



ZEEZEE WARRIORS

Dear Reader,

The national lockdown to fight the coronavirus has disrupted production and distribution of *The Sunday Express*. This has compelled us to reduce page count. To ensure that you do not miss out on the special weekend package, *Eye*, The Sunday Express Magazine, is being integrated into the main edition.

SUNDAY STORY PAGE 8



The Recovered

Hidden behind grim statistics of death, COVID-19 cases is another heartwarming number: those who recovered. Their stories

THE WORLD PAGE 10

Highest 1-day toll in US

Americans should wear face masks while outside, recommends Trump — then he says he won't



200 OF 500 DISTRICTS HIT, KEY GOAL TO BRING GOVERNANCE BACK ON TRACK

Easing lockdown, how, when, where: Ministers explore steps post-April 14

CORONA COUNT

3072 CASES 75 DEATHS

213 RECOVERED

79,950 samples have been tested as on April 4, 2020

RAVISH TIWARI
NEW DELHI, APRIL 4

AN INFORMAL group of Union Ministers has been brainstorming on the issues arising out of the nationwide lockdown to counter the coronavirus outbreak and exploring the possible next steps and options after the 21-day period ends April 14.

"This (nationwide lockdown) cannot continue for an indefinitely long period. But it also doesn't appear advisable to lift it from everywhere in one go," said a source aware of the deliberations in the informal group headed by Defence Minister Rajnath Singh.

The committee met for the third time on Friday and is likely to meet early next week again. It is learnt that the group may be in a position to make up its mind only after looking at the corona numbers — rate of growth of new cases, extent of the spread — by April 10.

More so, when currently, positive cases have been reported from little over 200 of the over 700 districts across the country.

"Given that there could be asymptomatic cases of COVID-19 in areas/hotspots and positive cases, these will have to be dealt with differently. Rural areas will have to be dealt with separately. Smaller shops need a different response than what needs to be done for malls or shopping complexes," said the source.

"For example, large shopping malls could pose a challenge in

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2



At Sir Ganga Ram Hospital in New Delhi, Sunday, after 108 medical staff were quarantined. Praveen Khanna

Use homemade mask when stepping out: Govt

ABANTIKA GHOSH
NEW DELHI, APRIL 4

AS THE number of novel coronavirus (COVID-19) cases climbed to 3,072 and the toll rose to 75 on Saturday, the Health Ministry, for the first time, advised use of "homemade face cover" for those stepping out of their houses, saying this would "help in protecting the community at large".

In the US too, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) revised the earlier stand and recommended "the use of simple cloth face coverings to slow the spread of the virus".

WHO TESTED POSITIVE

AGE GROUP	CASES (IN %)
0-20 years	8.61
21-40 years	41.88
41-60 years	32.82
Above 60 years	16.69

Source: Ministry of Health and Family Welfare

The World Health Organisation (WHO), however, has said there is no evidence that covering the face has any "self-protection paradigm."

Meanwhile, of the total

CONTINUED ON PAGE 6

After two test positive at Ganga Ram hospital, 108 staff quarantined

ASTHA SAXENA
NEW DELHI, APRIL 4

DELHI'S SIR Ganga Ram Hospital has quarantined 108 staff members, including 20 doctors and 75 nurses, after they came in contact with two patients who were brought to the hospital with no coronavirus symptoms, but later tested positive for the disease. While 85 people have been sent to home quarantine, 23 have been quarantined at the hospital's isolation ward.

Apart from the doctors and

nurses, nine ward boys, three technicians and a pantry staffer have been quarantined.

The two patients with critical illnesses were admitted to the hospital's ICU last week. "They did not have any symptoms of COVID-19 when they were admitted. But they later developed respiratory symptoms and were checked for COVID-19 as per ICMR protocols. Since then, staff associated with the patients have been quarantined," said Dr D S Rana, chairman (Board of Management), Sir Ganga Ram Hospital.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

Modi, Trump: Use India-US partnership to jointly fight COVID-19

SHUBHAJIT ROY
NEW DELHI, APRIL 4

PRIME MINISTER Narendra Modi Saturday said he had an extensive discussion on the COVID-19 crisis with US President Donald Trump over the phone.

Stating it was "a good discussion", the Prime Minister said in a tweet, "Had an extensive telephone conversation with President @realDonaldTrump. We had a good discussion, and agreed to deploy the full strength of the India-US partnership to fight COVID-19." The two also discussed the impact of the pandemic on the global well-being and economy, the PMO said in a statement.

"Stressing the special relationship between the two countries, the Prime Minister reiterated India's solidarity with the USA in overcoming this global crisis together. The two leaders agreed to deploy the full strength of the India-US partnership to resolutely and effectively combat COVID-19," the statement said.

Modi and Trump exchanged notes on the steps taken in each country for mitigating the health and economic impacts of the pandemic. "The two leaders also touched upon the significance of practices such as Yoga and Ayurveda (traditional Indian herbal medicine practice) for ensuring physical and mental well-being in these difficult times," the statement said. They agreed their officials would remain in close touch.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 6

Do the light thing!



For 9-min lights-off today, power sector switched on high alert

PM call only for lights at home, not street lights or appliances: Ministry

ENS ECONOMIC BUREAU
NEW DELHI, APRIL 4

THE NINE-MINUTE 'lights-off' exercise scheduled for Sunday evening, as per Prime Minister Narendra Modi's appeal to people across the country, has forced the grid operator to initiate an elaborate set of contingency measures to avert any crisis caused by the sudden massive load reduction quickly followed by a sharp increase.

These measures include tapering thermal output and increasing generation from hydro and gas stations to enable ramping up and down of power during the episode, calling for all personnel to be present on duty across the country and even requisitioning for "black start facilities" to be kept active as a con-

EXPLAINED Grid not likely to trip

LIGHTING, WHICH is part of the domestic load, accounts for under 10 per cent of the all-India load. If lighting load goes off, it is unlikely to have a major impact on the grid frequency in normal times. While grid frequency is expected to swing, the possibility of tripping is remote.

tingency measure. This refers to the set of restoration procedures at regional load despatch centres alluding to the possibility of

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

Almost 33% cases traced to Tablighi meet, Govt says one slip can be big

ABANTIKA GHOSH
NEW DELHI, APRIL 4

OVER 33 per cent of all COVID-19 cases in the country are linked to the gathering of the Tablighi Jamaat at Nizamuddin in Delhi last month.

So far, 1,023 of the 3,072 positive cases in India have been traced to that one congregation. The cases have come from 17 states and Union Territories — Tamil Nadu, Delhi, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Jammu and Kashmir, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Assam, Uttarakhand, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Kerala, Arunachal Pradesh, Jharkhand and Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

Lav Agarwal, Joint Secretary



At Ghaziabad hospital where some who were at Markaz event are admitted. PTI

in the Ministry of Health, said Saturday, "About 30 per cent of all our cases have been linked to this one incident. For us, it is a

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

ACROSS STATES, 107 MORE CASES WITH TABLIGHI LINK PAGE 6

Won't spare those spreading fake news, communal messages on virus: Uddhav

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
MUMBAI, APRIL 4



'Don't do it even for fun'

other virus that is emerging, which is creating a rift in the society — it is the virus of fake news

CONTINUED ON PAGE 6

BMC SCRIPTS FIGHTBACK PAGE 5

INSIDE



INDIAN RAILWAYS DESIGNS ITS OWN VENTILATOR

CORONA WARRIORS: THE PRICE THEY PAY TO KEEP VIRUS AWAY PAGE 5, 6

In quarantined Bengal village, fear of stigma as big as that of corona

RAVISH BHATTACHARYA & JOY PRAKASH DAS
NIJAMPUR, APRIL 4

POLICEMEN AND local guards man the entry and exit points of Nijampur, a village 130 km from Kolkata. A log and wooden benches block the breadth of the thin road that snakes its way through the village. A bamboo bridge over the Kansai tributary, the only other way out, has been severed by residents of Gobindopur across the waters. Ever since March 31, when a



Policemen and villagers at Nijampur village in West Midnapore district. Partha Paul

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

goldsmith back from Mumbai and his father tested positive, Nijampur in Daspur 1 block of West Midnapore has been under quarantine. All its 250 families have been ordered indoors.

No one gets in, no one gets out. The only people visible are village resource persons and an auxiliary nurse midwife (ANM) who make a team of nine. Wearing personal protective equipment, they have been going door-to-door, looking for anyone with symptoms of COVID-19.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

Amid yoga, TV and chai, group at Varanasi station asks: Will trains take us home?

AVISHEK G DASTIDAR
NEW DELHI, APRIL 4

WHAT DO you do when you are at a railway station, waiting for a train?

On Sunday, a group of 50 passengers from various parts of India will perform yoga together in the waiting hall of Varanasi railway station. After that, they will watch the re-run of *Ramayana* on Doordarshan on a 55-inch TV installed especially for them. After *Ramayana*, there will be lunch.

These passengers have been waiting for their trains since

Sunday, March 22, when the government observed Janata Curfew. The "curfew" ended, but their wait for a train did not.

The 21-day lockdown happened, the city shut down, and the railway station became their home.

Caught in this unintended consequence of the lockdown are daily-wage labourers, farmers, traders, professionals and pilgrims to the Kashi Vishwanath Temple from such far-flung places as Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat. There are women, children, sen-

ior citizens — all waiting for that one elusive object: a train.

"There is nothing to do. In the beginning, I used to go out of the station to look for some other ways to go home. But now, we just wait," says Manoj Shinde, part of a group of 11 daily-wage labourers from a village near Aurangabad, Maharashtra.

Shinde and group did some work around Patna for a few days and were due to return home. The Janata Curfew was still 24 hours away. So from Patna station, the local authorities got them to board a train, which, they said, was going to Maharashtra.



The group of 50, from Maharashtra, Karnataka, Andhra and other states, has been stuck since March 22

"Around 3 in the night, the train stopped at Mughalsarai. We were told that the train has been terminated here because of the Janata Curfew. We walked to the Varanasi station after that," he says.

It took the railway authorities just about a day to realise what had just happened. On Sunday, even as the curfew was on, the government suspended all train services till March 31.

Officials soon realised that there was a group of some hundred people waiting at the Varanasi station. "They were scattered across the station. We quickly got them to the large

waiting hall with benches and all. Then we formed a plan," says Anand Mohan, the station director, whose job, apart from running the station during the lockdown, has also been to take care of this group of stranded.

A couple of days later, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the 21-day lockdown. The station authorities realised that these people were now here for the long haul.

"Slowly, with coordination with state authorities, we started sending some people home, the ones who lived within distances manageable by taxis. But finally, a group of 50 remained — they

were some 1,500-2,000 km away from their homes. We decided to take care of them as best as we could," he says.

The yoga class and TV are new additions to their daily routine, starting Sunday. "...so that people have something to do and also stay fit," Mohan says.

The station officials arrange food. There is tea a few times of the day. Children play, people are on phones, the senior citizens are seen praying daily. Fights and laughter break out in equal measure, people sing songs, play music on phones, clothes are washed and put to dry every day.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 6



A LARGE PLAYGROUND

A child runs on an empty road at Shaheen Bagh on Saturday as the nationwide lockdown continues. Gajendra Yadav

ANOTHER SURGE IN NUMBER OF CASES LIKELY

Shortage of PPE kits, worried about docs and nurses, have written to Centre: CM

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, APRIL 4

CHIEF MINISTER Arvind Kejriwal said Saturday that hospitals under the Delhi government are facing a shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE) kits. He attributed the crisis to the surge in the number of people testing positive for coronavirus, fuelled by those evacuated from the Tablighi Jamaat gathering. He also said he had written to the Centre, but was yet to receive the kits so far.

Kejriwal said the number of cases in Delhi has risen to 445, with 59 new cases emerging in the last 24 hours.

"In Delhi, the situation is a little serious as we are having to take the responsibility of those who came from abroad. Around 2,300



At RML Hospital, Saturday. Fifteen people in the healthcare sector have tested positive. Praveen Khanna

people were evacuated from the Markaz and many among them are likely to test positive. So suddenly, there has been a shortage of PPE kits. I am worried about our doctors and nurses. I don't want

any doctor and nurse to treat coronavirus patients without PPE kits. We wrote to the Centre yesterday, seeking the kits urgently, but so far we have not received any kit," said Kejriwal.

As of Saturday, more than 10 people in the healthcare sector have also tested positive.

The CM said the city is likely to witness another surge in positive cases within the next one or two days, as reports of 500 out of 2,300 people who were hospitalised start coming in. However, the situation is very much under control, he added, pointing out that the total figure of 445 should not be analysed in isolation.

"The fact is, only 40 cases are those with a local history of transmission. The rest are either connected to the Markaz gathering or have a history of travelling abroad. This is somewhat reassuring... this is local transmission, not community transmission," he said.

So far, six patients have died in the national capital — five were aged over 60 while one was 36 years old. Five patients had

health issues such as diabetes, liver, respiratory or cardiac ailments. "Out of those admitted, 11 are in ICU and 5 are on ventilation. Their conditions can be described as serious... The elderly will have to stay safe. Those with sugar, heart and other serious diseases will also have to take special care," said the CM.

Kejriwal has also directed officials to convert Lok Nayak, GB Pant and Rajiv Gandhi Super Specialty hospitals into COVID-19 centres.

The Delhi government also alleged unfair treatment on the Centre's part, with Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia questioning the omission of Delhi from the list of states that are due to receive financial assistance from the Union government to fight COVID-19.

In a letter to Union Finance

Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, Sisodia said Delhi has been left "high and dry" despite Prime Minister Narendra Modi's assurance, at the meeting with the Chief Ministers, that all states will receive assistance. So far, the Centre has released Rs 17,287 crore to states under the first instalment of state disaster response mitigation fund and on account of revenue deficit grants.

"To our utter disbelief, Delhi has been left high and dry with zero allocation for the substantial burden of the fight against corona... People of Delhi expect fair and equal treatment by the government of India... I humbly request you to allocate Delhi's due share of funds to fight the worst disease mankind has ever seen," Sisodia wrote.

Govt issues guidelines on disposal of bodies

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, APRIL 4

LAYING OUT guidelines for proper disposal of bodies of COVID-19 victims, the government said burial or cremation of bodies will be carried out in the presence of trained healthcare workers in protective gear.

In a statement on Friday listing steps to be taken by hospitals, the Health and Family Welfare Department said, "Hospitals should store the body in a mortuary after ensuring proper disinfection of the body and the body bag as per guidelines."

The guidelines came soon after a conference was held by Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal with doctors from various government hospitals. Without clear instructions so far, there was a lack of consensus regarding disposal of bodies and to whom it must be handed over to.

The guidelines ask hospitals to take a call on whether an autopsy is required or not and insist that they provide a hearse van to transport the body to the cremation or burial ground.

Hospitals have also been asked to ensure a trained healthcare worker in protective gear packs and handles the body, and is present in the hearse van transporting it. After completion of the procedures, the van will be disinfected as per protocol.

RK Puram slum cordoned off as AIIMS staffer tests positive

MAHENDER SINGH
MANRAL &
ASTHA SAXENA
NEW DELHI, APRIL 4

THE NATIONAL capital reported 59 new cases of coronavirus on Saturday, taking the total number to 445. Of the new cases, 42 were evacuated from Markaz Nizamuddin, two are cases of local transmission, while 15 are under investigation.

Among those who tested positive is a 50-year-old man working as a contractual sanitation worker at the AIIMS Trauma Centre, who lives at the congested jhuggi jhopri camp near South Moti Bagh.

The entire area was cordoned off on Saturday after tests confirmed that the man had contracted COVID-19. He is admitted to Ram Manohar Lohia Hospital. While his family was initially asked to isolate themselves, they were later shifted to a quarantine centre in South Delhi's Chattarpur on Saturday evening.

The pradhan of the JJ camp said, "We got to know about the case today after an ambulance came to our colony. We found out the man had gone to the hospital to get tested four days ago, after he ran a fever. Today, his elder son went to collect the report and was told that his father had tested positive. There are 12 members in his family."

Close to 1,200 families live in the area, which is now under a strict lockdown. "His family members were also taken to hospital, but they returned as they were asymptomatic. We assured them help after they were advised to isolate at home. We are getting food at the government school nearby, so we told them



The Trauma Centre at RML will be turned to a dedicated isolation ward. Praveen Khanna



they would get food inside their home," said the pradhan.

A senior police officer said they have informed the department concerned and requested them to take necessary actions to contain the situation.

The total population of the JJ camp is around 5,000, and several people are now worried about their well-being. "We have asked everyone to be more cautious and alert their neighbours or the agency concerned if they notice any symptoms. The lockdown will be stricter in the area now, but perhaps that is needed," said a resident.

The city has seen 15 people who work in hospitals, including doctors and nurses, test positive for the virus so far.

On Saturday, two more nurses — one each from the Delhi State Cancer Institute and Indraprastha Apollo Hospital — tested positive. Five COVID-19 positive patients were discharged from hospitals Saturday.

Did not seek details of hospital WhatsApp groups, say police

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, APRIL 4

A DAY after the additional medical superintendent at Vardhman Mahavir Medical College and Safdarjung Hospital issued an order asking details of the administrators of WhatsApp groups of the hospital for "onward transmission to police", senior Delhi Police officers said they had made no such requests of the hospital administration.

A total of 48 people — 20 of whom have tested positive, while reports of others are awaited — are admitted at Safdarjung Hospital.

"We did not ask hospital authorities to issue any such order. It appears they did this to stop people from spreading any kind of fake news," said a senior police officer.

The circular, issued on April 3, said: "... I am directed by competent authority that as a legal requirement, names, mobile numbers, email of all admins of WhatsApp groups of hospital are

required for onward transmission to police. This is required to prevent spreading of any fake news, rumour or any other adverse comments/statements on social media and in the institution by any hospital/college staff."

Asked why these details had been sought, Medical Superintendent of Safdarjung Hospital Balwinder Singh Arora said, "No one should spread fake news."

He did not respond when asked if there had been an instance of someone sharing fake news or if the police had asked them to issue the circular.

Dr Manish, president of the Safdarjung RDA, said: "There was fake news which stated that five days' salaries of doctors and healthcare workers will be deducted. The Ministry then clarified that no such orders have been passed by the Director-General of Health Services. Also, many staff members are circulating wrong information about COVID-19 cases. The letter has been issued to ensure there is no panic among the general public."

Among those at sports complex, some who just stepped out to buy supplies

ANAND MOHAN J
NEW DELHI, APRIL 4

THE THOUGHT of biscuits dipped in tea made Vijay Kumar (55) step out of his home at a park in Anand Vihar and head to a local market nearby. But he was stopped by Delhi Police, who promised to feed him biscuits. Instead, he was dropped off at the Yamuna Sports Complex in Anand Vihar.

For the past four days, Kumar has been trying to convince officials at the sports complex to release him, claiming he has a family waiting for him at the park. But they are not convinced, and Kumar is expected to stay at the sports complex till the lockdown is lifted.

Since March 31, the Yamuna sports complex has been converted into a makeshift camp for those stranded in Delhi without a home. Among its 300 occupants are labourers who tried to leave Delhi on foot, street children, and many who simply broke curfew.

DCP (Shahdara) D K Gupta said, "The Yamuna Sports Complex near Vivek Vihar is being used as a shelter by the Delhi government. So far, we have managed to take 1,100 people there. They are mostly homeless people and migrant labourers who wanted to return to their villages. They are being provided meals, water, bathing facilities. Four police personnel are managing the



The Yamuna sports complex has been converted into a makeshift camp for those stranded in Delhi. Amit Mehra

security arrangements."

He said that since the complex is huge there is scope to add more people and that people here were transported via DTC buses.

Around 250 beds have been laid out on a red carpet at the main lobby of the stadium, and officials said more are on the way. A three-member medical team, comprising a doctor and a pharmacist, works in two six-hour shifts, in addition to around 35 civil defence volunteers who work on rotation.

Further, there are two portable toilets which are changed every 24 hours. Due to a lack of bathrooms, men and women have to bathe in the open in separate areas of the complex.

Officials have so far stocked

around 1,000 masks, 250 soaps and four bottles of hand sanitisers, which they believe should sustain them for at least a week.

Despite the facilities, Kumar and some others find themselves in a predicament. Among them is Ajijul (25), who claims he is stranded in a relative's house in UP. She was planning on walking to her village when she was picked up by police from Vivek Vihar. "I just want my children to know I am alive," she said.

Sohan Lal, the executive magistrate managing the stadium, said: "They will be allowed to leave if their families turn up with their address proofs in Delhi. We are trying to connect with the families." He said the facility can accommodate more than 1,000 people.

Abdul Khalid (34), who worked in a cloth-making unit for Rs 450 a day, was also picked up by police after he left his



CORONA
WATCH

DJB staff to donate day's salary to CM relief fund

New Delhi: DJB vice-chairman Raghav Chadha Saturday said all employees will donate one day's salary to the Chief Minister's coronavirus relief fund — an amount totalling nearly Rs 2 crore.

Gambhir lends a hand

New Delhi: East Delhi MP Gautam Gambhir Saturday gave 500 N95 masks and 125 PPE kits to the Delhi government's Lal Bahadur Shastri Hospital.

Man arrested

Gurgaon: A 26-year-old tax consultant has been arrested for allegedly spreading rumours regarding coronavirus on social media, alleging that a person in his neighbourhood had been infected and taken away by police. **ENS**

THE SUNDAY EXPRESS MAGAZINE

eye

ARTSETC

A Humane Heart
Parvati Sharma on a writer's
role in an anxious world



ZeeZee Warriors

Manjula Padmanabhan

NO TIME for tears! Roshan scolded herself, even as her eyes welled up. She pulled the knot of her long black hair tight behind her head and called to her eight-year-old son, "Tuktuk!" Her voice was muffled by her mask. "The van will be here any minute." They lived in Garden Estate, which was the closest point to the Millennium Medical Centre, far to the south of New Delhi. She guessed they'd be the last to be collected on the early morning run.

She snatched up the house keys and hurried towards the front door, pausing by what used to be the guest room. "Ash?" she called to her husband. "We're going now." She was about to add, "It's alright, don't come out", but he did, anyway.

His face was grey, unshaven. He hadn't changed out of his pyjamas in days. He met her gaze and whispered, "What you and Tuktuk are doing is... *God's work*." Then his voice cracked and he turned away, weeping. The room was in darkness. But Roshan could see, on the floor behind him, the golden mound of marigolds still laid out on a white sheet, in the shape of a small body. There was, of course, nothing beneath the flowers. Mourning families were not allowed even a last goodbye.

She and Tuktuk rushed out of the flat. The young boy looked like an astronaut, in his shiny white suit, gloves and boots. His curly black hair framed the blue face-mask. It had translucent breathing tubes curling out from the nostrils. Roshan wore regular clothes: black slacks, pearl-grey turtleneck jumper, black puffy jacket. It was early in the year and the air was icy.

They ran down three floors. Sure enough, the white transport had just drawn up, with the flashing red light on its roof. They scrambled in through the rear door. They were the last to be collected. Four other parents and their children were already strapped in.

The vehicle raced through the broad, empty avenues of Gurgaon with the siren whooping. The sky was black, encrusted with stars. The towering buildings on either side were dark and lifeless, all the residents and offices having closed after successive lockdowns. There was no traffic; the siren was meant to alert checkpoints along the way that a transport was coming through and must not be halted.

The Centre was believed to be the most advanced medical facility ever created. It was visible from afar, blazing like a permanent dawn over the horizon. The structure, when it came into view, resembled a glittering honeycomb made of plate-glass. The van cleared through the check-

As history and contagion literature have shown, even the darkest of nights is followed by day. In this short speculative story, a video gamer is determined to change the course of a pestilence

points without triggering any alarms. Then it plunged into the depths like a white bee returning to base.

Tuktuk had been silent all the way. But when the two of them got out and were walking towards the ZeeZee Hub alongside dozens of others, he clutched Roshan's gloved hand with his own smaller one.

"Mumma?" he whispered, into the microphone in his helmet.

She wore earbuds and a discrete mouth-mic. "What is it, sweetie?"

"What happens if I can't?"

She knew what he meant.

"Sweetie, you'll be fine," she said, hoping she sounded sincere.

"Yes, but —"

There was no time to stop. Around them, walking with the same air of steely purpose were other parents and children. All the children were dressed just like Tuktuk. There were girls, with their hair in long plaits or ponytails. Some boys had shaven heads. Some had turbans.

Roshan said, "Whatever happens, there's no danger to you. No danger at all."

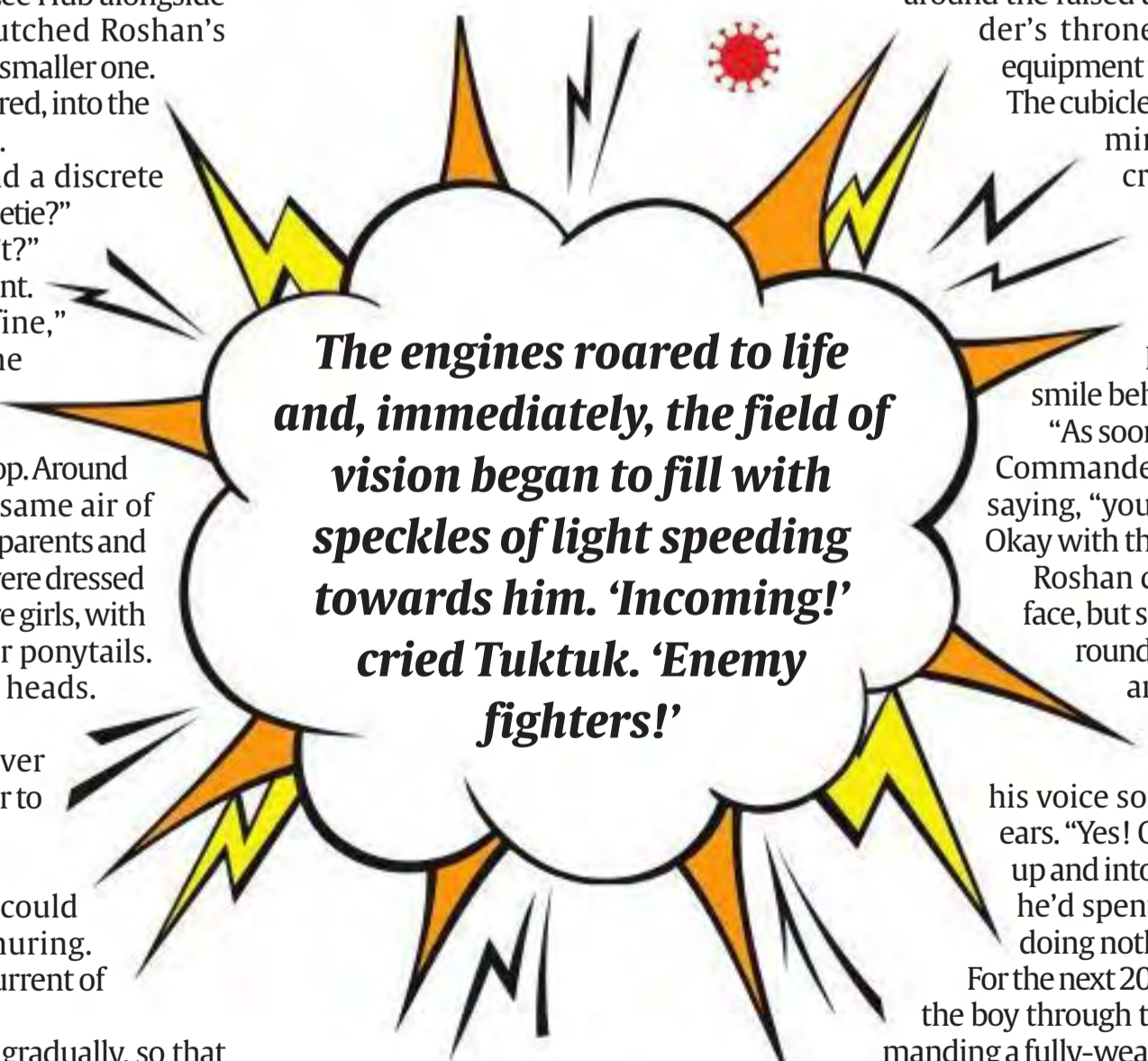
"But —"

Ahead of them, they could hear a wordless murmuring. There was also an undercurrent of bings, chirps and booms.

The corridor widened gradually, so that the transition to the enormous underground Hub was not too abrupt. As the murmurs and dings grew louder, tall figures wearing deep blue helmets and matching uniforms began to appear. They called themselves ZeeZee Hosts. Their faces were hidden, yet they seemed to be smiling with their whole bodies, as they greeted the young warriors and their parents.

Then the first ZeeZee stations came into view. Roshan heard Tuktuk gasp in amazement. Each one looked like a huge bubble made of frosted glass. Many were lit from within. They glowed and flashed in multi-colours, accompanied by muffled sound effects.

"Hello!" said someone. One of the blue-uniformed figures. She bent forward, addressing Tuktuk first, then Roshan.



"You're..." a tiny pause as her helmet scanner read information from the boy's face mask, "...Tuktuk! Your first time? Welcome! I'm Mimi. Follow me?"

All around them, other parents and their children were trotting obediently behind their individual hosts. Tuktuk clutched his mother's hand even tighter. Roshan clutched back. But she no longer felt anxious. The place had an unexpectedly festive air. Mimi led them through the maze of occupied stations until she came to a halt beside a darkened one.

"Here," she said. "This one's for first-timers." The door slid back at her touch and she stood aside, letting the other two in.

As soon as the door slid shut behind all three, the interior lit up. It revealed a cockpit bristling with twinkling instruments inside a child-sized spaceship. The details were a cleverly designed video projection curving around the raised and padded commander's throne. The only physical equipment was, in fact, the throne.

The cubicle filled with the thrumming sound of a spacecraft idling in space, as the star-strewn blackness of the cosmos surrounded them on all sides.

Roshan suppressed a smile behind her gloved hand.

"As soon as I strap you in here, Commander Tuktuk," Mimi was saying, "your ship will power up. Okay with that?"

Roshan couldn't see her son's face, but she knew that his small round mouth would be open and his eyes wide with wonder and delight.

"Yes," he said now, his voice sounding clearly in her ears. "Yes! Of course!" He jumped up and into his seat as readily as if he'd spent his entire young life doing nothing else.

For the next 20 minutes, Mimi guided the boy through the rudiments of commanding a fully-weaponised space vehicle, equipped to destroy enemy fighters. He was so eager to begin his first solo mission that he refused the offer of a chocolate slurpee.

Leaning forward in his seat, he called out, "Secure all decks!" in clear, piping tones. Mimi had taught him the start sequence. "Raise shields... ENGAGE!"

The engines roared to life and, immediately, the field of vision began to fill with speckles of light speeding towards him. "Incoming!" cried Tuktuk. "Enemy fighters!"

Mimi straightened up. Turning to Roshan, she gestured towards the rear of the cubicle. There was a narrow bench there, just enough for two. She drew down a transparent partition to reduce the audio. Then she removed her helmet. She wore a face-mask underneath. "One more warrior launched, I think!"

she said, her eyes smiling.

Roshan smiled back. "He didn't even turn to look at me!" They both laughed. "So: tell me. How does this work? What connects these little warriors to the viruses?"

Mimi said, "It's a simulation linked to patients, via the medical centre's HyperNet." She directed Roshan's attention back to the display. "See those enemy fighters? They're make-believe. But once your son hits enough of those practice enemies precisely, he'll be connected by remote links to an actual patient, in the medical wing upstairs. Tuktuk's movements will be scaled down to the microscopic level until they can act on instruments too tiny to be seen. They're minute machines that we've constructed and positioned inside the patient's lungs. Like minuscule missiles. Each missile carries molecules of virus-busting fluid —"

"Wait! There are no drugs against this virus!" exclaimed Roshan.

Mimi nodded. "That's right. No drugs. We're using molecules of soap." She smiled again. "The virus has a thin outer shell of fatty tissue. Soap breaks up the tissue. That's why hand washing is so important: it really does disable the virus. Without its outer coating, the virus loses the tiny prickles it uses to hook onto human cells!"

No hooks, no infection, no death. "We need effective vaccines. But until then, this is the best we can do," said Mimi. "It's extremely desperate! Using children as warriors, for goodness' sake! What's more desperate than that?"

Roshan watched Tuktuk, now swaying and rocking in his seat as dozens of spiky objects came whirling and twisting towards him. *Boom!* Got one. And another — *BOOM! Pom. DING! Whee —*

"Kids!" said Mimi. "For them, it's just video games. Each virus is worth a thousand points. They compete against one another and earn money as they go — 10,000 points is one rupee. They can keep at it for hours — oh! See the little glowing blob? That's the real thing — a real coronavirus. He's been assigned a patient!"

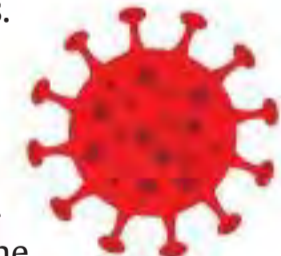
Both women leaned forward in excitement. Tuktuk swung the electron beam of his ship's primary canon this way and that, sending out shattering blasts of green light until, with an abrupt boom, he hit the blob. It burst open. Thousands of wriggling fragments shot into the void, faded and died.

"Zee-Zee-Zee!" shrieked the virus as it collapsed. "Zee-Zee-Zee!"

Roshan felt a radiant joy awaken within herself.

Yes, she thought. *We will win this war.*

Manjula Padmanabhan is an author, playwright and cartoonist. Her novel *The Island of Last Girls* is set in a brutal future world. She lives in the US, with a home in New Delhi



Love in the Time of Corona



BY SUDEEP SEN

I don't believe in God, but I'm afraid of Him.
— Gabriel García Márquez, *Love in the Time of Cholera*

*In the dark times, will there also be singing?
Yes, there will also be singing. About the dark times.*
— Bertolt Brecht

Faint indigo tints in the greys of your hair
evoke memory — Krishna's love for Radha,

its perennial longevity, its sustained mythology,
its blue-bathed lore — such are life's enduring

parallels. Fourteen years — yet my heart flutters,
infatuated like first love. My hands fidgety,

palms sweaty, pulse too fast to pick —
I am not allowed to touch your face.

Cyber-flurries of emoji-love fail to assuage
fears of corona criticality. *I don't believe in God.*

In thousands, migrant workers march home —
hungry footsteps on empty highways

accentuate irony — 'social distancing',
a privilege only powerful can afford.

Cretons spray bleach on unprotected poor, clap,
bang plates, ring bells, blow conches to rid

the voodoo — *karuna's* karmic score, infected.
Mood-swings in sanitised quarantine — self-

isolation, imposed — uncontained virus, viral.
When shall we sing our dream's epiphanies?

City weather fluctuates promiscuously,
mapping my bipolar temperature-graph —

tropic's air-conditioner chill, winter's
unseasonal hailstorm, sky's pink-blue spring.

Blue-grey will moult into salt-and-pepper,
ash-grey to silver-white, then to aged-white.

My lungs heave, ingratiating metallic-crackles
struggle to escape the filigreed windpipes —

I persist in my prayers. *I'm afraid of Him.*
Hope, heed, heal — our song, in present tense.

Sudeep Sen is a poet, translator,
literary editor and photographer



GETTY IMAGES

It takes courage to live with adversity

We need to keep moving forward, to be
compassionate without discrimination and to
not let adversity define us. No matter what



IMAGINE
BY SHELJA SEN

CORONAVIRUS has made us aware of the fragility of our lives. We are learning that despite the dead ends and detours, we need to move forward. As we navigate this uncharted territory, one thing that can guide us through the worst storms, roughest terrains and darkest times is our Courage. Courage is an acronym I use to highlight seven core practices we will need in this unprecedented journey. Because as American novelist Anaïs Nin put it, *"Life shrinks or expands in proportion to one's courage."*

C: Change the channel

One of the biggest challenges that the corona panic is posing is that it is making us feel helpless and hopeless. It is shrieking and crowding our minds with the worst-case scenarios. No wonder we are feeling frazzled, exhausted and on edge. Corona's voice of doom is tough to tune out. It has already terrorised our economy, taken thousands of lives, and now it is ready to tyrannise our minds. Not much of a surprise considering all the horror stories we are feeding our minds all the time. It is becoming a fertile ground for fear to breed. Imagine if we stood up to fear-mongering propaganda and took active steps to do all things that give us peace and joy. Through my co-research with children, we have developed a simple trick to stop corona panic in its tracks: **Alert** to the voice of corona panic churning away its stories of doom and gloom. **Breathe out** (imagine you are a dragon blowing a feather on

your hand) and get up and **Change** the channel (from corona worry to joy channel through dancing, art, music, gardening, knitting, cooking, yoga etc.).

O: Owning our light

JK Rowling described "dementors" as — *"get too near a Dementor and every good feeling, every happy memory will be sucked out of you"*. Corona panic is doing precisely that to all of us. As our jobs become uncertain, our future bleak, we grapple with insecurities, self-doubts and inadequacies. "Will I be able to go to college?" "Will I lose my job?" All the dreams and aspirations for the future might seem meaningless. A 23-year-old young man who had invested a lot of time and effort in making films told me despondently, "I used to be passionate about working with children with disability, but it seems so futile now."

That is what corona panic does — it distracts us from what truly matters to us by pumping in a lot of obsessive paranoia. Therefore, it becomes all the more important to hold on to what you value the most no matter what the corona panic tries to convince you of.

U: Us against corona

Corona panic has a devious knack of splitting people up through "othering". The recent spate of vicious racism directed at people from the Northeast is a typical example of this. There is no "us and them" here, we are all in this together. "Humanity needs to make a choice. Will we travel down the route of disunity, or will we adopt the path of global solidarity? If we choose disunity, this will not only prolong the crisis, but will probably result in even worse catastrophes in the future." These words by historian Yuval Noah Harari really resonate with a lot of us as we grapple with the intercontinental journey of the virus sweeping across borders. I loved the way this was explained so simply by a 13-year-old who told me: "If each team player plays for himself, then the team will lose. It is our match with corona too, and we are losing until we become strong team players."

R: Remain compassionate

Being quarantined is a privilege. That is something that is becoming obvious to all of us. From the comfort of our homes, we talk about the joy of slowing down, savouring moments with our families, loitering through the day aimlessly and posting pictures of gratitude. However, the trauma to the marginalised and the most vulnerable is something we will only get to understand in the months and years to come. Activists around the world are talking about the rise in domestic violence and abuse during the lockdowns. Think: there are 18 million street children in our country alone. Where do they go, who takes care of their meals, who looks out for them when adults who are supposed to protect them become predators? It is also heartening to see efforts being made by so many organisations to step up. We have to make compassion go viral in the coming months so that together we weather the storm and build our interconnected lives back.

A: A day at a time

The lockdown has disrupted our daily rhythm, especially for young people in the age group of 15 to 21. There is nothing much to do, nowhere to go and nobody to meet. A 19-year-old described it as a "weird sense of vacuum", a sentiment echoed by many others. This void can spiral into depression and other mental health problems if left unchecked. In my co-research I have found that what helps people is finding at least three anchors through the day which brings in stillness (yoga, meditation, walks), cultivating joyous moments and connection with people we love.

G: Growing our tribe

"We are all in this together," is popping up everywhere and people are rebuilding unique bridges in unique ways. Forgotten friends, relatives are being remembered and connections are being made. As a 21-year-old explained to me, "Structures of individualism and neoliberalism have to give way to structures of empathy." It reminded me of *A Letter to the UK from Italy* by the writer Francesca Melnadi, "Old resentments and falling-outs will seem irrelevant. You will call people you had sworn never to talk to ever again, so as to ask them: 'How are you doing?'"

E: Enduring adversity

Victor E Frankl, Jewish psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor, expressed it beautifully in his brilliant book, *Man's Search for Meaning*. "Everything can be taken from a (wo)man but one thing: the last of human freedoms — to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's way." Fear is inevitable in the present time but, courage and fear can go hand in hand. Andrew Solomon, author of *Far from The Tree*, talks about how crucial it is for us to take our adversity and forge some meaning out of it. Think of one person you admire deeply, who changed the world for the better. It could be Nelson Mandela, Mother Teresa, Mahatma Gandhi, Dalai Lama. In all these amazing people's lives, adversity has been a catalyst for them to find meaning in their life and bring about the change. As Solomon so eloquently explains it, "If you banish the dragons, you banish the heroes." Hats off to all the heroes across the world who have been slaying the corona dragon.

Courage is not a trait or a quality; it is a practice — to keep moving forward, to choose one's attitude, to be compassionate without discrimination, to not let adversity to define us and live our lives as close to what we value the most. No matter what.

Dr Shelja Sen is therapist, writer and co-founder of Children First, a child & adolescent mental health institute. Write to shelja.sen@childrenfirstindia.com

DIGITAL NATIVE



Nishant Shah

Nishant Shah is a professor of new media and the co-founder of The Centre for Internet & Society, Bengaluru

Viral Trap

The surfeit of news on corona must not make us oblivious to those fading into the darkness

I WOKE UP the other day with a strange feeling that I am losing my memory. As I was going through the morning rituals of scrolling through news feeds and social media updates, I felt that I could not remember the world before corona — BC, if you will. It was a strange feeling. I am almost certain that three weeks ago, before the pandemic was announced, before the shutdowns were implemented, before social distancing and physical isolation became the bywords, there must have been other things that were on my mind and in my information streams. Try as I might, I could only come up with vague recollections about events, people, places, and plans that must have occupied my attention.

The feeling of preternatural amnesia was complemented through the rhythms of the day. At "work", I sat at my desk in a dress-shirt and pyjamas, making an attempt to make only the camera-visible parts of me work-presentable. We joked how we have forgotten to wear work clothes. The virus had rendered us sartorially catatonic. The news feed was making me sick because the news channels were concentrating on the state of befuddled buffoonery in global governance of this pandemic. So, I shifted to other channels, only to find that they, too, were talking about everything in the context of corona: dating, mating, eating, meeting, cooking, creating, house-keeping and pet-keeping, all in the times of corona.

Unable to take this contagious onslaught, I moved to Netflix to watch a reality TV show, but had to stop midway through the first episode because every time I saw people touch, hug, or sit close to each other, my spidey senses tingled. My newfound pathology of touch and space could not tolerate these people existing in a pre-corona world, vegetating in one another's gummy exudation.

It is understandable that with such a global threat to our species, a lot of our attention is being taken by the emerging calisthenics of epidemiology as new epicentres of contagion emerge. However, our single-handed focus and viral information stream of the virus has trapped us. When our physical universe shrinks, at least for those who could afford it, the reassurance was that digital access will liberate us from our isolation. Instead, we found and are practising digital shrinkage, where our entire informational universe is being shaped and concentrated on just this one factor that binds and restricts



GETTY IMAGES

We will meme in darkness of the darkness, not paying attention to those who shall fade into it

Curriculum for a Crisis

A list of books to school even the most educated on the ways of the natural world

DOWN IN JUNGLELAND



Ranjit Lal

Ranjit Lal is an author, environmentalist and bird watcher

NOW THAT Mother Nature has the whole world by the throat, it's time we took another good hard look at our relationship with her — and how we've reacted to this monumental crisis. Judging by some of the WhatsApp forwards doing the rounds in India, it seems the magnitude of the crisis has been completely overshadowed by the magnitude of the ignorance of our "educated" class. While the poor Italians and Spaniards went out into their balconies to cheer and sing for their beleaguered medical workers, we, in India, did so to "spiritually cleanse" the country of the virus! Apparently, the chanted prayers (and clattering pots and pans) of 1.3 billion Indians, "matched the resonant frequency of the diurnal multipath propagation over the Indian subcontinent." Further, "scientists" say that it would definitely have created a ducting effect in the lower troposphere, which would either trap the virus in a "continental duct"

or would have columned the virus towards the stratosphere". And hey presto, in a week, all the viruses would be ducted away!

To counter this astonishing "scientific" balderdash, here's a brief list of books I would strongly recommend. First, a good mind-clearing dose of Richard Dawkins. You could start off with his book, *The Magic of Reality* (2011). It's been written for young readers but that makes it even easier to understand. Dawkins takes various questions — who was the first person? Why are there so many different kinds of animals? What are things made of? — and answers them in two ways: first, he mentions some of the traditional explanations that have been given by people all over the world and counterpoints this with the scientific explanation of the phenomenon. Since we're dealing with nature in this column, read the chapter on evolution to start with — it has been wonderfully explained and Dawkins's diamond-hard logic is impeccable. You may be loath to believe that our ancestors were fish, or centipedes or even chimpanzees — but Dawkins has a clear and simple way of showing us that this is, indeed, the case. Hopefully the book should go some way in "ducting" the woolliness in our heads into the stratosphere!

The second book I'd recommend is Jay Griffiths' *Wild* (2006). Griffiths is a British journalist who spent years among tribal and native people around the world. She drank psychotropic potions with the shamans of the South American rainforests, interacted with cannibals in New Guinea (amongst the kindest people she encountered) and the Inuit of the icy polar regions, amongst others. Now, I do have reservations about the practices of



RECOMMENDED READING

Books by (from left) Jay Griffiths, Richard Dawkins and Tara Westover can help counter unscientific beliefs and arguments

"medicine men" and "witch doctors", but the overarching theme of this book is that all of these tribes lived as a part of and in tune with nature — and did not treat her as their main adversary, to be trampled upon, cut down, drowned, conquered, and exploited. And that, no matter how "civilized" we pretend we are, deep down, the wild spirit remains.

Another major takeaway from this book is the fact that what the bat or pangolin has done to us is exactly what the European did to native tribes all over the world: subject them to viruses (and addictions) that they had no immunity against, so they died in droves, enabling them to take over their lands or enslave them. Today, a furious Mother Nature is showing us what goes around comes around and we're not enjoying it. Apart from this, Griffiths is an incandescent, kaleidoscopic writer who writes with her heart and absolutely doesn't hold back.

The third book I'd recommend is Tara Westover's *Educated* (2018). Tara Westover was brought up in a Mormon family and her parents believed in and lived according to rigid traditional ways and customs. Her father had a pathological suspicion of authority — and

refused to send his children to school or avail of modern medical facilities. He converted his house into a virtual bunker and stockpiled everything — food, guns, petrol, traditional medicines — in vast quantities. Everything that happened, good or bad, was because the Lord willed it, so and nothing could be done to change that. Familiar, isn't it?

But, ah, you may say, maybe that's what's needed now: a harking back to the old, "natural" ways. Not really, because there are serious illnesses those "traditional" medicines cannot cure — and which, in this case, put her and her family — in serious danger. This book is also a revelation as to what a lack of proper education can lead to: and that has been displayed so prominently today by messages on social media. We are literate, maybe, educated, certainly not.

If reading is not for you, here's another way of getting "educated". Every morning, go out into your balcony or garden and stand and stare. There's a lot to discover: every plant has a miniature ecosystem humming around it: translucent crab spiders waiting in ambush, butterflies paying fleeting visits, hoverflies standing still in midair. Also, people everywhere have suddenly discovered birdsong like never before. Even in big cities, you can pick up the songs and calls of at least 20 species in just five minutes. Ah, but I'll let you in on a small secret. The birds haven't come from the hinterland in great flocks to entertain us in this time of crisis! They've always been there, singing, squawking and arguing. We just never heard them over the incessant roar of traffic and the ill-tempered blaring of horns. And, yes, of course, the disharmonious beating of pots and pans!

'We learn from each new outbreak, but not enough'

Writer Laura Spinney on the impact of the 1918 Spanish Flu on India and the mostly unchanging response to each new epidemic

Sushant Singh

IN HER much-acclaimed 2017 book, *Pale Rider: The Spanish Flu of 1918 and How it Changed the World*, Laura Spinney recounted the story of a forgotten pandemic, which left between 50 and 100 million people dead worldwide. The Paris-based writer and science journalist's work, which shows how the pandemic was shaped by the interaction of a virus and the humans it encountered, has special relevance today in the time of COVID-19. Excerpts from an interview:

Why was the 1918 flu pandemic called the Spanish Flu? Was it directly linked to the Indian soldiers in the Great War?

The story of the misnaming of the 1918 pandemic is well-known. World War I was on in 1918, and the belligerent nations censored their press, not wanting to damage their populations' morale. Spain, however, was neutral in that war, and when the first cases of flu occurred there, they were widely reported. Incidentally, it was called the 'Naples Soldier' in Spain, after a catchy tune that was being played in local music halls at the time. The disease had already been in the United States for two months, and in France for several weeks at least. That information was, however, kept out of their newspapers. So the world came to see the disease as coming out of Spain. This was also encouraged by propagandists in other countries, whom it suited to shift the blame.

There was no particular link to Indian soldiers, though, of course, they were affected and they probably unwittingly helped spread it too, as they travelled. It, however, clearly shaped the pandemic and the Indian experience of it.

Did the 1918 pandemic alter the course of India's independence movement in a significant way?

I think you can argue from the historical evidence that it did — and I am not the only one to have done so. The devastation wrought by the disease exacerbated social tensions in India, contributing to an eruption of violence and significantly strengthening the independence movement. By 1918, Mahatma Gandhi was being seen as a future leader of the nation, but he lacked grassroots support. That spring, in Gujarat, he had organised two *satyagrahas*, but these were followed by thousands of people, not hundreds of thousands. When the flu returned that autumn, he fell ill, along with other members of the independence movement who shared his *ashram*. Armistice in World War I was signed in November 1918, but the Rowlatt Act followed in India, which imposed the martial law. That led to a call for a *satyagraha* by a very weak Gandhi, and, eventually, the Jallianwala Bagh tragedy. What



WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



COURTESY: LAURASPINNEY.COM

HORRORS REVISITED

(Above) A Spanish Flu victim in St Louis, USA; Spinney

followed in 1920 was a special session of the Congress in Calcutta, where Gandhi promised self-rule within a year if Congress followed his *satyagraha* model all over India. By 1921, thanks in no small part to the freedom fighters who provided relief to millions of Indian during the flu, Gandhi had secured massive grassroots support.

Was the art and literature of the time in India reflective of the pandemic and the tragedy?

Again, I think you can argue that the pandemic had an impact on Indian literature. For example, Munshi Premchand who became the self-styled "chronicler of village life" around 1918, and the poet (Suryakant Tripathi) Nirala who wrote about the tragedy in his memoir, *A Life Misspent* (1939). This argument is necessarily speculative, since the writers are no longer here for us to question them, but this does pose some interesting research questions for future historians.

Despite being such an immense tragedy, why was the 1918 pandemic erased so

quickly from public memory in India? Do wars attract more attention than disease?

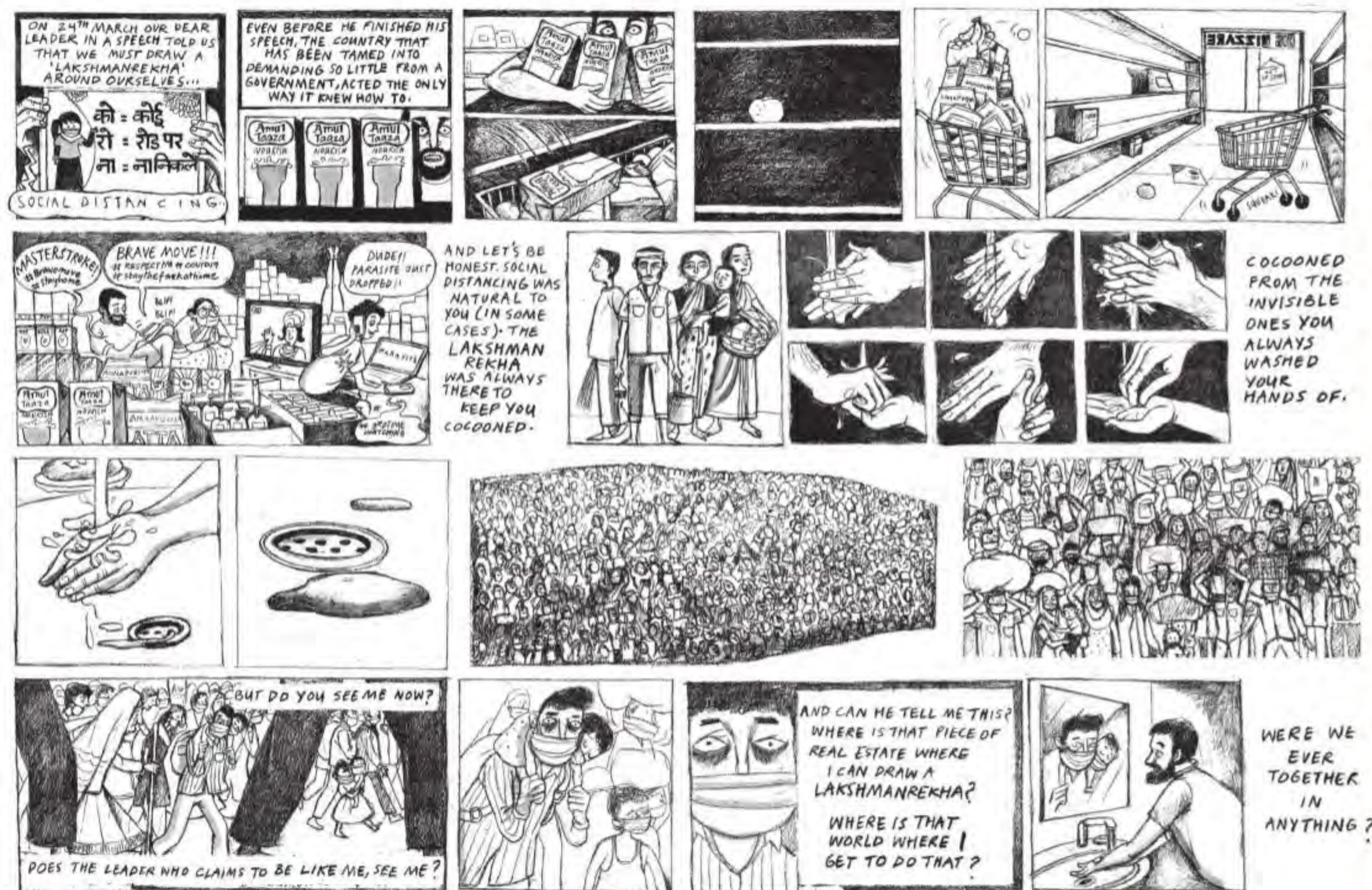
There are many reasons, but in India's case, I think, a contributing factor was that, for a very long time, Indians did not have an accurate sense of the scale of their loss. The dead had simply not been counted. Economist Siddharth Chandra's work in 2012 (*The evolution of pandemic influenza: evidence from India, 1918–19*, published in *BMC Infectious Diseases*) estimated that 18 million was a reasonable estimate for the death toll in India as a whole, which is roughly 6 per cent of the population of the undivided subcontinent at that time. And, I do think that wars attract much more attention from writers than epidemics or pandemics.

The world has faced many epidemics more recently, such as Ebola in 2014-16 and H1N1 in 2009. In what ways has the human response not changed?

We tend to swing from panic, when the pandemic strikes to forgetting and complacency when it passes. We learn from each new outbreak, but, perhaps, not enough.

LAKSHMAN REKHA

BY PRIYA KURIYAN



Priya Kuriyan is a Bengaluru-based illustrator, animator and comic-book artist

A Humane Heart

A writer's role in an anxiety-ridden world

Parvati Sharma

BEING A writer is half as much the "being" as the writing. I remember at 14, spending more time imagining myself an ink-stained Jo in her attic, or a salty Joseph Conrad on the high seas at 24, than producing actual stories. Like all clichés, these two, of solitude and adventure as essential to literature, are founded in truth. You do need to think in order to write; and you do need experience to write about. On the other hand, I realised over the years that it's perfectly possible to write in a crowded office — thinking happens in your head, after all, nobody needs an empty hillside for it — and that adventures don't have to involve tossing waves. Friendship is as much an experience as love; reading about the past can be as thrilling as diving into the present.

Still, if it weren't for that adolescent craving for a writer's life, I wouldn't write at all. At 14 and 40, the idea of an attic of my own and a leading role in a Historical Moment held an irresistible, propelling romance. But what did I know? Now I'm 42, the world is hushed and every moment is history — and I can't write a word. Staying in is hardly conducive to productive thought, after all, when going out is prohibited; the urgency of a historical moment is also its anxiety.

As I write this, 22 migrant workers have died trying to get home across north India, almost as many — 29 — have succumbed to the dreaded virus across the country; and a government order has decreed that stadiums become — not hospitals — jails. The American president wants to end his country's lockdown because the stock market's unhappy. In Columbia, death squads are using the opportunity to kill homebound activists; and Hungary has become the EU's first corona-inspired dictatorship. A global pandemic on the one hand, governments revealing their most malevolent aspects on the other — the fear has sucked the writing right out of me.

Nor can I read with much concentration, but I have been staring in glazed manner at Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), his account of the Great Plague of London in 1665. Some bits catch my eye, for example: "I could not prevail upon my unsatisfied curiosity to stay within entirely myself..."

It is tempting, as the world threatens to collapse around us, to collapse, in turn, upon ourselves. To spend more hours in bed. To become obsessive about disinfecting doorknobs and stocking the fridge, when the news becomes too much, to keep the dangers of the world at bay.

But Defoe is a writer. It's the bar he stocks — "I bought malt, and brewed as much beer as all the casks I had would hold" — and he ventures into the world. It's a "very, very, very dreadful" world, not just because of the plague but also because of madness and crime, mis-



GETTY IMAGES

Staying in is hardly conducive to productive thought, after all, when going out is prohibited

management and fear; and every time Defoe goes out he returns "[t]errified... and resolve to go out no more". Yet he does.

Thus, wandering the streets of London, he writes of being transfixed by the sight of the rich leaving the city, "a sight which I could not but look on from morning to night"; he writes of the "[m]aid-servants... and men-servants" going to fortune-tellers to ask if they would be abandoned by their employers, "Oh sir... what will become of me? Will my mistress keep me, or will she turn me off?" He writes of the tears in his eyes at the story of a boatman working day and night for the wife and children he can no longer meet; they are infected. He writes with black humour of a sleeping piper almost buried in a mass grave, and with anger of the city's terrible care for its sick and its poor — "as if they had had no warning, no expectation, no apprehensions, and consequently the least provision imaginable was made..."

Defoe doesn't let his spirit be contracted by fear nor does he let himself be overwhelmed by the exigencies of the self. He is as concerned about his brother's hat factory — where he finds the neighbourhood women helping themselves to its unguarded ware — as he is about the consequences of a general lockdown in a city built on daily labour: "I say, let any man consider what must be the miserable condition of this town if, on a sudden...labour should cease, and wages for work be no more." Able to engage with the present and speak to the future, Defoe is the ideal writer.

And — of course — he is fiction. Defoe was a child in 1665; his "journal" is a novel, though possibly based on a relative's experience of the Great Plague. And the writer his narrator represents, jotting down the socio-political horrors of the day while swigging homemade ale — that may be as much a fantasy as any I harboured in my adolescence. As someone exclaimed on Twitter recently, "A pandemic is not a writing retreat". Maybe it isn't possible to write when you're locked up and afraid of what the world is becoming.

But Defoe's idea of the writer — curious, courageous, empathetic — his idea of the writer's life as a writer's duty — unable to stay entirely within oneself, questioning the world as if responsible for it — this offers something to aspire to, more compelling, even, than the solitary genius with a bagful of sailors' tales.

Parvati Sharma is a Delhi-based writer



KP WANTS 'CONDENSED' IPL

Kevin Pieterse has proposed a 'condensed' IPL without fans, saying he 'truly believes' the tournament should take place. He added it could be held at three venues that will be safe for players.

Virus fallout: FIFA postpones women's U-17 World Cup in India



India's under-17 women's team was set to make its debut in the World Cup, which was to be held from November 2 to 21 this year. *File*

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
NEW DELHI, APRIL 4

THE FIFA Under-17 Women's World Cup to be held in India in November was on Saturday postponed by football's governing body due to the worsening COVID-19 pandemic across the globe.

The women's age group showpiece was to be held at five venues in the country — Kolkata, Guwahati, Bhubaneswar, Ahmedabad and Navi Mumbai — from November 2-21. The tournament was to be competed among 16 teams, with hosts India being automatic qualifiers. It was to be India's maiden appearance in the U-17 Women's World Cup.

The decision was taken by the FIFA-Confederations working group which was recently established by the Bureau of the FIFA Council to address the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. The working group recommended the Bureau of FIFA Council to "postpone the FIFA Under-20 Women's World Cup Panama/Costa Rica 2020 - originally scheduled for August/September 2020 - and the FIFA Under-17 Women's World Cup India 2020 - originally scheduled for November 2020." "New dates will be identified," FIFA said in a statement.

It was also decided "to create a sub-work-

ing group on the women's international match calendar to consider potential changes to the calendar and dates of postponed FIFA final tournaments".

The All India Football Federation said the postponement was on expected lines. "Just like other sports events which were postponed due to this dreaded disease, it (postponement of U-17 World Cup) was to happen. We have to accept the decision," AIFF General Secretary Kushal Das told PTI. "The qualifying events in Europe and Africa and other confederations are yet to be held and so the decision was on expected lines."

He said the tournament will most likely be held next year. The working group of the world body which took the decision includes the FIFA administration and Secretary Generals and top executives from all confederations. It unanimously approved a series of recommendations following its first meeting, which was organised via conference late on Friday. While the tournament itself is five months away, only the qualifying event for Asia has been held so far from which Japan and North Korea have made the cut.

Five remaining qualifying events -- that of Africa, Europe, Oceania, South America, and Central, North America and Caribbean -- have not been held due to the global health crisis which has affected more than a million

While the tournament itself is five months away, only the qualifying event for Asia has been held so far from which Japan and North Korea have made the cut.

people. Over 50,000 deaths have been caused by the deadly outbreak so far.

The official schedule of the tournament was announced in February and Navi Mumbai was to host the final. The Local Organising Committee (LOC) said it supported the decision though it was looking forward to host the tournament in November as scheduled.

"We agree that this has been made with the highest regard for public health, and the participating teams, host cities, staff and visiting fans, and keeps the best interests of everyone in mind," the LOC said in a statement.

All international games deferred

Reuters: The working group also recommended the postponement of all international matches due to be played in June -- a formality as Euro 2020, the Copa America

and the month's World Cup qualifiers have already been called off due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The recommendations still have to be approved by the FIFA Bureau, a reduced version of its decision-making Council.

"FIFA also reiterates that health must always be the first priority and the main criteria in any decision-making process, especially in these challenging times," said FIFA.

The group proposed discussions with continental confederations to finalise a revised schedule for 2022 World Cup qualifiers, after matches this month and in June were postponed. The age limit for the Tokyo Olympics men's football tournament could be raised so that players who were eligible in 2020 will not miss out following the postponement of the Games until the following year, FIFA said on Friday.

Olympic football is usually restricted to under-23 teams for the men's tournament, with three overage players allowed per team. However, a working group set up by global soccer's governing body FIFA recommended on Friday that the competition should remain open to players born on or after Jan. 1, 1997, as originally planned, FIFA said in a statement. This would effectively raise the age limit by one year, as requested by both South Korea and Australia. There is no age limit for the women's tournament.

India was supposed to start its four-month countdown to the Olympics this moment. But forced into an unprecedented, grim lockdown as the world battles the Covid-19 outbreak, sport is staring at unfathomable despair. Indian athletes though have given the country reasons to rejoice in the past. *The Indian Express* looks back at a bunch of these memories.



**THOSE MONTHS
THOSE MINUTES**



SEPTEMBER 25, 2014
'It was a case of a few small mistakes that decided the outcome.'

OCTOBER 2
'We were not emotional or nervous, but calm.'

Invincibles of Incheon



After countless false dawns and years of a fractured hockey team putting up sub-par performances, India pulled together as a unit at the Asian Games in 2014 to reclaim continental glory after 16 long years, beating arch-rivals Pakistan. Sardar Singh, the talismanic captain and India's finest midfielder of the era, looks back

TUSHAR BHADURI

OVER HIS long international career, Sardar Singh often left hockey lovers gasping with his skills with the stick. His peripheral vision, sixth sense about where a teammate would be, the blind pass, and uncanny tackling ability ensured he was part of numerous All-Star XIs.

However, hockey is a team sport and the midfielder par excellence had precious few moments when he tasted triumph as part of the national team. India, during his playing days, would often promise much before faltering in crunch situations, be it conceding last-minute goals or squandering gilt-edged scoring opportunities.

Honourable exception

However, the 2014 Incheon Asian Games was one occasion when everything fell into place and India not only secured its third gold medal but also a direct berth for the 2016 Rio Olympics.

"It was our first gold in 16 years and is one of the happiest memories of my career," Sardar looks back. "It was the result of complete unity of purpose in our batch. Everyone's thinking was the same."

Laying the foundation

Hockey India has often been flayed for its hire-and-fire policy of coaches. Hardly any head coach, especially foreigner, stays in the job for a significant length of time, which also breeds confusion among players.

But the arrival of Australian Terry Walsh, a silver medalist at the 1976 Montreal Olympics with successful coaching stints in the Netherlands and his home country, was a step in the right direction, feels Sardar, the captain at that time.

"We had Roelant Oltmans as the high performance director and with Terry's arrival, we

had a great combination of coaches. I always believe that whosoever is selected to play for the country already knows hockey. Only proper direction is needed," he says.

Preparation

JUNE-JULY, 2014
The hockey competition in Incheon was scheduled from September 20-October 2. The training camp before the tournament was held at New Delhi's Major Dhyana Chand National Stadium, and Sardar remembers the toil the players went through.

"It was peak summer in North India and the stadium had big stands on every side so there was very little air circulation. It was a 40-day camp and several friendships developed there. But the training sessions were so intense that we often felt that we would collapse.

"When Walsh joined us, we were in Bhopal. He decided to lay special emphasis on fitness. We had to complete 400m sprints in groups within a particular time, and used to be left gasping at the end. The coach also made us swim at the Talkatora Stadium pool."

It's not that the technical skills of the game were ignored. "We had days earmarked for a particular aspect. For example, one full session was dedicated to the slap shot," Sardar recalls.

No detail was left to chance and the team reached Incheon 10-12 days before the competition. "We had seven or eight training sessions at the venue and acclimatised properly. We were full of confidence when the tournament began."

Early setback

SEPTEMBER 25, 2014
India were in the same pool as Pakistan and it was always going to be the key clash. Sri Lanka and Oman were swept aside easily before the contest against the neighbours.

After a goalless first half, Pakistan went ahead through Muhammad Umar Bhutta.

Nikkin Thimmaiah netted the equaliser but Muhammad Waqas scored what turned out to be the winner a minute later. "It was a case of a few small mistakes that decided the outcome," the captain remembers. "We were disappointed, but not disheartened. We knew we were still in the tournament. We had a team bonding session late in the evening and looked forward to the next game."

What helped matters was that it was quite an experienced bunch of players. "Guys like Gurbaj Singh, Dharamvir Singh and Danish Mujtaba had a lot of games behind them and knew what needed to be done," Sardar says.

India needed to beat China in their last group game to make sure of a semi-final spot and after another barren first half, VR Raghunath and Birendra Lakra struck in quick succession to settle matters.

Taking down the hosts

SEPTEMBER 30, 2014
By finishing second in the group, India had made matters tougher for themselves as they had to take on hosts South Korea in the semi-finals. The East Asians had advanced with a perfect pool record, scoring 25 goals and conceding just one.

"Playing against the home country is always tough, with the whole crowd behind

them. Marginal decisions also usually went in their favour as there were no video referrals there. We conceded a penalty corner when I knew the ball had struck my hand and not the foot. But we were determined to keep our shape and discipline and avoid any cards. Our focus was rewarded as we kept the Koreans at bay and Akashdeep (Singh) scored the only goal of the match," Sardar reminisces.

'Just another game'

OCTOBER 2, 2014
On the morning of a big final against the arch rivals, one expects players to be super-excited with butterflies in the stomach. But the midfielder general of yesteryears provides a different perspective. "We were not emotional or nervous, but calm. We knew we had done our homework and were expected to be in the final. The preparation was like what we had before any other game."

"Our plan was to play with energy from the start and execute our strategy, so even when Pakistan took an early lead (through Muhammad Rizwan senior in the third minute), we didn't panic. I told my players that there was a lot of time left and we needed to play with discipline and stick to the plan."

"Pakistani fans are always very abusive and it was no different in this match. But we knew it would happen and were determined not to react," Sardar gives a glimpse into the team's mindset.

Before the half-hour mark, Kothajit Singh had restored parity. There were no more goals in the match, but no dearth of action either. The skipper made a special mention about his custodian, who came to India's rescue on more than one occasion. "(PR)Sreejesh was our rock. His body language too was such that it unnerved advancing attackers."

Shootout decider

Head coach Walsh was prepared for this

scenario as well. "He had decided on the players to be entrusted in the high-pressure scenario. I had a 50-50 record in training sessions, and was left out," Sardar recalls.

When Akashdeep converted the first attempt from the 25-yard line and Abdul Haseem Khan didn't, it put the Indians in front. Even though Manpreet Singh missed the third attempt, Sreejesh again rose to the occasion against Bhutta. All it needed now was Dharamvir to find the target, and he put the finishing touches on India's campaign.

"It was a very proud moment for me as the captain," Sardar looks back. "It was particularly significant as there were a few youngsters in the team playing their first Asian Games and they had a taste of victory," he adds.

Ask about the celebration after the final and he replies wryly: "You know these foreign coaches. They are very professional and don't allow you to let your hair down too much. We were given a bit of free time, had a team get-together before we had to pack our bags and prepare for the return home."

Alchemy

Indian hockey teams over the past few decades have seldom pulled in the same direction, and it has often pulled them down. The 2014 Asian Games squad was a team in every sense. What was the secret? "All the players bonded very well," Sardar reflects. "At the Games village, 8-10 players shared a large room. There was discipline and strict rules about mobile usage. Nobody used to stay awake late as a good sleep was crucial. Recovery and proper diet were looked into."

"Also, whenever we went out, even to a restaurant, the whole squad went together. When the other teams saw us moving together even off the ground, it exuded a different kind of feeling," Sardar feels. And to think that the Aussie architect of India's golden hour was gone a little over a month later.