENDING SINGER'S PARTY P22
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- AIRLINES MAY HAVE TO GROUND 68% AIRCRAFT IN TWO MONTHS P2

BS ON SATURDAY SPECIALS

WEEKEND RUMINATIONS
Social mobilisation 9

The game is prevention, since mitigation efforts would be hampered by inadequate medical resources. If it works, it would be Modi's second successful experiment in social mobilisation. **TN NINAN** writes

NATIONAL INTEREST
Journalism in the time of corona 9

Coronavirus is the biggest story of our lives and a billion-plus people expect us to be around, watching, reporting, editing, recording this for posterity and blowing the whistle to draw attention to injustices and state failures, writes **SHEKHAR GUPTA**

Sebi unveils measures to tackle market volatility

Curbs on short selling, steep increase in margins and penalties from next week

SAMIE MODAK & JASH KRIPLANI
Mumbai, 20 March

The Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) on Friday announced measures to control volatility in stocks. Curbs on short selling, a steep increase in margins, a 10-fold increase in penalties, and reducing the outstanding positions available for derivatives trading are some key changes the regulator announced.

Sebi has said the short positions in the derivatives market cannot exceed the value of the holdings of the underlying stocks or the collaterals provided by them.

An additional position limit of ₹500 crore will be available for the futures and options (F&O) segment. Market players said the move was to discourage traders from aggressively building short positions.

"There is a practical short-selling cap at ₹500 crore that has been levied. If people want to speculate beyond the prescribed limit of ₹500 crore, they will need to put up twice the margin, which will be blocked for three months," said Jimeet Modi, founder and chief executive officer, Samco Securities.

The market regulator and stock exchanges have been under pressure to rein in huge fluctuations in stocks, which were causing heartburn to long-term investors.

The benchmark indices have

TIGHTER FRAMEWORK

- Norms for F&O trading made stringent
- Limits available for trading halved in the case of volatile stocks
- Margin requirements hiked for both cash and F&O
- Participants barred from taking naked short positions
- Penalties increased 10 times



dropped 12 per cent this week and 22 per cent so far this month.

Further, Sebi has halved the so-called market-wide position limit (MWPL) for highly volatile stocks — those that see an average daily variation of 15 per cent during the week.

In recent weeks, many stocks in the futures and options (F&O) segment have seen fluctuations of up to 40 per cent daily. Turn to Page 18

FM takes stock of COVID-19 impact

ARUP ROYCHOUDHURY & SANJEEB MUKHERJEE
New Delhi, 20 March

Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Friday met her ministerial colleagues and bureaucrats of various departments to assess the impact of the coronavirus pandemic. In multiple meetings, the ministries discussed the problems in their sectors, which are some of the worst-hit, and presented memorandums from stakeholders.

While the meetings on Friday were preliminary discussions, *Business Standard* has learnt that sectors like tourism; hospitality; aviation; micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs); and livestock have sought deferring loan repayments and temporary tax holidays in specific cases to help them tide over the steep fall in economic activity.

Friday's meetings were a precursor to the meetings of the COVID-19 Economic Response Taskforce, which is yet to be constituted.

Turn to Page 18

RBI BUYS ₹10K CR OF BONDS, ANOTHER ₹30K CR IN MARCH P17

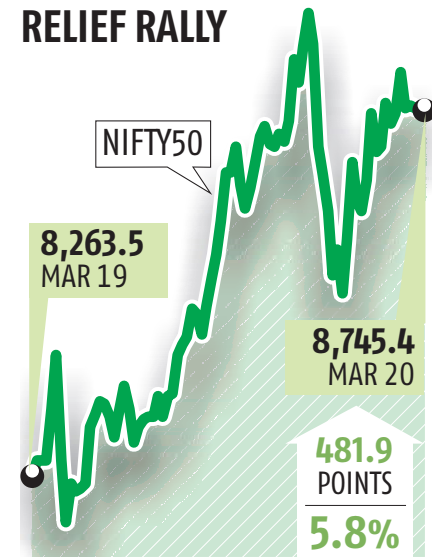
BANKS SEEK DEFERMENT OF LOAN REPAYMENT, NPA RECLASSIFICATION P17

SBI THROWS LIFELINE FOR AFFECTED BORROWERS P3

Markets rally on stimulus hopes

Indices post biggest single-day gains since 2009

RELIEF RALLY



Source: Exchange/Bloomberg

SUNDAR SETHURAMAN
Mumbai, 20 March

Investors had something to cheer going into the weekend, with the domestic benchmark indices rallying about 6 per cent, underpinned by a slew of support measures announced by policymakers around the world to cushion the economic shock of the coronavirus pandemic.

Markets across Asia and Europe gained as Brent crude prices rose above \$30 a barrel, while the US dollar weakened. The Sensex closed at 29,916, up 1,628 points, or 5.8 per cent, while the Nifty rallied 482 points, or 5.83 per cent, to end at 8,745 — the biggest single-day gains for both the indices since May

NIFTY GAINERS

	Mar 20	One-day chg (%)
Bharti Infratel	148.2	19.4
ONGC	72.4	18.5
GAIL India	80.8	16.4
UltraTech Cement	3,573.9	12.9
HUL	2,051.7	11.6

WORST WEEK SINCE 2008

	Mar 20	Chg (%)*
Nifty Bank	20,318	-19.3
Nifty Smallcap 100	3,885	-17.7
Nifty Midcap 100	12,661	-13.3
Sensex	29,916	-12.3
Nifty 50	8,745	-12.2
India VIX	67	30.4

*Change over last week

2009. The gains helped the market prune the weekly loss to 12.3 per cent, the worst since October 2008. If not for Friday's 6 per cent jump, the market would have logged its worst weekly setback in history.

The Sensex and the Nifty had dropped to 26,714 and 7,833, levels last seen in November 2016 in the aftermath of demonetisation, in intra-day trade on Thursday.

To avert a global recession, most central banks have announced measures worth trillion of dollars. The US Federal Reserve, the European Central Bank, and the Bank of England have doled out bond-buying programmes, interest rate cuts, and currency swaps to tide over the crisis. Turn to Page 18

India Inc puts best foot forward

Top conglomerates rule out cut in jobs or salaries

BS REPORTERS
Mumbai, 20 March

Several conglomerates promised on Friday they would not cut salaries of their staff and were not considering layoffs in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, which threatens to push the global economy into recession, leaving millions out of work.

"I will cut my salary to zero before a single employee is laid off," Rajiv Bajaj, managing director and chief executive officer of Bajaj Auto, said in a TV interview. The Aditya Birla group, the Vedanta group, and the Essar group also promised not to cut any jobs or salaries of their staff.

Tata Sons Chairman N Chandrasekaran said the group companies would ensure full payment to temporary workers and daily wage earners working in its offices and sites in India for March and April. They would get remuneration even if these workers were not able to work due to either quarantine measures, site closures, plant shutdowns, or other reasons, he said.

The assurance from India Inc top leaders came after IndiGo, the country's largest airline, announced hefty pay cuts for the senior management, while the Apollo Tyres promoters, Onkar Kanwar and Neeraj Kanwar, announced a 25 per cent cut in their remuneration. GoAir has already sent 80 of its expat staff home.

With inputs from Dev Chatterjee, Viveat Susan Pinto, Sohini Das, Shalby Seth Mohile and Avishek Rakshit

VOICES FROM THE C-SUITE

"TATA COMPANIES WILL ENSURE FULL PAYMENT TO TEMPORARY WORKERS AND DAILY WAGE EARNERS WHO ARE WORKING IN ITS OFFICES AND SITES"

N CHANDRASEKARAN,
CHAIRMAN, TATA SONS

"I WILL CUT MY SALARY TO ZERO BEFORE A SINGLE EMPLOYEE IS LAID OFF"

RAJIV BAJAJ,
MD AND CEO, BAJAJ AUTO

"IN THESE TRYING TIMES, BUSINESS CAN TAKE A BACK SEAT AND THE SAFETY AND LIVES OF PEOPLE ARE OF UTMOST IMPORTANCE"

H M BANGUR, CHAIRMAN,
SHREE CEMENT



HUL SETS ASIDE ₹100 CRORE TO FIGHT VIRUS

Hindustan Unilever (HUL), the country's largest consumer goods company, on Friday said it had committed ₹100 crore to fight the COVID-19 epidemic in India. It has also taken a host of other measures such as price cuts, free availability of soaps to the needy, a ₹10-crore donation for better testing facilities, and public awareness programmes. Sanjiv Mehta, chairman and managing director of HUL, said: "In a crisis like this, companies have a big role to play." 2

RBI's contingency plan: Keep it going from a secret location

A crack team of 150 overseeing critical operations from a hotel

ANUP ROY
Mumbai, 20 March

As the country goes on a self-imposed lockdown to fight the coronavirus contagion, a crack team of 150 people, in hazmat suits, is keeping India's financial system up and running since March 19 from an unknown location in a completely quarantined environment.

These 150 people, including 37 officials from critical departments of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), such as debt management, reserve management and monetary operations, and third-party service providers, are now in charge of the business continuity plan of the central bank, designed in a way that could help create a benchmark for such exigencies in the future as well.

The idea is to keep the RBI's information technology (IT) infrastructure in top shape to run the payments and settlement system uninterrupted 24x7, and run the full gamut of RBI functions from the secured data centres, as nearly 14,000 RBI staffers, except the senior-most management, work from home.

The IT infrastructure operated by the RBI is necessary not just for the banking system to keep functioning, but also to ensure uninterrupted business and retail payments, as well as the continuance of government tax and other payments, said a source familiar with the arrangement.

"These systems, operated through multiple data centres, must stay live notwithstanding any exogenous disruption," the source said.

According to the plan, the 150 personnel are divided into two teams —

The infrastructure operated by the RBI is necessary not just for the banking system but also to ensure uninterrupted business and retail payments



IMAGING: AJAY MOHANTY

one that is running the show, and the other is acting as a backup. A primary data centre has been identified, while other centres are in standby, and the central bank has hired a hotel in the vicinity of the primary data centre exclusively to accommodate these people. The support staff of the hotel (69 in all), comprising maintenance, security, kitchen, front desk, and administration, has also been isolated within the hotel. Turn to Page 18

Court sends Rana Kapoor to judicial custody till April 2

SUBRATA PANDA
Mumbai, 20 March

The session's court in Mumbai on Friday sent Rana Kapoor, former managing director (MD) and chief executive officer (CEO) of YES Bank, to judicial custody till April 2. This came after the Enforcement Directorate (ED) submitted before the court that it does not need Kapoor's custody any further.

The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) has also moved a production warrant to take Kapoor into custody.

The CBI had filed a case against Kapoor for allegedly obtaining illegal gratification by acquiring a property in Delhi from Gautam Thapar's Avantha group. In exchange, YES Bank waived the industrial house's dues and advanced new loans.

Earlier, Kapoor's ED custody was extended by four days to March 20 while the ED had asked for a six-day custody. The former banker was arrested on March 8 by the ED under the provisions of Prevention of Money Laundering Act and was since in the ED's custody. Kapoor told the court on Friday that he was suffering from asthma, and because of his age, he is vulnerable to coronavirus. The court has asked the jail authorities to take appropriate precautions on this count.

Meanwhile, a number of high-profile corporate promoters were summoned by the probe agency, including Anil Ambani, Naresh Goyal, Kapil and Dheeraj Wadhawan,



YES Bank co-founder Rana Kapoor at the Arthur Road Jail in Mumbai on Friday

PHOTO: KAMLESH PEDNEKAR

Subash Chandra and Sameer Gehlaut in connection with the YES Bank case. Anil Ambani was questioned by the ED on Thursday and asked to furnish some important details which are crucial for the case, said an ED official. Ambani's Reliance group is among the largest borrowers of the bank, with an exposure of around ₹13,000 crore.

Ambani sought more time from the agency to provide further clarifications on some specific queries. The probe agency has asked him to appear again on March 30. Other big defaulters of YES Bank, who had been summoned by the ED to appear this week, did not show up.

During investigations, the probe agency found that a loan of ₹202 crore was sanctioned to Mack Star Marketing, which is a joint venture among HDIL promoters Sarang Wadhawan & Rakesh Wadhawan, former PMC Bank chairman Waryam

Singh and the De Shaw group.

The first three hold only 16.64 per cent shares in the entity while the De Shaw group holds majority stake. The ED found that the loan of ₹202 crore, sanctioned to Mack Star Marketing, was used by HDIL to pay off loans. The loan was sanctioned to the entity with the specific purpose of renovating its office building.

Further investigations have revealed that about 78 companies owned by Kapoor's family members were being controlled and managed by Kapoor himself. The ED has also found that YES Bank had bought debentures of Dewan Housing Finance (DHFIL) worth ₹3,700 crore while the latter gave a loan to a firm owned by Kapoor's daughters for ₹600 crore.

Both the transactions were suspicious as the company owned by Kapoor's daughters did not have sufficient businesses or assets.

Gopalakrishnan, R Gandhi named additional directors

SUBRATA PANDA
Mumbai, 20 March

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on Friday appointed R Gandhi and Ananth Narayan Gopalakrishnan additional directors to the board of crisis-hit YES Bank for a period of two years.

This will be R Gandhi's second stint as an additional director on the private sector lender's board. The former deputy RBI governor's first term was to expire in May 2021 but the central bank superseded the previous board of YES Bank earlier this month.

Gopalakrishnan, an associate professor at SP Jain Institute of Management and Research, is an international banking and financial markets expert. He was previously Standard Chartered Bank's regional head of financial markets for ASEAN and South Asia.

According to the YES Bank reconstruction scheme, the government had constituted a four-member board. Prashant Kumar, the current administrator of the bank, was appointed the managing director and chief executive officer. Sunil Mehta, former non-executive chairman of PNB, was named the non-executive chairman of the bank.

SBI to provide ad hoc loan to users affected by COVID-19

State Bank of India (SBI) will provide emergency loans at 7.25 per cent (per annum) fixed rate of interest to existing borrowers whose operations are impacted by COVID-19. The scheme will be in force up to June 30.

The ad hoc loan facility, named COVID 19 Emergency Credit Line (CECL), is aimed at meeting the temporary liquidity mismatch arising out of the virus outbreak, SBI informed branches.

All standard accounts as of March 16 and till the date of

sanction are eligible. However, standard accounts classified as SMA 1 (overdue between 30 and 60 days) and SMA2 (overdue between 61 and 90 days) are not eligible for availing of this credit facility.

The maximum loan that could be availed of under the special scheme is capped at ₹200 crore.

This loan facility shall be made available as fund-based limits only, SBI said. The maximum brunt of COVID-19 fallout is being faced by business establishments. **ABHJIT LELE**

Lenders to seek relaxation on loan repayment

SOMESH JHA
New Delhi, 20 March

Lenders are set to demand a host of relaxations on repayment of loans in a bid to tide over the COVID-19 crisis. These include a 90-day relief in classifying accounts as non-performing assets (NPAs) and deferring installment of term loans.

The management committee of the Indian Banks'

Association (IBA) met on Friday and froze a set of demands that it will put up before

the Reserve Bank (RBI) and the government. It will make a bid to help the sector and retail and corporate borrowers alike, IBA chief executive officer Sunil Mehta said over phone.

"We are asking for a 90-day extension of the timeline for slippage of a running account - both cash credit and overdraft - into NPA," Mehta said. If borrowers are unable to repay loans within 90 days of the due date, their loan account is classified as NPA by the banks right now. If the IBA's recommendations are accepted, the NPA tag will take six months.

During the intervening period, the accounts will not be classified as a 'stressed asset', technically known as Special Mention

Accounts (SMA)-1 or SMA-2 accounts. SMA-1s are those in which loan repayments have been overdue for a period between 31 and 60 days, while SMA 2 accounts are the ones with a delay of 61-90 days.

Bankers foresee that the COVID-19 impact on the sector will last for six months. This is because businesses across all sectors will run dry on cash and even take extreme measures such as retrenchment to tide over. Banks want easier loan repayment terms, a CEO of a bank, who was present in the meeting, said.

"We have decided to demand deferment of up to six months in term-loan installments with a consequential shift in the repayment period by six months. This will be left to the discretion of bankers. If lenders feel that half of the installment amount can be deferred, as the payment capacity of the borrower has weakened, additional six months can be given. Even full installment sums can be postponed on a case-to-case basis," said Mehta, who was earlier the MD and CEO of PNB.

The COVID-19 has hit several industries in India and the impact is visible across all segments as cities head for a lockdown to contain the spread.



CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

PEOPLE'S CURFEW: A TRAILER

From Maximum City to Millennium City, the impact of the deadly coronavirus on life and business has been uniform. Although there's no complete shutdown order yet, the country is already in a state of a virtual lockdown



Deserted CST railway station in Mumbai as several trains got cancelled and passengers preferred to stay home due to the increasing coronavirus threat



Electronic display boards at Gurugram's Cyber Hub, which are usually reserved for marque brands and shows, are flashing messages on how to stay away from the virus

MUMBAI

Trade goes into lockdown

RAJESH BHAYANI
Mumbai, 20 March

Even before Prime Minister Narendra Modi asked the country to observe a *janata* curfew this Sunday, Mumbai had already started taking the threat of coronavirus seriously as traffic and passengers on public transport dwindled over the week. Most offices, especially in the organised sector, are asking employees to work from home.

Malls are shut except for essential items, street food vendors have gone, and the famous *khaugallis* in market areas are empty. Even parks and beaches are desolate.

Friday's decision by the Maharashtra government to close all workplaces till March 31, except shops selling essential commodities and financial markets, will mean that there will be even less activity in Maximum City.

C-ward, spread across five sq km in south Mumbai, is the hub for several retail and wholesale markets such as Zaveri Bazaar for jewellery, Lohar Chawl for electrical goods, and Mulji Jetha market for textiles. The area is usually very crowded and sees footfalls in hundreds of thousands including traders, customers,



CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

and employees. Even on Thursday, in many of these markets that were open, customers were missing. On Friday, most shops were shut and the narrow streets empty.

Till Thursday, local authorities' efforts were to reduce gathering of people, which has now changed to complete closure of commercial premises, including wholesale and retail markets in Mumbai. However, some of the markets had heeded to the government guidance and spun into action. Wholesale food market Agricultural Produce Market Committee in Vashi was kept closed on Thursday to facilitate disinfection and protect participants from coronavirus. The diamond trade had taken steps to decongest the Bharat Diamond Bourse at the Bandra-Kurla Complex and Opera House on Thursday but will now be shut after Friday's commercial area lockdown.

Even the number of daily wage earners in these markets such as porters lugging goods has gone down. Around 10,000-12,000 such people are estimated to be working in C-ward alone and half of them are estimated to have gone back to their villages in interior Maharashtra or Uttar Pradesh, given the challenge of procuring food due to closure of eateries.

DELHI

Staring nervously at end of business

SUBHAYAN CHAKRABORTY
New Delhi, 20 March

The idea of maintaining a one-metre distance from people is a concept so foreign in the traffic-choked lanes and bylanes of Old Delhi that residents are amazed that the municipal authorities even bothered to suggest it.

"Has Modi ji or Kejriwal ji ever visited Chawri Bazaar? There is hardly any space to walk, as thousands jostle with each other over these bad roads," Prakash Aggarwal exclaims from behind a desk overflowing with mechanical parts. Aggarwal's 43-year-old shop, which caters to dealers of light hydraulic machines, is located in Gali Ghansi Ram, where residents continue to work and play, without face masks and seemingly untroubled by the panic over the coronavirus pandemic.

"Business has been slow since last year and we've got used to orders getting cancelled. I doubt if this virus can ruin things further," says Aggarwal's neighbour Afzal Sheikh, who is a wholesaler of pump sets. Most business owners swing between this cautious optimism and fear of major losses in the densely populated 6.1 sq km urban ghetto of historical Old Delhi.

Despite the restrictions that have come in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak, this bustling distribution hub for goods is yet to shut down. "But it's coming soon. The market association has called for a total bandh from March 21. It

will be disastrous for me if that happens as most of my inventory remains unsold and suppliers are getting anxious over payments," says Sudheer Jain, a retailer of iron pipes and fixtures in Hauz Qazi.

"People in Delhi like to conduct business the old way. Even regular customers who trust our products come over to sign the orders in person. Now, most are cancelling their visits due to the virus," Jain says.

At nearby Khari Baoli, one of India's largest markets for dried fruits and spices, shopkeepers are in a bind over how to deal with the current crisis. "People usually pick up a little bit to taste or inspect. I can't ensure that they will do so after washing their hands," says an exasperated Bhajan Ram, owner of a dried fruits business.

Deserted markets

In East Delhi's Laxmi Nagar, a popular garment market, the streets are empty and quiet. "Things can only go bad for retailers like us when customers don't step out," says Balram, the shop manager at the sprawling Oswal Fashion showroom. With workers fleeing to the villages, the cost of labour is inching up and the supply chain has been hit. Daily business, usually pegged at ₹1.8-2 lakh this time of the year, has nosedived to ₹45,000 now, he adds.

Smaller businesses have taken a harder hit. "People tell me, don't open your shop or you'll get infected," says 62-year-old Ashwani Kumar. "Well, it doesn't matter

because anyway I can't afford to pay back my loans," says a dejected Kumar, whose hole-in-the-wall shop sells leather bags, belts and wallets. The last lot of these remain unsold as footfall has dwindled.

Across the road, Nafeez's 12-year-old meat business, Calcutta Meat Shop, is facing an existential crisis. The rumours and WhatsApp forwards have begun to take their toll. "People stay away from non-veg during such times, even though doctors have stressed that consuming chicken does not cause coronavirus. But people are not listening," he says tiredly, looking around his empty shop.

The party fizzling out

In high street Connaught Place, the state government's order to close all food and beverage businesses is making people nervous. "The police have started visiting all the bars and nightclubs, ordering them to shut down. If this place is shut for the next 10 days, at least five of us on weekly wages will be without a job," says Ravinder, a bouncer at a watering hole.

Others have their own problems. MBA student Ravi is out on his first date with a batchmate. "We managed to sneak out of campus, but half the places here are closing down, while others are jam-packed. I had planned a dinner tonight and this is embarrassing, to say the least," he says, glancing at his friend. "I want this to be over soon," he adds. So does the rest of the world.

GURUGRAM

Millennium city at standstill

ARNAB DUTTA
Gurugram, 20 March

It's late afternoon and Rajesh Tiwari, who runs a non-descript corner shop at Sushant Lok's Vyapar Kendra, is sitting without any customer. Located at the entrance of a popular retail hub, the outlet selling soft drinks to cigarettes has been doing brisk business for many years. But in the past 10 days, Tiwari's sales have been severely hit.

With the fear of coronavirus increasing, the regular customers are just not turning up these days. "Everybody is staying home. The regular smokers are mostly using home delivery services," Tiwari, 35, says. Go a little further in the glitzy town of Gurugram, best known for skyscraper offices of multinationals, premium malls and fancy apartments, some stores appear busy. For instance, Shyam Store, a large-format *kirana* outlet is packed with shoppers purchasing consumer staples like wheat flour, pulses and rice in bulk. Nearly a dozen store attendants, including the manager, are trying to manage the crowd, which is stocking up in case there's a full lockdown. The activity here is in

contrast to the eerie silence elsewhere. The malls are shut, corporate groups have allowed work from home, and the residents have isolated themselves in compliance with government advisories. At Cyber Hub, the largest F&B cluster in the heart of the millennium city, the scene is a little different, from a distance. This reporter finds office goers, rather rare during the corona days, walking around. But a closer look reveals a dominant virus theme in the otherwise happening complex. Vast electronic display boards, which on a normal day would flash about shows, events and brands, are running precautionary messages on how to keep away COVID-19. The restaurants and food courts, that remind you of those European cities, are all closed.

Across the hub, in Cyber City, most offices are operational, but that's about all. The attendance has dropped drastically since Tuesday, when the state government came out with guidelines urging private enterprises to vacate offices as much as possible. Move on to Cyber Greens, which houses firms like Nokia Solutions and Networks, HP India, and United Airlines, the attendance is down by 75 per cent.

While till last week, temperature reading at the entrance was in place in just a few of these towers, now it is mandatory everywhere. In some places, temperature scan has practically replaced the traditional security check at the entrance. Compared to last week, when this reporter had earlier visited Gurugram for a recce of coronavirus impact in workplaces, clean-up exercise has been stepped up. Hand sanitizers seem to be all over the counters at any office building, while it's tough to find faces without masks.

The drop off area outside the twin towers of One and Two Horizon Centres is deserted, giving away the coronavirus impact. In stark contrast to a normal day, cab drivers are relaxed as they wait for passengers.

To keep a check on the spread of the virus, many housing societies have stopped entry of domestic help, while some have restricted entry of daily vendors supplying newspapers and milk. Also, even as delivery personnel from e-commerce firms are being seen as a lifeline, they are being stopped for temperature scanning before they can enter any of the high-end apartments.

KOLKATA

Footfall, but no trade

AVISHEK RAKSHIT
Kolkata, 20 March

The public health advisories in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak seem to have fallen on deaf ears in Burrabazar, one of Kolkata's largest wholesale markets. Here, the crowds are as thick as ever, street vendors are as numerous and raucous as ever, and but for a few harried home guards and civic volunteers, no one seems to be perturbed that a deadly, highly contagious virus is going around, infecting and killing people by the thousands.

Though streets and commercial establishments in the rest of Kolkata were relatively empty on Friday, in Burrabazar in central Kolkata, which houses nearly 1,000 registered and unregistered shops, and witnesses daily transactions of more than ₹100 crore, it seems to be business as usual. However, many of the traders here say that despite the crowds, business has been down since the coronavirus outbreak. They insist that the area is crowded only because of the office-goers who pass through it — not because business is thriving. "Our sales are 90 per cent down since

the day the virus broke out in India. Both wholesale as well as retail trading are affected. If people die in the state because of this virus, business will be hit further," says Ranjit Singh Arora, owner of Maa Kali Traders.

Cloth merchant Shekhar Singh is equally despondent. "I used to sell 150 metres of cloth per day. This has now come down to 25. Business has been hit badly," he says.

But that has not stopped shop owners who source their wares from the wholesale market from stocking up. "It would be irrational not to stock up owing to any scare. Business is down at the moment, but I need to be ready when it recovers," says Bapi Tulakdar, coughing into his hand as he does so. The precautions to be taken against the spread of COVID-19 have obviously passed him by.

Some traders say that part of the frenetic activity in the market is due to panic buying. Shankar Agarwal of India Canvas Company, which sells industrial polymers, plastic and tarpaulin, says that some people are stocking up their stores in advance because they are uncertain as to what the future holds. But though many acknowledge that business has been

affected because of COVID-19, they don't see the jostling crowds as a threat to their health and safety.

"Kolkata is the land of Goddess Kali. She will protect no matter what virus attacks," says a metal trader in his 40s, nonchalantly spitting out *gutta* juice. Clearly, he is not aware that the state has asked people not to spit in public places as one of the measures to fight the virus.

Ironically, near the Cathedral of the Most Holy Rosary, a landmark near the market, there is street vendor peddling single-use masks for ₹60 a piece. That seems to be Burrabazar's only concession to the fact that these are extraordinary times. Traders here are also unanimously opposed to any lockdown of the market. "It is a disease of the rich and rich people don't come shopping here," says cloth merchant Singh. "What will we eat if shops are closed and there is no business?" asks Agarwal.

Shop owners reveal that after the Centre issued the ban on the entry of international travellers into India, Bangladeshis, who account for around 40 per cent of the total buyers in the market, have dwindled.

"Footfall has reduced since the coronavirus outbreak in India and it is expected to go down further because the Bangladeshis are now headed home. The business from Indian locals has also been affected due to the panic around coronavirus," says Mukesh Luthra, owner of a garment store.

BENGALURU

Traffic jams come to a halt

SAMREEN AHMAD
Bengaluru, 20 March

In the city with the worst traffic in the world, COVID-19 has wrought a miracle — no traffic jams. As malls, offices, schools, and colleges remain shut, the traffic in Bengaluru has fallen by 40-45 per cent. The shops on the normally bustling Brigade Road have been open but with no customer in sight. The line of autorickshaw drivers, who used to park at MG Road, adjacent to Brigade Road, has gone awol.

Church Street, thronged by visitors throughout the day because of its hundreds of cafes and restaurants,

was eerily empty. None of the popular eateries — Oye Amritsar, The White Room and Bheema's — were open. "Our business has gone down 90 per cent. I do not know if I will be able to pay the salaries of my seven helpers next month. I have requested my landlord to waive the rent at least for next month," said Shantanu Karmakar who owns a small Chinese food joint on Church Street.

At the famous Empire restaurant on the corner of Church Street, which used to have a waiting time of 20 minutes at lunchtime, three diners enjoyed a solitary meal. Business was down 70 per cent, said the manager. Three kilometres away, the wholesale Russell

Market with 400 fruit and vegetable stalls, was deserted. Since last weekend, the stall owners had suffered losses of 70-75 per cent every day.

"The market is losing ₹7-8 lakh a day. The fish and poultry units have completely shut as there is no business happening with most restaurants closed as they were the biggest buyers," said Javeed Sait, joint secretary of the Russell Market Association.

Despite the lack of customers, the shops remain open as no order to close has come from the Karnataka government, said Sait. The government has, however, ordered the closure of all malls, theatres, educational institutes and commercial establishments for a week. Later, it extended the partial lockdown to March-end.

The state has so far reported 14 positive COVID-19 cases and one death. Residents have been told to visit relatives in hospital only if absolutely necessary. Friday prayers in mosques have been limited to 15 rather than the usual 60 minutes. The number of worshippers visiting the famous Banashankari Amma temple at Kanakpura Road have decreased by 60 per cent.



Church Street, which is normally frequented by visitors throughout the day because of its cafes and restaurants, looks eerily empty

PHOTO: SAMREEN AHMAD

India sees biggest jump in a day: 63 new cases



236

Positive cases in India so far, says Health ministry

20

Number of cases in New Delhi

2

More test positive in Gujarat, count rises to 7

4

More test positive in Chandigarh, total count at 5

12

Fresh cases in Kerala, total goes up to 37

3

New cases in Maharashtra, total 52 now

■ **Delhi government orders closure of malls; exempts pharmacy, grocery stores**

■ **Disney+ launch in India on hold due to IPL delay**

■ **Second positive case in West Bengal**

■ **Four test positive in Madhya Pradesh's Jabalpur**

■ **Centre extends visas of foreigners in India till April 15**

■ **Delhi markets to shut for 3 days starting today**

■ **One fresh case of COVID-19 in Telangana; Total rises to 17**

■ **Centre launches MyGov Corona Helpdesk on WhatsApp**

■ **5 foreigners under**

■ **observation in Kochi test positive**

■ **PM Narendra Modi holds key meeting with state CMs**

■ **24-hour lockdown in Shillong today**

■ **14 firms get licence to evaluate COVID-19 tests kits**

■ **Railway official suspended for allegedly hiding COVID-19 positive son in office guest house**

■ **Railways cancels 90 more trains till March 31; total number of cancelled trains climbs to 245**

■ **Help tackle fake news: IT ministry writes to Twitter, Facebook, Google**

Maha orders offices to shut till Mar 31

ANEESH PHADNIS
Mumbai, 20 March

All non-essential services, including private offices and stores, in Mumbai, Pune and Nagpur will remain shut till March 31 in light of the continued spread of the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19), Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray announced on Friday.

Grocery stores, milk centres, pharmacies and banks are exempt from the restrictions, which come into effect from Friday midnight. Similarly, the stock exchange, stock broking offices, clearing corporation and primary dealers under ambit of Reserve Bank of India and Securities and Exchange Board of India will remain open.

All government offices will function with 25 per cent attendance and local trains and buses will continue to operate as usual in Mumbai to allow for smooth functioning of essential services. Factories can function with 50 per cent of staff strength. School examinations for classes

one to eight, too, are being cancelled.

The enhanced restrictions are being put in place to prevent the spread of COVID-19 which has so far infected 52 persons in the state. Over 40 of these cases are among those with a history of foreign travel and the government is working hard to ensure there is no community transmission. "Residents have responded positively to our appeals to work from home and crowds have lessened. But we need to be careful and take precautions for next 15 days," Thackeray said.

Earlier in the week, cinema halls, parks, gyms and swimming pools were closed while stores in crowded areas were allowed to function on alternate days. In Pune and Nagpur the local administrations ordered the closure of restaurants and bars and some of them have kept only their kitchens open for take away services.

"We are also working to find a solution to financial challenges caused by the COVID-19 crisis and a working group has been formed to look into it," Thackeray added.

WORLD

■ **Global death toll crosses 10,000, over quarter of a million cases reported**

■ **California shuts down amid dire projections of 25 million cases**

■ **Italy's death toll crosses 4,000, reports 627 deaths**

■ **Pakistan reports third death, cases rise to 453**

Several MPs in self-isolation after party

Vasundhara Raje, son met singer Kanika Kapoor who tested positive at Lucknow Taj Mahal hotel

ARCHIS MOHAN
New Delhi, 20 March

Pressure increased on the government on Friday to end the ongoing Parliament session at the earliest when several MPs quarantined themselves after fears they might have come in contact with people infected with coronavirus. The Budget session is scheduled to end on April 3, and is yet to pass the finance bill.

Former Rajasthan chief minister Vasundhara Raje tweeted that she and her son, Dushyant Singh, have self isolated themselves after attending a party in Lucknow where singer Kanika Kapoor was also present. The two, however, have not been tested positive yet.

Earlier in the day, Kapoor quarantined herself after testing positive for coronavirus. In an Instagram post, the 41-year-old singer said she returned from London 10-days back, but

developed signs of flu in the last four days. She also alleged that she had to make repeated requests to the health authorities in Lucknow to get her tested. Kapoor had landed in India from the UK on March 9. According to her father, she had attended at least four parties in Lucknow, including with family and friends, between March 13 and 16.

One of the parties was at Lucknow's Taj Mahal Hotel, which Raje, Singh and at least a 100 others attended. Uttar Pradesh government has ordered the hotel shut until further orders. A video has surfaced of Kapoor at the Holi festivities hosted by UP Lokayukta Sanjay Mishra on March 15. Kapoor had also stayed with her extended family in Kanpur. Raje and Dushyant, along with several politicians, and bureaucrats, had attended the party at Taj Mahal hotel in Lucknow on March 13. UP health minister Jai Pratap



Singer Kanika Kapoor who tested positive for coronavirus booked for negligence by Lucknow police

Singh and Congress politician Jitin Prasada, who have quarantined themselves, also attended the party.

Meanwhile, Dushyant, a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Lok Sabha member, had actively participated in parliamentary proceedings and meetings after his return from Lucknow. On Wednesday, Dushyant was at Rashtrapati Bhavan, along with over 100 other MPs from UP and Rajasthan, for a breakfast meeting with President

Ram Nath Kovind. In photographs tweeted by the President's office, Singh can be seen standing right behind the President and Defence Minister Rajnath Singh.

Later that day, Dushyant attended a meeting of the parliamentary standing committee on transport, aviation and culture. More than a dozen MPs and senior bureaucrats had attended that meeting. On Thursday, Dushyant attended a party in the national capital, where several other MPs were present. Some who had interacted with Dushyant since his return from Lucknow, including Trinamool Congress' Derek O'Brien, BJP's Varun Gandhi and Apna Dal's Anupriya Patel, quarantined themselves pending tests. Aam Aadmi Party's Sanjay Singh said he has quarantined himself, too, as he interacted with O'Brien.

"While in Lucknow, I attended a dinner with my son Dushyant and his in-laws. Kanika, who has unfortunately tested positive, was a guest. As a matter of abundant caution, my son and I have immediately self-quarantined," Raje said.

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Business Standard

WEEKEND

A house for Mr Ambedkar

Will a museum to the Dalit leader in London enlighten Brahminical British Indians, asks Ashis Ray

Last week, the uncertainty over whether a museum would exist in London in the name of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, architect of the Indian Constitution and strenuous campaigner for Dalit rights and education for women, was quashed. Robert Jenrick, secretary of state for Housing, Communities and Local Government in the Conservative party government of Prime Minister Boris Johnson, ruled irreversibly in its favour. The proposed institution was prematurely inaugurated in 2015 by Narendra Modi, after the Maharashtra government paid £3 million to acquire a townhouse in the leafy, intellectual suburb of Primrose Hill, where Ambedkar lived in 1921-22 while reading at the London School of Economics and preparing to be called to the bar at Gray's Inn.

Indeed, Jenrick, with a little encouragement from a British Foreign Office anxious not to ruffle relations with India, overruled an objection by the Camden Borough Council. It was an issue of granting planning permission to convert use of a residential property in a soundless locality for a potentially noisy public purpose, such as a museum. The Indian high commission's application for retrospective sanction had previously been rejected.

At a hearing on the matter last year, Camden's conservation officer, Nick Baxter, argued that Ambedkar was not a significant figure in Britain and had lived in the house for only a year, thereby not justifying a violation of planning rules. Caroline Daly, also of the Council, maintained that every house lost in the borough through conversion or redevelopment "is a home that needs to be replaced". To these, Steve Gasztoiwicz, a Queen's Counsel appearing for the Maharashtra government, described Ambedkar as a "God-like" personality, who mattered to Indian-origin people in the United Kingdom.

Jenrick's award, though, recognising neighbourhood sensitivities, was conditional and in-principle. It mandated that Ambedkar House — as the building has been named — would operate solely under the supervision of the Maharashtra government, its opening hours will not exceed 11 am to 5 pm and a museum management plan would need to be submitted to Camden Council for approval. There have been stories of unseemly wrangling for control and unmonitored expenditure since the property was purchased. Another £3 million was, reportedly, spent on its refurbishment.

Ambedkar was born on April 14, 1891 at the military cantonment of Mhow in Madhya Pradesh into the Mahar caste, looked upon by Indian society of that milieu and by the British, who ruled India, as "untouchables". The family hailed from

Maharashtra. His father Ramji Maloji Sakpal had, however, become an officer in the British Indian Army and was, thus, fortunate to have his son educated. Indeed, Ambedkar junior was the first in his community to complete high school.

Yet, he experienced unspeakable oppression. "While in the school I knew that children of the touchable classes, when they felt thirsty, could go out to the water tap, open it, and quench their thirst. But my position was separate. I could not touch the tap; and unless it was opened by a touchable, it was not possible for me to quench my thirst," he later wrote. (These reminiscences were published in a booklet, *Waiting for a Visa*.)

A bright student, he proceeded to obtain a bachelor's degree in economics and politics at Bombay University. Coincidentally, here he met the reformist Maharaja of Baroda, Sayajirao Gaekwad III, who granted him a scholarship of £11.50 a month for three years for further education at New York's Columbia University, where he received a master's degree and a PhD. He lived in a dormitory with a friend, Naval Bhathena, a Parsi; they remained friends for life. Others he considered to be close to him were his professors John Dewey, James Shotwell, Edwin Seligman and James Robinson, who were refreshingly uncaring of his caste status.

After three years in America, he arrived in London in 1916. The British police suspected he was a revolutionary and frisked him minutely before allowing him entry. Luckily, letters of introduction from his professors proved invaluable. He enrolled at Gray's Inn to become a barrister; and the LSE for a doctoral thesis, which was eventually published as *The Evolution of Provincial Finance in British India*.

But Ambedkar's scholarship from Baroda had run its course. Therefore, in 1917 he returned to India, after being given permission to come back to London to finish his studies within four years. He became professor of political economy at Sydenham College in Bombay, where he was popular with his students, but some of his colleagues objected to his sharing their drinking water jug. It was a culture shock after his experience of equity in the US and London. Unsurprisingly, in 1919, he gave evidence to a British committee advocating separate and reserved seats in elections for scheduled castes. In 1920, he returned to London to finish his training at Gray's Inn and his work at LSE — where a bust of him has now been installed — helped by loans from Bhathena and the Maharaja of Kolhapur. In 1924, he began practice as a barrister in Bombay.

Ambedkar, who was conferred the Bharat Ratna by the government of Prime Minister Vishwanath Pratap Singh, was undoubtedly a nationalist; but he frequently collided with the Indian National Congress. After the British government ordered separate electorates for

"untouchables", Mahatma Gandhi, vehemently opposed to a division in the Hindu vote, commenced a fast unto death. Ambedkar backed down. But he interpreted Gandhi's outreach to scheduled castes, whom the latter described as "Harijan" or children of God, as patronising.

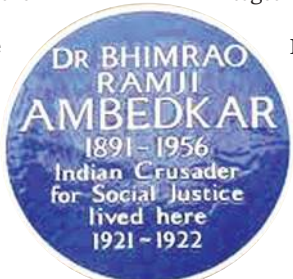
At the 1931 Roundtable Conference in London, where Ambedkar was invited as a representative of Dalits, Gandhi lashed out: "All parties at this meeting represent sectional interests. Congress alone claims to represent the whole of India, all interests. It is no communal organisation; it is a determined enemy of communalism in any shape or form. Congress knows no distinction of race, colour or creed; its platform is universal." He continued: "And here I see that the Congress is treated as one of the Parties. I do not mind it; I do not regard it as a calamity for the Congress; but I do regard it as a calamity for the purpose of doing the work for which we have gathered together here."

Ambedkar, who converted to Buddhism, contended that Hindus should concede Pakistan to Muslims. This was at odds with Gandhi's view, but in consonance with Congress' acceptance of the partition of India.

Jawaharlal Nehru invited Ambedkar to be India's first minister of law and justice. The Constituent Assembly appointed him chairman of the drafting committee for the Constitution of the Indian Republic, which came into being on January 26, 1950. While he was, arguably, giving shape to Nehru's vision of an independent India, he edited and clarified content as well as defended certain formulations in debates in the Assembly. Notwithstanding his

insertion of the abolition of untouchability, he echoed Nehru's view of India as a liberal democracy, with a federal structure and safeguards for rights of minorities. It is generally accepted that Ambedkar resigned his ministerial position in 1951 because Congress refused to implement a uniform civil code. He was, however, pleased with his efforts to create the Constitution. He was confident to the extent of asserting: "I feel that the Constitution is workable; it is flexible and it is strong enough to hold the country together both in peace time and in war time. Indeed, if I may say so, if things go wrong under the new Constitution the reason will not be that we had a bad Constitution. What we will have to say is that Man was vile."

Ambedkar's legacy runs deep among Indian Dalits in Britain. They are disgruntled. They complain of discrimination from upper caste people of Indian origin, especially in rigid Gujarati and Punjabi circles. In 2015, under the government of Prime Minister David Cameron, the House of Lords discussed "amendment of Section 9 of the Equality Act 2010 that requires the introduction of secondary legislation to incorporate caste as a protected characteristic". This followed a judgement in an employment case relating to caste discrimination.



INDIAN DALITS IN BRITAIN COMPLAIN OF DISCRIMINATION FROM UPPER CASTE PEOPLE OF INDIAN ORIGIN, ESPECIALLY IN GUJARATI AND PUNJABI CIRCLES



◀ B R Ambedkar outside the House of Commons during the 1931 Roundtable Conference in London; (bottom left) Ambedkar's house during his LSE days, now a museum

Dolar Popat, who is of Indian descent, reacted: "My Lords, the vast majority of the British Hindu and Sikh community is outraged at this amendment to the Equality Act."

Meghnad Desai, also of Indian extraction, asked: "My Lords, is not the problem that the majority of Hindu and Sikh organisations is responsible for the discrimination of the minority in their own ethnic origin community?"

Shreela Flather, a grand-daughter of Ganga Ram Agrawal (after whom a hospital is named in Delhi), intervened: "My Lords, the Hindu community says that there is no caste discrimination in this country and therefore we do not need this subsection. Fine — but if that is the case, why is it fighting so hard against it? ... But because they are fighting so hard, it leads me to believe that there is discrimination."

In the House of Commons in 2018, Bob Blackman, who represents a constituency that has a decisive percentage of Gujarati-origin voters, put the question to Penny Mordaunt, a minister in the government of Prime Minister Theresa May, as to when "she will respond to the long-awaited consultation on removing caste from the Equality Act 2010". Mordaunt replied: "I hope to make an announcement on this in the coming weeks." But the position remains, caste discrimination is not expressly prohibited under the Act, although Section 9 of it, as amended, requires the UK government to introduce secondary legislation to make caste an aspect of race, in effect rendering caste

discrimination a form of race discrimination.

A commission appointed by the British government recorded: "The study found evidence of caste discrimination and harassment in Britain in areas relevant to the Equality Act 2010, namely in work, and the provision of services. It also found evidence of caste discrimination and harassment in other areas, namely education (pupil against pupil bullying), voluntary work (dismissal), worship and religion and public behaviour (harassment in public places). The consequences of these could be severe for the victims."

Opponents of the specific inclusion of casteism in the UK's equality framework dubiously plead that such enactment "is part of a wider campaign to interfere in India's internal affairs". The Indian high commission subscribes to this unempirical stance.

The Camden Borough was correct in contending that Ambedkar was not so well known in Britain. The best known and most revered among Indian politicians are Gandhi and Nehru. Indira Gandhi, too, captured Britons' imagination. Now, in this digital age Modi is pummelled 24x7 into the consciousness of overseas Indians but does not elicit respect among progressive elements and has certainly earned the wrath of mainstream British media.

Political expediency prompts Indian political parties to heed the Ambedkar factor. But if the museum in his memory inspires and instils among Brahminical British Indians an attitude of equality towards Dalits, the edifice would be worth it.



PHOTOS: AMIT ROY



VIEWFINDER



VEENU SANDHU

Live the moment

Every morning, after he is done with his walk, my dog and I head to a neighbourhood park. It is not much of a park; just a large plot of Delhi Development Authority land, big enough for a bungalow. While he strolls around, off the leash in the security of this walled space, I usually pull out my phone for news updates or to see what the world of Twitter is reacting to that morning. This is not a particularly pleasant habit: the news is seldom upbeat and Twitter is almost always vile, but I indulge in it nevertheless out of the kind of obsession many of us are now familiar with.

One morning a few weeks ago, when things were particularly foul on the microblogging site, I put my phone away in my pocket in disgust and looked up to call for my dog so that we could go home. For a moment I couldn't spot him, and panicked. And then I saw him at the other end of the park, his head buried in a flower bush. From where I stood, he appeared to be smelling the flowers — something I used to do a long time ago, when lawns at homes were not the luxury they are today.

Back in those days I could tell every new bud that had appeared, every flower that had started to bloom in our lawn in our no-frills army accommodation. A lot of time back then was spent doing what would today be described as nothing. Looking at the flowers and the leaves, or feeling their texture, and arriving at the conclusion that nothing we create can ever come close to the way nature presents it. Tracing the slow progress of the occasional snail or following an evasive earthworm. Staring at the trees on windy days, at how their branches swayed. Watching the rain fall, oblivious of the minutes gone by sitting there with not even a book in hand. Just watching. How it looked as it fell on the road outside the house. How it appeared under the yellow glow of the streetlight far away. How the wind pushed it in one direction or the other as it fell.



So many of these images came back to me that morning. And I found myself looking at the park. Really looking. It had been cleaned and freshly laid with grass some months ago. My dog, by now on the grass, was licking dewdrops off its blades.

Scattered here and there were patches of flowers. The gardener, I noticed, had followed his heart — sprinkled a bunch of purple petunias here and pink ones there; thrown a random cluster of chrysanthemums in one corner; dropped a few yellow and white dog flowers along the boundary wall with no particular thought; and planted an assortment of dahlias in one flowerbed. Elsewhere in the park, he had grown a solitary marigold bush and placed a batch of tiny pink, purple and white flowers at its feet as though to give it company.

But this gardener — an artist actually, inclined as he seemed to be to present the beauty of imperfection — had left one corner untouched. Not out of choice though. In this corner stood a big red silk-cotton tree that seemed determined not to allow even grass to grow under its flowery canopy. The ground below it instead was covered with almost as many flowers as it had on its branches above.

So this is what I did in the park that morning: nothing. And this is what I have been doing in that park every morning since.

My dog and his goofy nose-in-the-flower-bush moment made me realise how much of our time is spent trying to be purposeful, to achieve something, to get somewhere, to be something. And how little of it is spent just being. A pity.

The Japanese, I recently discovered, have a word for this wonderfully rejuvenating art of doing nothing. They call it "Boketto", which literally means "gazing vacantly into the distance without thinking of anything specific". It is a rejuvenating, destressing exercise. No, "exercise" cannot be the word for it. It is too purposeful a word. Boketto is a rejuvenating, destressing state of being.

I am glad I rediscovered these do-nothing moments. At a time when our world has been rattled in ways we have never encountered before, these mornings have been my window into a universe where all that matters is living in the moment.

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I am fifty, but not ready

PAMELA DRUCKERMAN

I turn 50 today. There, I've said it, which is more than some friends of mine can manage. One just calls it %) — shift 50 on the keyboard. Another describes her age entirely in fear emojis.

I should probably worry about the coronavirus instead of turning 50, but it turns out that I can worry about both. It doesn't help that, in French the word "quarantaine" can mean both being in your 40s and isolating sick patients (because boats from plague-stricken countries used to wait 40 days before unloading their goods).

What's it like to be in your 50s? My 40s taught me that it's easier to cope with new developments when you can name them. So to brace myself (and my anxious cohort) for the coming decade, here are some of the changes in store for us:

Your body becomes an accidental autobiography. There's the scar from when I had a lymph node removed, and another from when a surgeon took off my borderline back mole. Loose skin on my stomach reminds me that I went full term with twins.



This year, I'd planned to write a musical, start a podcast and try stand-up comedy. I haven't done any of those

You won't accomplish everything. Or in my case, almost anything. This year, I'd planned to write a musical, start a podcast and try stand-up comedy. I haven't done any of those. In the weeks before my birthday I went on a no-carb starvation diet, so at least I'd turn 50 as a size 4. ("I'll be so skinny you'll forget I'm old," I texted to a 30-something man, who didn't reply.)

You're more settled. The 40s bring an explosion of new insights and the feeling that it's now-or-never to change your life.

You're becoming who you really are. "In the 40s you're still in chaos," a friend in her 60s explained. In the 50s, you have revelation fatigue and just want to enjoy what you've learned.

You know yourself better, but that knowledge is disappointing. I grew up in Miami reading obsessively about the Holocaust and imagining how I'd have behaved in 1940s Europe. Now that we live with the coronavirus, a gangster president and impending planetary disaster, I know exactly what I'll do when faced

with catastrophe: practically nothing. I'll refuse plastic bags, retweet scary articles and continue to write about my own life.

Still, your self-esteem doesn't flatline as easily. You feel like less of an imposter, in part because you've lived long enough to accumulate small accomplishments. In moments of near despair, I remind myself that a student devoted a section of her master's thesis to the use of italics in the French translation of my book.

You can't hide from time. I wasn't bothered when my doctor prescribed hormonal gel or when a hairdresser offered to dye my eyebrows. But I can sum up the physical trauma of the 50s in two words: wrist wrinkles. I've also been grappling with an existential question: Since I've spent decades investing in expensive skin care "rituals", why don't I look any better than my 50-year-old husband, who has never spent a dime on any of it?

You're better at spotting trends, because you've witnessed so many of them. I can see that bilingual is the new gifted, listening is the new talking, and — for environmental reasons — thrifting is the new shopping. But age also brings fresh doubts: Am I rejecting a new idea because it's wrong or because I'm old?

No one cares how old you feel. Age is only "just a number" in the way that money is just printed paper or that 1600 is just a score on the SATs. Humans invent stuff and give it meaning.

Some of the shock of ageing dulls. Forty felt new-old. By 50 you're used to being middle-aged, though you suspect the next decade will speed by even more quickly than the last one did. When I met a tour group of retirees recently, I suddenly realised that some weren't much older than me. The real problem with 50 isn't 50, it's that 60 comes next.

Old problems are replaced by new ones. For my 40th birthday I threw an aspirational party and invited people I thought should be my friends but who barely knew me. They wondered why they were there. For my 50th, I vowed not to make the same mistake. I phoned a few actual friends to invite them over but refused to disclose how old I'd be. "Alexa, how old is Pamela Druckerman?" one shouted into his house. He had the answer in seconds.

I needn't have said anything; I ended up canceling the party because of the pandemic. To be honest, I'm relieved. Maybe I don't have to turn 50 after all.

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Sweet everything

Kainaz Messman Harchandrai is turning Theobroma, her mother's beloved desserts business, into a national cake shop chain, writes Ranjita Ganesan

One likely reason why Kainaz Messman Harchandrai was popular in school was the hoard of handmade chocolates she would bring to distribute among her teenage classmates. Her mother Kamal, a home caterer, used to whip these up with cocoa, icing sugar, butter, and lavish splashes of rum. There was "so much alcohol in the old-fashioned candy" that afterwards, in the maths period, the numbers would dance. "We would hardly follow the class," she reminisces, with a giggle.

Kainaz and her sister Tina grew up in an enticingly aromatic environment. Her mother sold those heady rum chocolates and chocolate orange mousse cakes to clients in their South Mumbai neighbourhood of Cusrow Baug, as well as in Cuffe Parade and Churchgate. Kamal was also known for baking "shape cakes" in the form of Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck at a time when these were not readily available. With little advertising and no social media to rely on in the 1990s, the girls helped her take orders, bake and wrap the desserts.

Where Kainaz later trained as a chef at Mumbai's Institute of Hotel Management and Delhi's Oberoi Centre of Learning and Development, Tina who is a gifted yet quite reluctant cook, sought a career in finance instead which took her to London. In 2004, Kainaz paired a desire to show off her mother's signature recipes with another desire to introduce Indians to European classics like many-layered croissants and fruit tartes, which led to her opening a French-style café, Theobroma. Now, with the family's homespun business fast becoming a national chain, the sisters have co-written a book, *Baking a Dream: The Theobroma Story*, about that journey.

At age 16, through a Rotary exchange programme, Kainaz had spent a year in Albi, a red-brick town in France. Scores of little patisseries there took care of local families' cake and bread needs, and for the first time in these simple establishments, she tasted buttery strawberry-crowned tarts, *pain au chocolat* and *pain aux raisins*. During monthly trips to the nearest big city, Toulouse, she sampled finer things like blue cheese and wine. Unsurprisingly, upon returning to India, she wanted to study food. Apart from her own mother, the 19th-century chef, Marie-Antoine Carême, perhaps the world's first celebrity chef, and his follower Georges Auguste Escoffier, legendary for having simplified French cooking techniques, act as sources of inspiration.

For some years after chef school and before she injured her back, Kainaz made pastries in a five-star kitchen. A bulging disc was grazing her nerve and restricted her to bed for three months. She used this time to recover and, encouraged by her



family, to dream up the café venture. "My father thought I would have easier hours in a solo business than at the hotel. Of course, he was wrong about that." The bakery and café was entirely uncharted territory, but the experience of working in a restaurant did prepare her for how to think about maintenance and planning.

As with any enterprise of this sort, it took a village to get things rolling. Kainaz attributes every action related to her business to a collective "we" rather than just herself. Her father found the first shop space just outside Cusrow Baug, and helped with seed money. The young chef had insisted that her designer, who had worked on homes but never a retail outlet, fit in wooden floors, which sadly wore out within weeks. There was not enough

THEOBROMA, GREEK FOR 'FOOD OF THE GODS', IS ALSO THE FORMAL TITLE OF THE CACAO TREE. THE EFFORT PEOPLE PUT INTO REMEMBERING THE COMPLEX NAME ENDED UP HELPING WITH BRAND RECALL, SAYS KAINAZ

capital to hire professionals so her mother's cake business assistant joined their kitchen, along with another untrained cook. Her grandmother's old flat in Colaba became her first commercial kitchen. Tina, who was pregnant then, flew in to help with opening day.

The name they chose for the new patisserie, on the suggestion of one of Tina's colleagues, was a mouthful. Theobroma, Greek for 'food of the gods', is also the formal title of the cacao tree. The effort people put into remembering the complex name ended up helping with

brand recall, says Kainaz. Like the menu — a mix of Kamal's favourites and less-known international pastries — the clientele was also a mix of old and first-time faces. From the very first day and for several days thereafter, according to her, there were queues and some items sold out swiftly. The runaway hit was the soft walnut- and chocolate chip-studded brownie, based on her mother's original recipe, which "no matter how many trays we made, ran out every day".

While the France-trained chef wanted to steer clear of any obvious offerings, people would often walk in asking for comfort food like blackforest cakes, pineapple pastries and Parsi chicken puffs. "There was a point when I realised I am not in the business to feed my ego but to serve people and make them happy." The menu has since grown to include familiar flavours, and Kainaz now listens carefully "when anyone talks about their favourite foods, their food likes and dislikes, what they want to eat when they are feeling unwell". In all the attention to sweets, she admits that bread had become something of a step child. She was compelled to take a course in bread-making and grow that category to include multigrain loaves, focaccia, and lavash when a retailer wanted to bring her on as a supplier but asked for savoury staples as well.

Until a few years ago, Theobroma brownies were a quintessential treat that anyone visiting from Mumbai was expected to bring along. Now they are available in other locations in the country. Kainaz and her family were too preoccupied with the kitchen to pay attention but they had broken even by the end of the first year. Over a decade later, in 2017, they decided to scale up the business with the help of private equity funding. That led to forming a chain of 52 cafés, express shops and kiosks across Pune, Delhi and the NCR. Theobroma is eyeing Bengaluru and Hyderabad next.

Each new city comes with its own peculiarities. "Managing remote teams and ensuring consistent quality and service is our biggest challenge," she notes. Further, the quality of ingredients

and palates vary too. In Mumbai, for instance, the patties are sweet and sour because people are familiar with Gujarati flavours, and the Parsi-style mayo is infused with mustard, pepper and garlic. These were adapted to suit the Delhi foodie's palate which seems to favour spicier items. During the first Delhi opening two years ago, people showed up even without the family having roped in a publicist. "Our reputation got them to our door," says Kainaz, adding with founder's pride, "but our product has kept them coming back."

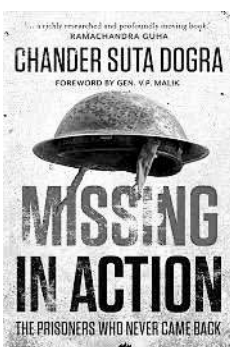
India's lost soldiers

This intensely researched book opens up a crucial and uncomfortable chapter of military, political and diplomatic history that few care to visit, says **Veenu Sandhu**

At the entrance to the cadets' mess at the National Defence Academy in Khadakwasla, Pune, a table for one is set meticulously for every meal. The chair is tilted forward. The candle on the table is unlit. On the bread plate is a slice of lemon, a reminder of the bitterness of fate. There is salt on the plate, symbolising tears. The glass is inverted.

The soldier for whom the table has been set couldn't make it for the meal. But his comrades have reserved his place for whenever — if ever — he does. A plaque nearby bears the simple message: Remember.

This message is also at the heart of Chander Suta Dogra's book, *Missing in Action: The Prisoners Who Never Came Back*. Dogra's is a story of unfinished stories. Of soldiers who went missing during or around the wars with Pakistan — mainly in 1971 and to some extent in 1965. Information



MISSING IN ACTION
THE PRISONERS WHO NEVER CAME BACK

Author: Chander Suta Dogra

Publisher: HarperCollins

Pages: 341 plus xlv

Price: ₹699

about some have occasionally trickled through, mostly the result of the determined and desperate pursuit for answers by some families. For most others, there have only been decades of nothingness.

In official records, the number of soldiers missing in action stands at 83. The initial number was 54 but names were added as new evidence surfaced. Many believe there could be more.

This intensely researched book opens up a crucial and uncomfortable chapter of military, political and diplomatic history that few care to visit. Dogra digs into official records, diary entries, long-preserved letters, newspaper reports as well as personal accounts of the soldiers' families and colleagues to get some answers. The attempt is to find out why the nation failed these men so miserably, and what we can do about it.

The Geneva Conventions that apply to armed conflicts, even those not necessarily declared as

wars (such as the Kargil conflict of 1999), mandate that signatory nations holding prisoners hand them over to their home country soon after hostilities end. There are also rules for the humane and dignified treatment of the captured men — which the public witnessed recently in the case of Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman. These rules are not



always followed, however. For instance, instead of recognising a captured soldier as a prisoner of war (POW), the enemy establishment may choose to categorise him a "security prisoner" (spy). When that happens, the prospect of his return or even tracing his whereabouts become that much tougher.

Dogra, who is the daughter, wife and mother of defence officers, remains a journalist as she details these realities, placing before the reader facts and steering clear of jingoism that could have detracted from the sensitive subject.

The Indian government is often criticised for not having negotiated hard enough with Pakistan despite its thumping victory in the 1971 war. Besides control over large swathes of its land, India also had in its custody over 90,000 Pakistani POWs, whose release Pakistan was desperate to secure. For India, it was a great bargaining chip. Pakistan had Mujibur Rehman, whose release Prime Minister Indira Gandhi badly needed to meet the political goal for which the war was fought: the sovereignty of Bangladesh.

In the dramatic events that led to and followed the Shimla Agreement of 1972, in the obsession to ensure a deal that would recognise Bangladesh as a separate country and in the subsequent exchange of soldiers, India failed to ensure that all of its own men had been accounted for and returned by Pakistan. Both sides, in fact, have treated their soldiers as pawns at different times. Dogra also raises the issue of Pakistani POWs with India. One of them, Sepoy Maqbool Hussain, who was captured by the Indian Army during Operation Gibraltar in 1965, was released 40 long years later, in 2005. By then, all his family was dead and gone.

Pointed questions are also raised through intriguing stories. One of them concerns Major SK Suri, the quartermaster of 5 Assam Regiment, who was wounded and later declared dead in December 1971. The army cremated his body a few miles from the battlefield in the Chhamb Sector. That was the official version. But the family kept getting conflicting reports from the army — that he had been wounded, that he had died. Conflicting dates were given for his death, too.

One day in December 1974, his father received a letter dated December 7, 1972 from a Pakistani resident carrying a note from his son: "I am quite OK here." Six months later, another letter arrived in his son's handwriting: "... Please try to contact Indian Army or Govt of India about us. We are 20 officers here."

More clues came from cross-border friends but to this day Major Suri's whereabouts and fate remain unknown, as does the reason for the Indian Army's handling of his case.

Mystery also shrouds the case of Wing Commander HS Gill ("High Speed Gill" to his colleagues), an ace MiG pilot who had a premonition that he wouldn't return. His name was announced on Pakistan radio channels as one of the pilots captured, before Pakistan declared him dead. (Announcements on Pakistani radio were a crucial source of information for soldiers' families.) A spy back from Pakistan said he had met someone who had seen Gill in a Pakistani prison. Similar stories trickled in from other unrelated sources



(1) Flt Lt Vijay Vasant Tambay (2) Maj SPS Waraich (3) 2nd Lt Paras Ram Sharma (4) Flt Lt Ram Methram Advani (5) Maj Ashok Kumar Suri (6) Capt Giriraj Singh (7) Wg Cdr Hersern Singh Gill (8) Capt Kamal Bakshi (9) Sqn Ldr Mahinder Kumar Jain (10) Capt Om Prakash Dalal (11) Capt Ravinder Kaura (12) Flt Lt Sudhir Kumar Goswami (13) Flt Lt Harvinder Singh: (far left) a table for one, laid out in memory of the missing soldier at NDA every day

— one of which indicated Gill had been "loaned" by Pakistan to the US for its top-secret project to train its pilots to fly and battle the MiGs. The mystery endures.

The limitations of the International Court of Justice and International Committee of the Red Cross in these cases are also evident in the stories in this book.

As are the weak efforts of India's tri-services committee for monitoring missing defence personnel. Dogra also tells us how the US does it differently, coordinating with countries to secure and identify even the remains of each unaccounted-for soldier.

Some changes, though, have been pushed by retired defence personnel, significantly the late Lieutenant General JS Aurora, the face of India's 1971 victory. One of them is getting the government to recognise the missing men as still alive and serving, rather than "presumed dead", so that their families continue to receive the salaries due to serving officers; they are also promoted when promotion is due and retired when it is, notionally, time for their retirement.

Much, however, remains to be done. If any of these men are alive, then time is running out for them. And if they aren't, their families deserve to know. *Missing in Action* makes a compelling case for this.

VERSE AFFAIRS



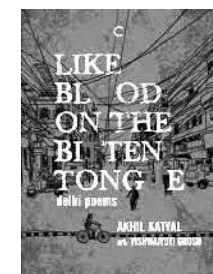
UTTARAN DAS GUPTA

The language of Delhi

A couple of months back, a friend and I were walking down from the SDA Market in South Delhi towards Aurobindo Market, when she pointed out a road sign and said to me: "You know, I can read all the four scripts (Roman, Devnagari, Nastaliq and Gurmukhi) on it." I could read only the first two and asked her to teach me at least one of the others. In Akhil Katyal's latest collection of poems — his third — this experience, which must be common for so many of our fellow citizens, finds poetic expression and historical resonance.

"My grandfather/would ask us to read him/the shop signs in Devnagari:" writes Katyal. "All his life, he/only knew Urdu,/leaving Lahore at 18." The grandfather in question moved from west Punjab to Delhi, and then to Lucknow (Katyal's hometown) as a refugee, and never learnt the Devnagari script, depending on his grandchildren to read out shop signs to him. But he never taught them Nastaliq either: "Years later,/when I ache to read Faiz's letters/in his own handwriting, I have to/write to a Facebook friend in Lahore./or ask an old Jangpura neighbour,/or worse, use a translation app." Katyal finds he has no visa to go to the language which his grandfather inhabited.

In a remarkable trilingual experiment, Katyal gives the reader the shop signs first in Devnagari, and then moves on to Nastaliq while referring to Panchna Road, where his



LIKE BLOOD ON THE BITTEN TONGUE
DELHI POEMS

Author: Akhil Katyal
Art: Vishwajyoti Ghosh

Publisher: Context
Pages: 163
Price: ₹499

grandfather first lived after coming to India.

The theme continues in the next few poems "In the Urdu class" and "In the third Urdu class". In many ways, the places, languages — several poems in the book are in Hindi — and memories we inhabit is the theme of this book — wonderfully illustrated by Vishwajyoti Ghosh — which carries as its subtitle: "Delhi Poems". Through these poems, Katyal performs a cartographic act, bringing to life the metropol-

olis which he has adopted as his home.

For Katyal, there are two self-confessed inspirations for writing about Delhi: Aga Shahid Ali and Ravish Kumar. He translated Kumar's *Ishq Mei Seher Hona*, comprising short love narratives. At the same time, Katyal is also located within a larger community of poets, currently living and working in Delhi and writing about it relentlessly. Some of these poets are Michael Creighton (*New Delhi Love Songs*, 2017), Maaz Bin Bilal (*Ghazalnama*, 2019), and yours truly (*Visceral Metropolis*, 2017). This is not an exhaustive list and also does not include poets working in languages other than English.

Katyal, as his many fans would already know, also creates a queer map for Delhi. He has been a queer rights activist for many years. His poems "I want to 377 you so bad" and "Girl, when you" have gone viral on social media. (Katyal often first publishes his poems online.) The first one reads: "I want to break laws/with you in bed and in streets and in parks". This poem was written in 2013 — the Supreme Court revoked sections of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, which criminalised non-heteronormative intercourse, only in 2018. These lines are like throwing down the gauntlet to the law.

In the second poem, Katyal casts light on how silly the law was anyway: "Girl, when you/blow your boy.../I know it feels/like heaven, you/too violate 377." (This poem was written in 2014.) The poem that I particularly recommend is "[Varun is Typing]", which imitates the process of hesitation and inhibition as two men text each other on a messaging app. The poem is easily available online, so I am not describing it; Katyal's innovation lies in adopting a technological development and incorporating it into a poem of such emotional depth.

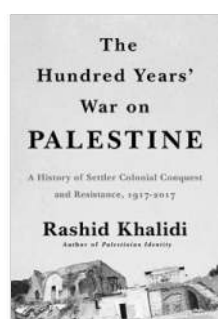
Most of the poems in this book will not be unfamiliar to the readers who have probably read them online already. One reason for buying the book is, of course, Ghosh's art. But even lovers of Katyal's poetry would be well-advised to get a copy, because reading these poems altogether — and away from the immediate context in which they were first produced — is a very different experience. In some ways it is also a sort of time travel to those events or memories, a visa to the country of the past, where, as L P Hartley tells us, they do things differently.

The writer's novel, *Ritual*, was published in February

OUT NOW

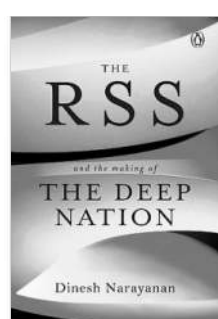
PLANNING IN THE 20TH CENTURY AND BEYOND: INDIA'S PLANNING COMMISSION AND THE NITI AAYOG

The Planning Commission played a crucial role in India's development but remains a little studied institution. This set of essays examines the history and experience of planning in India. **Santosh Mehrotra & Sylvie Guichard (eds)** Cambridge University Press ₹950, 355 pages

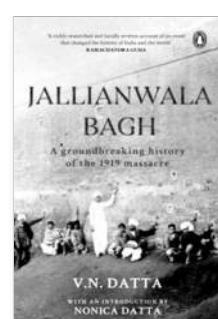


THE HUNDRED YEARS' WAR ON PALESTINE: A HISTORY OF SETTLER COLONIAL CONQUEST AND RESISTANCE
A historian recreates the voices of Palestinians and his own experiences during critical moments of his nation's occupation. **Rashid Khalidi** Hachette ₹599, 336 pages

FORTHCOMING



THE RSS: AND THE MAKING OF THE DEEP NATION
A journalist traces the RSS's nearly century-long operations in the relentless pursuit of ideological dominance in a nation known for its rich multiculturalism. Due March 23. **Dinesh Narayanan** Penguin ₹699, 344 pages



JALLIANWALA BAGH: A GROUNDBREAKING HISTORY OF THE 1919 MASSACRE
A historian draws on first-hand accounts to recreate the tragedy that altered the dynamic of collective consciousness to colonial rule in profound and lasting ways. Due April 2020. **V N Datta** Penguin Random House ₹399, 256 pages

SMART ART



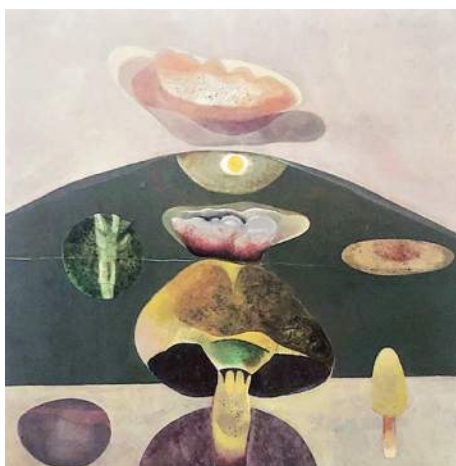
KISHORE SINGH

Art's healing touch

Last summer, I spent some time chatting with a doctor who works with patients with mental disabilities and learning issues from marginalised sections of society. I had proposed the use of art as a therapeutic tool for his recovery programme. We agreed there was substantiation to suggest that those traumatised by instances of childhood violence were better able to address their emotions through art. Follow-up meetings with the NGO team, however, soon petered out. The programme remained still-born.

Does art heal? Evidence would point towards that, and it seems the chain hospitals are taking cognizance of it — though the mostly inane prints of flowers and landscapes in their endless corridors are too mind-numbing to contemplate. Some serious thought needs to be provided to the choice of art in medical institutions, as well as of colours that are considered curative by healers. This is as true of offices where banal, thoughtlessly collated works of "art" should make way for those that are provocative, help you think, are relatable, even aspirational.

As more and more people become home-bound in the wake of coronavirus, I am thankful to be surrounded by art that is contemplative, thoughtful and challenging — and, yes, even decorative. I find myself looking up often from where I am sitting and writing this to look at a wall with abstract paintings — Bimal Dasgupta's eerie, surreal landscapes, Rajendra Dhawan's poignant, evocative renditions, Navtar Bhavsar's pigment-laden work, Gopi Gajwani's floating colours. Elsewhere, I can spot figurative paintings by Jamini Roy, G R Santosh or Gogi Saroj Pal, and gifts from artist friends who wanted to share a little bit of their selves with me. The eyes of Jayasri Burman's *Durga* penetrate across the length of the room, bringing succour in this time of anxiety. M F Husain's painting of an open palm and a *chakra* symbolising Ashoka's wheel of *dharma* that forms part of the national emblem, seems to mark a historical legacy. I can watch Netflix, or gaze endlessly at an editioned torso by Ravinder Reddy, with equal interest. Rabin Mondal's drawing of a caricatured king made to resemble a helpless clown is a reminder of these difficult times in which we find ourselves powerlessly marooned.



Untitled, by Bimal Dasgupta

Art appeals to us at an intrinsic level, touching our hearts, or minds, with its message. Some prefer sacred works, others different forms, or genres, or styles of painting and sculpture. Whatever the choice, and whether we choose the aesthetic or the intellectual, what we select to surround ourselves with says as much about us as a biography. S H Raza's *bindu* serigraph exercises as much power as Sohan Qadri's ribbed and dotted watercolour. Manu Parekh's tantric exploration is as hypnotic as Satish Gupta's zen-like art. When all appears lost, one can escape into Avinash Chandra's early landscapes, or take flight with Chameli Ramachandran's pigeons, or find solace in Meite Delteil's soporific idylls. As with books, art helps forge lifelong friendships.

Meanwhile, out there, it is a topsy-turvy world where one no longer knows what sense to make of it. The Sotheby's auction of Indian art in New York went off without a hitch, established new benchmarks, and was a success, while Christie's postponed its sale, so we'll have to wait and watch what comes next. Other auctions in India appear on schedule — but who is to know. Exhibitions are being cancelled, often at the last minute. Every day brings more messages of art fairs and large events being shelved. Galleries and museums are going online. Instagram fills our vicarious need for art in the time of virus. It also provides a healing touch.

Kishore Singh is a Delhi-based writer and art critic. These views are personal and do not reflect those of the organisation with which he is associated



Kidding

TRAGICOMEDY, HOTSTAR

First premiering on SHOWTIME, this Jim Carrey-starrer is now streaming online and it's recommended even for those who've previously been put off by Carrey's OTT acting in slapstick works such as *Ace Ventura*. Carrey is seen as Jeff Pickles, a beloved television presenter who is adored by children and adults alike, thanks to his long-running puppet show. Mr Pickles is a fairy tale-like person who teaches children valuable life lessons. But when he loses one of his twins, his grief leaves him distraught and all he wants to do is acknowledge that loss on the show and teach his viewers (primarily children) about death, something the makers of his puppet show strongly oppose. The poignant series is a tale of how Pickles deals with the loss of a child, all the while trying to protect the multimillion-dollar brand empire that's built on his "happy" image.

BINGE-FIGHTING THE VIRUS

Be it videos of penguins being taken for walks around the zoo or cats playing games with their humans, the internet can be an endless source of entertainment in these stay-at-home weeks. Nikita Puri lists the best shows and films to watch online as you ace social distancing



Self Made

INSPIRATIONAL DRAMA, NETFLIX

This is a limited series that sees Octavia Spencer as the historical figure of Sarah Breedlove, widely documented as America's first African-American businesswoman who went on to become

a millionaire in the early 1900s. The self-made entrepreneur and philanthropist made an empire out of making cosmetics and hair care products for black women. Spencer, applauded for her role in the Academy Award-winning film *The Help*, convincingly plays Breedlove, right from her days of being a single mother who started out by being a washerwoman to

support her daughter to building a business called the Madam CJ Walker Manufacturing Company. Directed by Kasi Lemmons, the narrative has been fictionalised slightly to reimagine the struggles of a woman born on a cotton plantation to a formerly enslaved family, but the feel-good series is largely based on true events.



Better Call Saul

CRIME DRAMA, NETFLIX

This one's a slow burner created by Vince Gilligan and Peter Gould, and is a spin-off from the former's hugely successful *Breaking Bad*. Much of the cast of *Breaking Bad*, save the two lead characters, make their appearance in this show. The protagonist of this crime drama is Jimmy McGill, Bob Odenkirk. The show doubles as a standalone precursor to *Breaking Bad* and charts the slow descent of the lovable and street-smart McGill into the world of crime. McGill is a self-made man who earned his law degree while working in the mailroom, who then becomes a badly paid lawyer who works out of the rear of a nail salon. Despite the borderline-criminal ways McGill gets things done, the cards he has been dealt almost makes one sympathise with his shady character. A new episode of the latest season, the fifth, airs every Wednesday.



Afsos

DARK COMEDY, AMAZON PRIME VIDEO

This miniseries follows Nakul, a writer so unsuccessful that he attempts to commit suicide serially. He remains unharmed, but the same cannot be said for those who save him. If this plot wasn't ridiculous enough to warrant a watch, Nakul decides to enlist the help of "reformed" contract-killers who now "help" people wanting to die. While Nakul, played by Gulshan Devaiah, holds the story together, Heeba Shah as the deadly assassin Upadhyay is a treat to watch for her deadpan commitment to what she calls "art". Throw in a bunch of scientists hunting for an immortality potion, and a sadhu tracking Nakul because he appears to be immortal, and you have a story ripe with plot twists. Directed by Anubhuti Kashyap, *Afsos* has plenty of things wrong with it, but its chilled attitude to morbid subjects like mortality and fatality makes it watchable.



Hunters

DRAMA, AMAZON PRIME VIDEO

Inspired by stories of real "Nazi hunters", the polarising show follows a motley group of people who've chosen to band together to seek out war criminals hiding (mostly) in America under new identities. The show stars Al Pacino as Meyer Offerman, a Jewish philanthropist and Holocaust survivor who doubles as the leader of the group covertly hunting Nazis in New York. While real life hunters, like Simon Wiesenthal, took their findings to the police or the media, the show's characters take it upon themselves to avenge the Jews who suffered at the hands of Nazis. And it is this attitude that makes their youngest recruit, Jonah Heidelbaum (Logan Lerman) who takes his late grandmother's place in the group, question everything that he believes in. With elements of a vengeance fantasy and satirical comic book-story telling, the show has issues but there's some stellar acting in here.



Curb Your Enthusiasm

COMEDY, HOTSTAR

Transforming the simplest stuff into sublime art takes a rare talent. And Larry David, writer and co-creator of

Seinfeld who plays a fictionalised version of himself in *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, is a past master. To vent his ire at wobbly tables and lukewarm coffee, he opens up a "spite store", a coffee house right next to the coffee house with the wobbly tables and lukewarm coffee. Without either, of course. The 10th and newest season of this series is as relevant to the times as possible, throwing in references

to Harvey Weinstein and the #MeToo movement. There's also an episode where David goes around town wearing a MAGA (Make America Great Again) hat after discovering that the accessory popularised by American president Donald Trump works like a charm in keeping people away (social distancing before coronavirus). A new episode airs every Monday.





Mentalhood

COMEDY, ALT BALAJI AND ZEE5

Karisma Kapoor makes her web debut as Meira, a mother of three, in this story of how imperfect parents try to raise their kids as best as they can. A former Miss Kanpur, Meira has only recently moved to Mumbai to raise a "modern family" with Sanjay Suri who stars as her workaholic husband. The series also features a dependable star cast that includes Sandhya Mridul, Tillotama Shome, Shilpa Shukla, Shruti Seth and Dino Morea. Created by Ekta Kapoor and directed by Karishma Kohli, the show charts Meira's evolution into a blogger who writes on everything from nutrition to gender roles in the hopes of creating a parenting guide. The show comes across as being inspired by the Reese Witherspoon and Nicole Kidman-starrer American drama *Big Little Lies* and, unlike the American series, this preachy series is likely to be enjoyed more by viewers who have children.



Miss Americana

MUSIC DOCUMENTARY, NETFLIX

Directed by Lana Wilson, whose previous films focused on suicide and late-term abortion, this project follows the life of American singer-songwriter Taylor Swift. It opens with Swift being surrounded by diaries, markers of personal stories. This is significant since Swift has made a living out of channelling feelings into songs that have become chart-toppers. She's then told that her latest album, *Reputation* (2018), has received no major Grammy nominations. Swift carries on, almost stoic in her approach. Wilson goes on to show Swift addressing her "nice girl" image that has dominated the latter's music career, and how Swift deals with idea that "nice girls don't make waves". The story charts her rise to fame as well as her desire to please fans, all of which has led Swift to some dark places. The film shows the private side of Taylor, the celebrity who despite her superstar status leads a life shadowed by loneliness.



Westworld

SCIENCE FICTION/WESTERN, HOTSTAR

The third season of *Westworld* is now streaming online, and while it is being lauded for getting futuristic tech references right, we are still dazzled by the brilliant execution of the show's story. The tale begins in Westworld, a fictional, Wild West-themed amusement park where visitors can do anything they want, without any consequences whatever, because the "people" in Westworld are actually life-like androids. These androids are so believable as humans that visitors constantly return to the park to play out their wildest fantasies, actions which would be unacceptable in the "real" world. Trouble begins when the android hosts at the park gain consciousness about what they really are. This new season sees them escape into the real world, our world, after a bloodbath. Based on Michael Crichton's 1973 film by the same name, the series stars Even Rachel Wood as Dolores Abernathy, a sapient android.



A Life of Speed

SPORTS DOCUMENTARY, NETFLIX

This fresh-on-the-block documentary narrates the story of Juan Manuel Fangio, an Argentinian race car driver who more or less dominated the first decade of

Formula One by winning the World Drivers' Championship five times in the 1950s. This record remained unbeaten till Michael Schumacher came along (as part of four different racing teams). Directed by Francisco Macri, this historical documentary aims to understand the mind of the racing legend while

examining the lives of race car drivers who routinely risk their lives for the love of speed. The high-octane world of racing was perhaps far more dangerous in Fangio's time than it is today considering there was no protective gear in those days and safety features were minimal.



I Am Not Okay With This

COMEDY, NETFLIX

This coming-of-age story manages to effectively exude a sense of low-key dread. The show starts out by telling us that the protagonist, Sydney Novak (Sophia Lillis), is dealing with every teenage issue ever teenager has ever had. Except, when she gets really angry, the object of her anger feels like they've been hit by an unseen shovel. Among

the most subtle of these rage-induced periods is when Novak's best friend's boyfriend, whom the protagonist dislikes, starts bleeding from his nose out of the blue. Things only get worse from there and Novak has no idea why her rage can "make things happen". Based on a comic book by Charles Forman, Novak reminds us a little of Carrie, the protagonist of Stephen King's eponymous novel, as well as Eleven from *Stranger Things* since both these young girls also have telekinetic powers, but the similarities end there.



Guilty

CRIME DRAMA, NETFLIX

Inspired by how those accused of sexual harassment have slowly made their way back into society, this Karan Johar production aims to rekindle conversations around the #MeToo movement. Directed by Ruchi Narain, the film stars Kiara Advani as Nanki, whose boyfriend Vijay "VJ" Pratap Singh (Gurfateh Singh Pirzada) is accused of raping his college batchmate. A politician's son and a musician, VJ is the most dateable guy on campus, while the woman who accuses him, Tanu (Akansha Ranjan Kapoor), is someone disliked deeply for being loud, attention-seeking and insensitive. The film gives the benefit of doubt to both parties, making audiences question if Tanu is making it all up for publicity (something she is capable of), as well as casting doubts on VJ's Teflon reputation. As the authorities investigate, Nanki sets out to find the truth for herself, all the while battling her own personal demons.



Next in Fashion

REALITY SHOW, NETFLIX

As Netflix's first venture into design-wars, this reality show features 18 designers from across the world. The contestants are all professionals who've dressed celebrities in the past and have worked with major fashion houses, but none is a "household name", something they all aspire to be. The show takes one through the process of creating a design, right from fabric selection and prepping it to the time it's ready to be modelled. The show is hosted by Tanveer Wasim "Tan" France (of *Queer Eye* fame) and designer, model and television presenter Alexa Chung. The winner gets prize money of ₹1.86 crore (\$250,000), and the chance to become the next big thing in fashion. There's also room for inspiration for viewers as contestants design outfits worthy of the runway, formals for work, as well as trendy streetwear.



Pushpavalli

COMEDY, AMAZON PRIME

Season two of this drama sees the return of comedian Sumukhi Suresh as Pushpavalli, a young woman whose highly questionable attempts at wooing a suitor, Nikhil (played by Manish Anand), left viewers aghast. A Tamilian from Bhopal who follows Nikhil to Bengaluru, the otherwise witty Pushpavalli continues to keep audiences hooked with her unabashedly convoluted attempts to hook the man of her dreams. After kidnapping his dog, bribing a *chaiwallah* to do her bidding and getting her leg broken, Pushpavalli goes on to find imaginative ways of getting out of tough spots, so what if that requires getting engaged to someone else, or unleashing a reptile among unsuspecting children. Special mention must be made of Bengaluru-based actor Shraddha in this well-scripted show as Vasu, the night-wearing, hockey stick-wielding landlady who runs Pushpavalli's paying guest accommodation. Vasu's character alone merits a show to itself.



Maska

COMEDY, NETFLIX

This coming-of-age film sees Manisha Koirala as a Parsi mother battling to get her son involved in the family business of running an Iranian café. "Nineteen years ago when Rumi was born, his future had already been decided," says Jaaved Jaaferi, Koirala's screen husband in the film's trailer. Rumi was to grow up and become "a *maska-wala*" (one who applies butter) like his father (Jaaferi) before him. But he decides to become a Bollywood actor instead. Prit Kamani plays Rumi, the confused young millennial who begins discovering his Parsi heritage only after distancing himself from it. *Maska* is as much about Rumi's personal journey as it is a celebration of Mumbai's Irani cafés. With a fair sprinkling of young romance and family drama, this is *Dil Toh Baccha Hai Ji* writer Neeraj Udhwani's first attempt at direction. The film releases on March 27.

Special Ops

ESPIONAGE DRAMA, HOTSTAR

Directed by Neeraj Pandey of *A Wednesday!* and *Special 26* fame, this is the latest Indian thriller to be released online. It features Kay Kay Menon as Himmat Singh, a senior intelligence officer. The story encapsulates how Singh has been chasing a theory that the actual mastermind of the 2001 Parliament attack was someone whose existence no one knows about. Singh has his own agents in foreign cities and has been splurging on operations to chase this man down, and now he has to justify the money spent. Between flashbacks viewers are caught up on how Singh's team is trying to find this mystery villain. The show reminds us a little of Manoj Bajpayee's *The Family Man*, which is a better show. Action scenes and bad writing in the slow parts let down an otherwise decent story, but, for the stuck-at-home and nothing-to-do, it's something one could mindlessly watch.



Sport in the time of Covid-19

DHRUV MUNJAL

The thing about sport is that it never stops. Or that's how it used to be, anyway. Teams and athletes have played through torment and turbulence, braving bloody wars and bitter political conflicts. Sport has metamorphosed into something more than just entertainment. It is a perennial source of optimism, a universal caregiver tailored to deal with grim times.

And it has been so, until now, when a scary virus has forced so many of us to retreat into lockdown and administrators to postpone sporting events across the world. Premier League football has been suspended till April 30. Euro 2020 has been pushed back by a year. The French Open will be held in September instead of May. The Formula One season is effectively over even before a car could be rolled out on to the circuit. And the Tokyo Olympics, despite the organisers' best attempts at calling for calm, look pretty doomed as well.

As much as so many of us live and breathe sport, catastrophes such as these help put things into perspective. In the face of families losing loved ones, carrying on with any kind of sport is, quite frankly, stupid. Not to mention how it puts the lives of so many athletes at risk. The very idea of sport right now sounds meaningless; a kind of background noise with nothing but echoes of irrelevance. Liverpool being denied the title or Aston Villa going down is insignificant when you compare that with the cramped hospital wards in Italy, or the rapidly emptying supermarkets in the US.

The cancelling of sport is perhaps the most apt measure of how terrible the situation has become. Sport possesses its share of palliative qualities, but it is also a reflection of normalcy, a distraction embedded so deeply in our routines that we often take it for granted. European league football on Saturday evening marks the beginning of the weekend for many; a Federer-Nadal final caps it off on Sunday night. In between all that, you say no to a family lunch or cancel a dinner date because you don't want to miss seeing Virat Kohli belt out another hundred, or P V Sindhu rise in a final, or Tiger Woods sink an improbable 20-ft putt on the 18th green to win a tournament. Tuesdays and Wednesdays are reserved for the Champions League, Thursdays for the Europa League.



Outside London Stadium, the home ground of West Ham United. Premier League football has been suspended till April 30

Sport possesses its share of palliative qualities, but it is also a reflection of normalcy, a distraction embedded so deeply in our routines that we often take it for granted

Experiencing sport has never been just a pastime, but a way of life. An escape from the mundaneness of daily schedules, a gateway to undiluted happiness; a kind of therapy for the soul. And that's why in this time of strife, we should, perhaps, not just miss sport, but also appreciate and celebrate it. The hollowness so many of us are feeling at present is a reminder that the show elite athletes put on for us week in and week out is a privilege we must cherish. The global commercialisation of sport, after all, has ensured that we are bombarded with so much of it that we seem to have forgotten its true value. In a way, the mindless consumption of sport has meant that it has been drained of all its charm and magnificence. This time off will perhaps give us an opportunity to introspect and reclaim some of that.

But what do you do in the meantime? That people have to urgently stock up on groceries and jostle for precious millilitres of sanitiser might prove to be a distraction in the short term, but once the panic of it wears off and the overall state of things hopefully improves, the absence of sport will start to haunt — an emptiness only devoted fans will be able to relate to.

That's why the best thing to do is to show a bit of patience, wait it out. Revisit old footage, perhaps: your favourite Messi goal, your most memorable Tendulkar century, your dearest Manchester United comeback. Only then will we be able to grasp the lost meaning of why we watch sport, why we love it so much.

And that way, once it's all over, once the athletes return and the stadiums open, we will be able to enjoy it even more. And who knows, once some normalcy is restored, sport may offer the healing touch it almost always does, uniting grieving populations and springing hope by using a rare kind of universal power only it has the capacity to wield.

DIY bodies

The latest trend in the search for good health involves experiments with one's own body. **Veer Arjun Singh** tries to explain the phenomenon of biohacking

This is extreme. Please do not try to visualise it. The experiment requires a blender, a strainer, a few healthy donors and a recipient who has been fasting. Faecal matter taken from donors is whipped together in the blender along with a saline solution. The slurry obtained is strained and the liquid is inserted into the recipient's colon with a rectal syringe or an enema bottle.

As grotesque as it sounds, Faecal Microbiota Transplants (FMTs) or stool transplants, are not as rare as you might imagine. The idea is innocuous enough: to cultivate healthy bacteria in the gut of patients suffering from extreme diarrhea because of underlying conditions such as Clostridioides Difficile Infection, or CDI. Usually, donors are pre-screened for infections and the whole thing is performed by medical practitioners in a hospital. But the one detailed above is a DIY hack posted on Reddit by a self-styled biohacker.

"I know someone who has done it. But honestly, I am yet to see any results," says celebrity trainer Kris Gethin, who is as popular for getting actors Hrithik Roshan, John Abraham and Ranveer Singh into their desired shapes as he is for his wacky biohacker lifestyle. He wears a pair of red tinted glasses, likes ultra-violet therapy when he can't be in the sun and bonds with friends over ice baths and cryotherapy sessions. But even for Gethin, a stool transplant is an extreme biohack. And a DIY one even more so.

At its simplest, biohacking means using science and technology to make one's body function better. The processes involved range from intermittent fasting to injecting older people with the blood plasma of young

GREENFIELD'S SIMPLEST HACKS INCLUDE BUTEYKO BREATHING (SIMILAR TO PRANAYAMA), A FIVE-MINUTE SHOWER THAT ALTERNATES BETWEEN HOT AND COLD WATER, AND COMPLETELY AVOIDING ALL VEGETABLE OILS

individuals in an attempt to slow down ageing. DIY biohackers are testing out gene-editing on bacteria, plants, dogs and even themselves. Most enthusiasts are conversant with the basics of health science and the daredevils — some would say the reckless — among them often try new therapies and drugs.

Gethin is among the latter. A few months ago, he underwent stem cell therapy at the Centro de Celulas

Madre Y Biotecnologia in Pereira, Colombia. "It was to strengthen my knees and shoulders, the areas where the load is more. I am going to be in the gym even when I am 90. I have no plans of slowing down," he says. It was one of his biggest self-experiments to date, details of which are available on his weekly podcast, *The Knowledge and Mileage*, which has over 100 episodes. Milder stories of physical transformation, such as how Roshan went from a few slipped discs and chain smoking to a chiselled superhero for the film *Krrish 2*, can be found in his books.

At 45, Gethin says that he feels and performs like he is 20 — a claim that resonates within a close group of popular biohackers. Some of them look it, too. But what makes people like Gethin convincing is that they run marathons, participate in triathlons, and gain and drop kilos almost at will.

Unlike "grinders", more extreme biohackers who have undergone magnetic, near field communication (NFC), radio frequency identification (RFID) and even bioluminescence implants, "purists" like to focus on understanding one's body, collecting and interpreting available data and applying "hacks" to achieve better performance. A qualified nutritionist could do that for you, but biohacking is about taking charge of your own mind and body.

For the clients he trains, Gethin first orders a complete blood test, including a vitamin and mineral profile and a test for heavy metal toxicity, followed by a hair follicle



PHOTOS: COURTESY KRIS GETHIN



(Clockwise from left) Kris Gethin (in the ice bath) and Ben Greenfield; Gethin soaking in some infrared light during a UV therapy session; Gethin breathing pure oxygen in a hyperbaric oxygen therapy machine; Jag Chima in a cryotherapy chamber

test to ascertain the effects of prescription medication or drug abuse before devising a diet and exercise plan. He says it helps him to quickly plug nutritional deficiencies.

"Dietary supplements and heart rate monitors are the most basic biohacks," says Jag Cheema. Gethin's business partner and CEO of Kris Gethin Gyms. He says that there needs to be accountability as well as a measure of performance. High Intensity Interval Training, for instance, is based on the principle of keeping the heart rate in the "fat burning zone", which is about 70 per cent of one's maximum heart rate. "But the problem with people is that they are impatient. Hacks can't bypass the foundations," he says.

Author and entrepreneur Dave Asprey, 46, got his Silicon Valley colleagues, including Twitter co-founder Jack Dorsey, hooked to a lifestyle of restricted eating. His book, *Head Strong*, focuses on the nutritional and lifestyle changes that help strengthen the neural networks of the brain and the functions of mitochondria, known as the powerhouse of human cells. Mitochondria generate a chemical called adenosine triphosphate (ATP), the cell's energy that powers a body's metabolic processes.

Asprey's controversial but popular "Bulletproof Diet" is based on a cyclical ketosis diet — high in fat for 5-6 days followed by 1-2 days of carbs re-feed — which claims to cause weight loss and address complaints such as

memory loss. He likes his morning "Bulletproof Coffee" with some unsalted butter or ghee and a brand of medium-chain triglyceride (MCT) oil that his company sells.

Ben Greenfield, 39, is another popular biohacking author. Greenfield prefers his coffee with some L-theanine, an amino acid that occurs in tea leaves, or even *tulsi*. The claim that it increases the secretion of inhibitory neurotransmitters, such as Gama Aminobutyric Acid or GABA, as well as serotonin and dopamine, which suppress stress and anxiety, echo the teachings of ayurveda. His simplest hacks include Buteyko Breathing (similar to *pranayama*), a five-minute shower that alternates between hot and cold water, and completely avoiding all vegetable oils. But biohacking is a slippery slope. His simple methods ultimately give way to extremes such as the use of "nootropics" or "smart drugs" such as Qualia Mind and even microdoses of LSD.

A deep dive into biohacking, however, does not necessarily include extremes. Pranav Anam, a geneticist and the founder of a B2B startup called The Gene Box, has a way of looking at someone's DNA and suggesting more lasting hacks than a one-diet-fits-all approach. "We all say we are unique but we don't really implement it in our food and lifestyle choices," he says. The genetic test that costs between ₹12,000 and ₹20,000 uses a simple saliva swab to analyse up to 70,000 genetic mark-

ers. It claims to be able to predict everything from a predisposition to a disease such as diabetes to how well carbohydrates or a certain vitamin B12 is being metabolised by your body. The company was recently signed by German football club Werder Bremen to do the testing for its athletes.

Brittany Ford, a "holistic nutritionist" in Vancouver, Canada believes in analysing as much data as possible but has a simpler approach on most days that falls back on the principles of biohacking. "For instance, if you had a loaf of bread and felt bloated or were constipated within the next 48 hours or had acne, you know that it doesn't work for you," she says. "Biohacking also means being self-aware."

Even Kombucha is a biohack. And so is Shilajit, an ayurvedic substance obtained from mineral formation in rocks. Hyperbaric oxygen therapy is for the body and sensory deprivation tank for the mind. There's a biohack for every purpose. You just have to be willing to be your own rat.

Instagram feminism

A personal photographic project that explored young women's body image has evolved into an empowering space for the traumatised, writes **Amrita Singh**

What are young Indian women's relationships with their bodies? How do these relationships impact their ambitions?" Mumbai-based photographer Anushka Kelkar, 23, began grappling with these questions two years ago, when still a student at liberal arts institution, Ashoka University. Surrounded by women in their late teens and twenties, Kelkar saw diversity, not just in terms of where the women were from, but in the struggles they experienced.

Curious to know more, she started an Instagram page called Brown Girl Gazing. The initiative explores Indian women's relationships with themselves, capturing through photographs their different stories, insecurities, vulnerabilities and triumphs. Today, Kelkar's page has about 10.8K followers, the visual stories striving to vanquish unachievable beauty standards and talk about issues such as domestic abuse.

"When I first reached out to women

in my college to participate in this project, I was overwhelmed by the number of responses. On the very first day, I had close to 40 emails from women I knew and didn't know," says Kelkar. Her first few posts celebrated women's bodies in their natural state — without make-up and free. In one post, two girls posed around an empty pool, playing, talking and laughing, as if the camera wasn't there. But soon, Kelkar moved on to loaded topics.

One young woman, who chose to remain anonymous, made Kelkar photograph bruises on her body — all cruel evidence of paternal abuse. "This shoot took place within three months of my starting the project. It's still one of the hardest shoots I have ever done," recalls Kelkar. A more recent shoot involved a 30-year-old woman who had been made to feel worthless all her life by overly critical parents. "When she was 15 or 16 years old, her parents thought of getting her married because they didn't think she was good for anything else. Even though



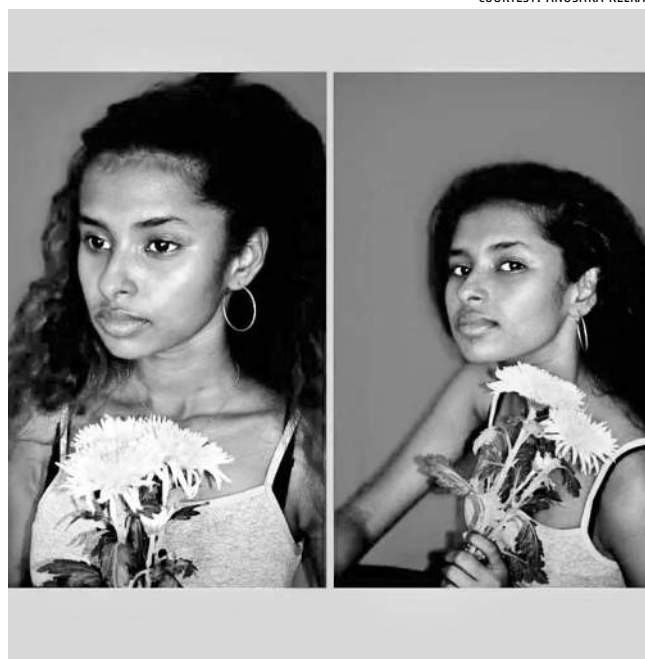
she is doing well now, this trauma continues to haunt her," says Kelkar.

The current 333 posts cover subjects ranging from fat shaming, the obsession with light-coloured skin, acne and other skin problems, body hair, breast sizes and stretch marks — all in an aes-

thetic manner and always accompanied with a personal note from the sender of these photographs.

"Initially, Brown Girl Gazing was more focused on quashing beauty standards. But with time, I have become interested in understanding and docu-

menting 'shame,'" says Kelkar. She has now begun conducting body-image workshops in schools and universities in Mumbai and the NCR region, and is in constant touch with psychologists and therapists for her ongoing research on the idea and practice of shame in the



The current 333 posts cover subjects ranging from fat shaming, the obsession with light-coloured skin, acne and other skin problems, body hair, breast sizes and stretch marks

country. Studying the subject has allowed her to look at how eating disorders co-exist in a country that is burdened by high levels of malnutrition. "We don't take disorders such as anorexia and bulimia seriously because we think it can't exist in India. But they are taboo subjects that we need to be doing something about."

"With time, this platform has turned into more of a community than a personal project. It is no longer mine, it is a project of the thousands of women who have found pieces of themselves in it. One of the most gratifying parts is getting messages from women who say something along the lines of, 'I thought it was just me and used to feel so ashamed, but now that I know it's a larger community I feel much stronger,'" reflects Kelkar.

Brown Girl Gazing accepts crowd-sourced stories as well, to maintain the diversity of issues and women. As a lot of women have begun sending her stories, Kelkar tries to pick stories that haven't already been told on her page. "It's a challenge to keep it diverse. I have a hard time selecting stories. But the impact needs to be felt," she says. With each story, Kelkar has managed to empower women who took the plunge by putting themselves and their insecurities out for the world to see on her body-positive page. Each woman here has the other's back, and feeling stronger for it.

COURTESY: ANUSHKA KELKAR

AND ANOTHER THING

Away from office, on the job



AAKAR PATEL

As someone who has worked from home for years, I feel qualified to write on the subject as an expert. And to offer tips and stories, which is what you may be here for. The first thing I wanted to say was that not going to office is the best thing, and almost as good a feeling as being here. The first thing I wanted to say was that not going to office is the best thing, and almost as good a feeling as being here. The first thing I wanted to say was that not going to office is the best thing, and almost as good a feeling as being here.

Now then, let's quickly have a look at the tips. First: get dressed and look the part. This is to my mind the single-most important pointer that can be given and one that is applicable to all of us. Do not lull yourself by changing your personal rituals based on your day ahead. Stick to them, even if they seem superficial or unnecessary. I am unfamiliar with the daily rituals of women or at least I know no more

than hearsay and observation allow. But for men, I recommend the full-dress treatment. Shave, shower, brush every day even if there's absolutely nothing to be done and nobody to be met. This may seem a minor thing but is effective. I will not say why, but leave it to the reader to reflect on because it seems to me there is more than one benefit.

Another thing is to attack the hardest part of the work first and earliest. This has several advantages. The first is the obvious one: you will actually get stuff done. Putting things off is much easier at home, with all the distractions at hand than at work with no colleague or boss wondering why you're not doing what you're supposed to.

The second benefit here is that only when you work from home do you realise that your body is like your phone. It is fully charged in the morning and then steadily loses power through the day. The mind is best when fully charged, clean of the random access memory that it will begin to accrue as the day goes on, wiping itself clean again almost fully while asleep.

While there is a reason the siesta happens in the middle of the day but its benefits are not equal for all and some of us cannot sleep in the daylight.

A thing related to the ones above is to set yourself a curfew. A time after which you will not work. Again this has a couple of advantages. The less important one is that you will come under some pressure to knock off stuff

that is pending, half-done. And the other is that if you down your shutters at, say, 6 pm, that gives you more time to do what you want to do which would otherwise be unavailable. There's no more effective way of wasting a day than to be at half-work all the time.

This is what I have. Let's turn to what famous people do when they don't go to work. I've picked the rituals of a writer, an architect and a painter.

The great science fiction author J G Ballard was widowed in his 20s and had to raise three children. Asked what the hardest part of the day was, he replied "keeping the first drink at 6". That is a really good tip and one that can save the day. Ballard admitted to spending too much of his adult life drinking. "It was a great sense of achievement," he recalled, "when my first drink of the day was not at nine in the morning but at noon and then at eight."

The architect Charles-Édouard Jeanneret (who called himself Le Corbusier) was unusual because he worked daily both from home and from office. His schedule, as recounted in the book *Daily Rituals*, ran as follows:

"After waking at 6:00 am, he did forty-five minutes of calisthenics. Then he served his wife her morning coffee and, at 8:00, the couple ate

breakfast together. The rest of Corbusier's morning was devoted to painting, drawing, and writing. This was the most creative part of his day, and even though he often spent hours on paintings that had no direct relation to his architecture, and which he showed to no one other than his wife, he attributed his professional success to these private mornings of artistic contemplation. Le Corbusier's office hours were brief. He arrived at the studio (a short subway or taxi ride from home) at 2:00 pm."

I've saved the shocking story for the end, and this is the ritual of the painter Francis Bacon, whose retrospective I saw just a few months ago, taken from the same work. It is the wildest working ritual of anyone in history. His biographer Michael Peppiatt said that Bacon was a creature of habit, but

the habit was pure lunacy. Painting came first. Despite his late nights, Bacon always rose at dawn and worked for several hours, usually finishing around noon. He would then drink a bottle of wine, followed by a long lunch and then more drinks at a succession of private clubs. When evening arrived, there was a restaurant supper, another round of nightclubs, perhaps a visit to a casino, and often, in the early-morning hours, yet another meal at a bistro. "At the end of these long nights, Bacon



frequently demanded that his reeling companions join him at home for one last drink — an effort, it seems, to postpone his nightly battles with insomnia. Bacon depended on pills to get to sleep, and he would read and reread classic cookbooks to relax himself before bed. He still slept only a few hours a night. Despite this, the painter's constitution was remarkably sturdy. His only exercise was pacing in front of a canvas, and his idea of dieting was to take large quantities of garlic pills and shun egg yolks, desserts, and coffee — while

continuing to guzzle a half-dozen bottles of wine and eat two or more large restaurant meals a day. His metabolism could apparently handle the excessive consumption without dimming his wits or expanding his waistline. Even the occasional hangover was, in Bacon's mind, a boon. "I often like working with a hangover," he said, "because my mind is crackling with energy and I can think very clearly."

This is the paragraph that I often come back to, as an antidote to where too much WHF can bring you.

DIGITAL CONSUMER

Work-from-home tech headaches and solutions

From shoddy Wi-Fi to digital distractions, our tech can make remote work miserable. Brian X Chen has tips on how to overcome the problems

Working from home because of the coronavirus pandemic may sound like a luxury. Freedom to cook lunch. Time to do laundry between tasks. Respite from that loquacious co-worker.

Then reality sets in. Your Wi-Fi slows down to a crawl, the new software tools you work with are confusing and your computer mouse is a piece of junk. Without an IT department, you are on your own with your tech problems.

Our most common work-from-home tech issues are the ones that slow down our productivity: unreliable internet connections, low-quality video calls, software programs that are too narrowly tailored and uncomfortable work stations.

Fret not, new telecommuters: I've worked from home on and off for many years and have managed to minimise my tech problems to achieve a kind of work-from-home nirvana. And in consulting other remote-working veterans, there are easy lessons and fixes to apply that will help throughout the time you work from your residence.

The biggest of these: Less is better, especially fewer gadgets and fewer work apps. That principle can guide us to a simpler, less frustrating setup that enables us to work well with our colleagues.

"There's an overabundance of tools," said Jason Fried, a founder of Basecamp, a software company in Chicago that makes remote working tools, and co-author of the book *Remote: Office Not Required*. "These are disasters waiting to happen."

Here's what you can do to make working from home a joy.

LET'S TALK ABOUT YOUR INTERNET

Let's first address the No 1 tech issue at home: internet connectivity. Compared with the zippy broadband connections in our offices, our home internet speeds are probably sluggish and our Wi-Fi connections may be spotty.

So now is a good time to assess your infrastructure.

■ If your Wi-Fi signal is unreliable, meaning it's strong in one room but weak in another, my recommendation for most people is to invest in a so-called mesh Wi-Fi system. That lets you connect multiple wireless access points together to blanket your home with a strong internet connection. My favourite mesh systems are Google Wifi and Amazon's Eero, which can be bundled with additional access points.

■ If your internet speeds feel slow, a modern Wi-Fi system with support for the latest wireless standards, like the aforementioned ones, would help. But if speeds continue to feel sluggish even after you upgrade your networking gear, you may have to contact your internet provider to ask about other options. Some providers may offer faster broadband speeds at higher prices.

In general, many of us (myself included) are experiencing slower overall speeds in the wake of the pandemic. That's because hordes of us are going online from home and sucking up the internet provider's bandwidth, which can cause average speeds to dip. There's not much we can do in this case beyond calling our service providers to complain about the slowdowns.



That's why it's wise to have a backup option. When speed problems arise, you can resort to using your smartphone's hot spot feature, which turns the device's cellular connection into a miniature Wi-Fi network. Cellular networks are designed to handle larger amounts of users, so chances are that your smartphone's data connection will be faster when your broadband is overwhelmed. Apple and Google offer instructions on their websites on how to turn iPhones and Android phones into hot spots.

MAKE THE MOST OF (AND MINIMISE) YOUR TECH SETUP

There is no one-size-fits-all recommendation for the best remote work setup because we all have different jobs. But one rule of thumb is to keep your gadgets to a minimum. The more tech we own, the more troubleshooting we eventually have to do.

With that in mind, here's a list of common remote-work headaches and

their tech solutions, including products recommended by Fried and *Wirecutter*, a *New York Times* publication that tests products:

■ Cramped screens

Many of us were sent home with laptops for work, and the smaller screens can feel constraining. You could consider adding a second monitor to your desk, like HP's Z27, a high-resolution 27-inch monitor.

■ Awkward video and phone calls

Many of us are familiar with poorly lit video calls and low-quality phone calls. If sound quality is an issue, wireless headsets like the Jabra Elite 75t earbuds have noise-reducing microphones so you don't pick up as much external noise. For better video quality, you might consider buying a

LESS IS BETTER, ESPECIALLY FEWER GADGETS AND FEWER WORK APPS. THAT PRINCIPLE CAN GUIDE US TO A SIMPLER, LESS FRUSTRATING SETUP THAT ENABLES US TO WORK WELL WITH OUR COLLEAGUES

webcam, like Logitech's C920S. For lighting issues, a light therapy lamp, like Carex's Day-light Classic Plus, can provide some natural-looking lighting to a video call — and it might even perk up your mood.

■ Noise

For those who have loud children or live in an urban environment, a pair of noise-cancelling headphones, like the Bose 700 over-ear headphones or the iMore DualDriver BT ANC earbuds, can muffle out many unpleasant sounds to help you focus.

■ Body pains

Without help from an ergonomic specialist, you may run into problems like wrist pain, neck strain and a sore back. You can remedy wrist pains with an ergonomic keyboard, like the

Kinesis Freestyle Edge, or a comfortable wireless mouse like the Logitech M720 Triathlon Multi-Device Wireless Mouse.

If your back is killing you, it may be time to invest in a well-built office chair, like the Steelcase Gesture, or a standing desk like Uplift's V2 standup desk.

Fried keeps his tech setup simple: a laptop, a good office chair, a therapy lamp for lighting up video calls and noise-cancelling headphones for when his children are being noisy. When he feels like standing, he puts his laptop on a bookcase.

LET'S TALK ABOUT OUR PROBLEMS WORKING ON TEAMS

When it comes to remotely collaborating with a team of colleagues, the path to success has less to do with tools than having empathy for one another when we use tech.

At any company, the main thing to understand is that people have different levels of tech literacy. So it's best for you and your team to choose a set of versatile tools rather than a variety of single-taskers, Fried said.

What does that actually mean? Team collaboration apps like Slack can handle group chats, private messaging and uploading files. Google's app suite includes collaboration tools for document editing, calendar sharing and video conferencing. Relying on a general-purpose tool like those for various tasks would be better than using a separate app for each task. Projects can get messy if some work files are in one tool but not in another.

The second step for a team is to ensure that everyone uses the same tools. Don't be the colleague urging everyone to use Zoom for videoconferencing when everybody else is video chatting on Google Hangouts, for example. A lack of consensus on collaboration tools can quickly escalate workplace tensions.

DISTRACTIONS? THINK OF THEM AS BREAKS

Many who are new to telecommuting cite tech as a major distraction from work: TV shows, video games and digital comic books are just a button press away.

Here's a secret to finding happiness in these distractions: Embrace them.

You are entitled to take breaks. At home, you have the liberty to spend your lunch break watching a Netflix show instead of going to a restaurant.

"You don't have to feel like you're in the office," Fried said. "Take advantage of that — don't feel ashamed of it at all."

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