



EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW "IN MODI 3.0, TECH-DRIVEN CHANGES WILL BE OUR TOP PRIORITY" - NIRMALA SITHARAMAN

MAY 6, 2024 ₹100



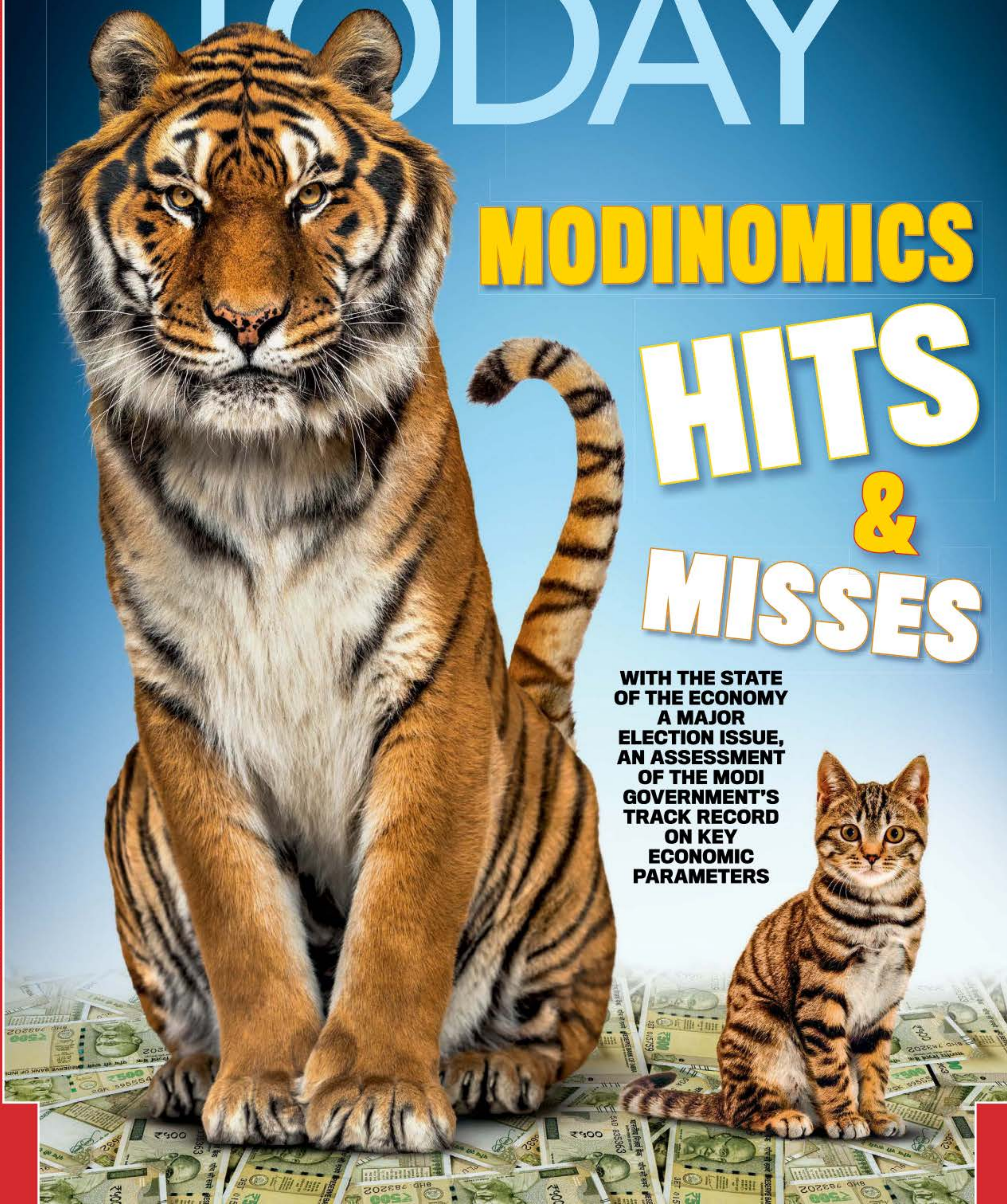
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INDIA TODAY

MODINOMICS

HITS & MISSES

**WITH THE STATE
OF THE ECONOMY
A MAJOR
ELECTION ISSUE,
AN ASSESSMENT
OF THE MODI
GOVERNMENT'S
TRACK RECORD
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As his primary calling card, people usually talk of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in personality terms. Aspects like charisma take precedence over all else. But governance produces its own kind of personality, forming the true measure of a leader. While elections may be won or lost on emotions and perceptions, there is a decisive underlying factor. Which is, as Bill Clinton once bluntly put it, "It's the economy, stupid." In February, the INDIA TODAY biannual Mood of the Nation (MOTN) poll found unemployment and inflation to be the two issues that concerned India's public the most, besides economic growth. As voting gets under way for the seven-phase general election, much of the political discourse centres around both these livelihood issues. This is reflected not just in the speeches of leaders but also in their party manifestos released recently. To win a third term in power, Modi holds out a vision of the future. This is the idea of Viksit Bharat—the target of transforming India into a fully-fledged developed nation by 2047. The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has adopted the slogan 'Modi ki Guarantee' as its refrain and main campaign plank. It cites the 10-year track record of the PM's handling of the economy as proof of his ability to deliver. For the Opposition, though, joblessness and inflation take prime slots in their critiques and form the leitmotif of their campaign promises.

Rather than merely report the rhetoric, we decided to make a factual assessment of the Modi government's 10-year performance record on the economic front. Experts sum up Modinomics, as it is termed, as being characterised by a blend of fiscal prudence and investment-led growth, laced with a strong dose of targeted, tech-enabled welfarism. Key aspects of Modi's governance personality emerge here. His vision leans decidedly towards the long term, resisting the temptation for immediate gratification. We saw this capacity to bite the bullet during and after the Covid shock. India's economy endured and bounced back when even major economies were flailing, and GDP projections for FY24 are a robust 7.6 per cent, making it the world's fastest growing major economy. That didn't happen by accident. The trajectory owes directly to the conscious (and hard) choice Modi made to be monetarily conservative rather than profligate while battling the pandemic. Not making the panic-induced error the West made to pump in massive stimulus packages.

Driven by this belief in first securing the base rather than performing cosmetic surgery, Modi focused massively on building infrastructure. Yearly average capital expenditure on railways trebled during 2014-23 from what it was during 2009-14, resulting in an eye-popping 25,871 km of new tracks, with 37,000+ km being electrified. You see these impressive numbers all across, whether highways, shipping or airways. The spike in capex not only broke the cycle of underinvestment that had plagued these critical sectors for years, but government spending also filled in at a time of feeble animal spirits globally in the private sector. This emphasis on physical infrastructure flows from the conviction

that they provide jobs as well stimulate economic growth.

But while the GDP figures are respectable, every analysis points to K-shaped growth: a widening gap between rich and poor, nothing to shore up incomes for the latter, and even rural wages falling, besides what many economists call disguised unemployment. While government figures show unemployment figures have dipped post Covid, a drilling down of those statistics brings out the nuances. Out of all those employed, some 57 per cent are self-employed, according to the Periodic Labour Force Survey report of 2022-23. Many jobs are in the informal sector—both unsecured for the individual and simultaneously indicative of underemployment, when seen from the standpoint of efficient utilisation of human resources. About 21.8 per cent are casual labour. Formal jobs cover only 20.9 per cent of India's workforce.

Once this pattern started getting noticed and critiqued, especially since the pandemic, Modi has focused on welfare to alleviate hardship and ensure there is no outright destitution. For example, with the free grain scheme that covers 810 million poor. But this is also proof of how dire the circumstances are at the bottom of the pyramid. Being naturally wider than the

top, it also influences a key economic factor: consumption. Lack of surplus money in common hands leads to low demand, offering no spur for production, and hence reduced appetite for risk among investors. This low mood is what resulted in a scenario where private investment never kicked off despite corporate tax reductions. This is the big conundrum of the Indian economy and a problem for the government.

Also, disinvestment in PSUs has slowed after Air India, and manufacturing remains stagnant at 17 per cent of the GDP. Agriculture growth, meanwhile, stayed sluggish at an average of 4 per cent over the five-year period ending FY23, and hit a deep trough thereafter, slipping to 1.8

per cent in FY24, according to the first advanced estimates. Erratic weather patterns are keeping growth predictions below one per cent even over the next year, likely sustaining that dark undertow on the GDP. The external environment, too, has not been favourable with all the geopolitical tensions, and the trend towards *deglobalisation* has meant that exports are not firing enough and seem to be not gaining fully from the global turn to the 'China Plus One' strategy. That apart, the prudent fiscal management and the growing spread of the GST net have led to an ongoing formalisation of the economy and boosted government revenues. However, the government should take heart as the future outlook for the Indian economy looks positive on most counts.

In this issue, we present a comprehensive mapping by our bureaus of the hits and misses of Modinomics, to enable voters to cut through the clutter and make informed choices.

Ultimately, democracy will be the final judge.

(Aroon Purie)



April 25, 2022

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letters.editor@intoday.com or
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Volume 49-Number 19; For the week

April 30-May 6, 2024, published on every Friday

• Editorial/Corporate Office Living Media India Ltd., India Today Group
Mediaplex, FC-8, Sector-16A, Film City, Noida - 201301; Phone: 0120-4807100

• Subscriptions: For assistance contact, Customer Care, India Today Group,
C-9, Sector-10, Noida (UP) - 201301. email: wecare@intoday.com;

Phone / Whatsapp: +91 8597 778 778 (Monday to Friday, 10 am - 6pm).

• Sales: Direct all trade enquiries to General Manager (Sales), Living Media India
Limited, C-9, Sector-10, Noida-201301 (UP).

• Regd. Office: F-26, First Floor, Connaught Place, New Delhi-110001.

• Impact Offices: 1201, 12th Floor, Tower 2 A, One Indiabulls Centre,

(Jupiter Mills), S.B. Marg, Lower Parel (West), Mumbai-400013;

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26560929; Fax: 26565293 • Copyright Living Media India Ltd. All rights

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Printed and published by Manoj Sharma on behalf of Living Media

India Limited. Printed at Thomson Press India Limited,

18-35 Milestone, Delhi Mathura Road, Faridabad-121007, (Haryana)

and at Rajhans Enterprises, 134, Industrial Town, 4th Main Road, Rajajinagar,

Bengaluru-560044, (Karnataka).

Published at F-26, First Floor, Connaught Place, New Delhi-110001.

Editor: Raj Chengappa.

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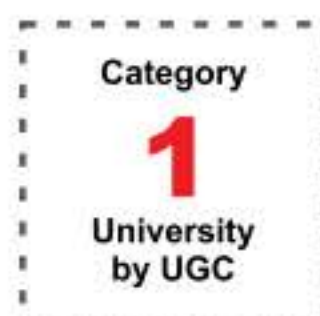
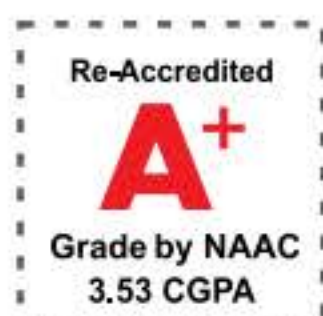
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MANDATE 2024 | GANDHINAGAR |

SHAH AT HOME

AS THE UNION HOME MINISTER SEEKS A SECOND TERM FROM GANDHINAGAR, HE BANKS ON THE DEVELOPMENT PLANK AND GUJARATI PRIDE FOR A MASSIVE MANDATE. BUT ISSUES LIKE JOBS AND KSHATRIYA IRE THREATEN TO DENT HIS WINNING MARGIN

By Jumana Shah
in Gandhinagar

T

TWO DAYS BEFORE AMIT SHAH FILED HIS NOMINATION PAPERS FROM GANDHINAGAR—a seat the Union home minister first won in 2019, with a margin of 557,000-plus votes—he visited 30 voters for whom he is the designated *panna pramukh*. A *panna* is a page in the electoral rolls, each assigned a *pramukh*, or in-charge, by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to mobilise support. “Twenty-seven confirmed that they will vote for [Prime Minister Narendra] Modi before 10.30 am on polling day. I’ve requested the remaining three, who plan to travel, to reschedule their vacation,” says Shah, settling down for a Gujarati meal, wife Sonal by his side, at the house of a close associate, amid campaigning the following day.

RAISING THE BAR Union home minister Amit Shah (centre) leads a road show, with Gujarat BJP chief C.R. Patil (left) and CM Bhupendra Patel by his side, in Gandhinagar Lok Sabha constituency, Apr. 18



Earlier that day, on April 18, riding a makeshift chariot atop a mini truck, the 59-year-old waved to supporters jostling on the roads under the scorching sun for a glimpse of their leader. “Raise your hands and take a pledge to vote for the *kamal* (lotus, the BJP symbol) before 10.30 am on May 7,” he exhorted a gathering at Vejalpur, concluding his 10-hour-long road show, as hands shot up in unison. “Now I am relaxed,” he said, “to campaign in other parts of the country and return here on the day of voting.”

With over two million voters in this Lok Sabha constituency, Shah claims that his team has visited nearly every home at least once. The microscopic attention to detail and the presence of thousands of dedicated foot soldiers, combined with the natural appeal of the idea of voting for *aapdo manas* (our man/ a Gujarati) as the prime minister,

are key to Shah’s confidence—so much so that he spent only one day holding road shows and rallies before filing his nomination papers.

A prestigious seat for the BJP, Gandhinagar was long held by party veteran Lal Krishna Advani, whom Shah replaced in 2019. In 1996, party patriarch Atal Bihari Vajpayee had also thrown his hat into the ring from Gandhinagar besides Lucknow, but chose to retain the latter after winning both. Having learnt the ropes in the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), the student wing of the BJP’s ideological fountainhead Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Shah, in fact, had first gained prominence as Advani’s campaign manager in the 1991 Lok Sabha election. But Shah brings a distinct advantage his predecessor lacked—he is a local. Shah’s ancestral village Mansa falls in the Gandhinagar North assembly segment and he entered the Gujarat Vidhan Sabha from the erstwhile Sarkhej seat in 1997,

representing it till its dissolution in the delimitation exercise of 2012. Subsequently, he was elected to the state assembly from Naranpura, where, too, he had a house. “As an ABVP activist, I used to draw the lotus symbol on the walls of Naranpura,” he reminisced at the Vejalpur rally.

Of the seven assembly segments that make up the Gandhinagar Lok Sabha constituency, four—Naranpura, Vejalpur, Ghatlodia and Sabarmati—are predominantly urban and fall under Ahmedabad district. The remaining three—Gandhinagar North, Kalol and Sanand—cover several villages, which, too, are witnessing a rapid urbanisation. Gandhinagar, in fact, remains an exemplar of the BJP’s development plank, with a number of big-ticket infrastructure projects concentrated here, unrivalled by any other urban agglomeration across the country. These include Modi’s two pet projects—GIFT City, which is India’s first and only International Financial Services Centre, and the Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel Sports Enclave in Motera, which also houses the world’s largest cricket stadium named after him. In fact, during his speech at Vejalpur, Shah announced that hosting the 2036 Summer Olympics in Gandhinagar is a ‘Modi ki Guarantee’ even as India is competing with countries such as Germany, Italy, Canada, China and South Korea to host the world’s biggest sporting event.

Opposite the sports enclave, massive concourses are under construction at the Sabarmati Multimodal Transport Hub—home to the terminal bullet train station in Gujarat. Based on Japan’s Shinkansen, the Mumbai-Ahmedabad High Speed Rail (MAHSR) project is estimated to cost Rs 1.08 lakh crore and will reduce the rail travel time between the two terminal hubs from the current 5-7 hours to just over two hours. About 30 kilometres away, Sanand is being developed as an automobile, semiconductor and space manufacturing hub. It’s here that the US chip-

Gandhinagar

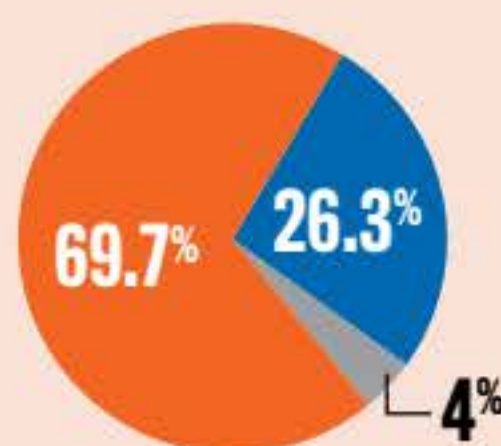


SAFFRON STRONGHOLD

The BJP has never lost the Gandhinagar seat since 1989. Party veteran L.K. Advani won it six times; even former PM A.B. Vajpayee was victorious in 1996 but chose to resign and retain the Lucknow seat instead

LS 2019

- Winner
AMIT SHAH
BJP
- Runner-up
C.J. CHAVDA
Congress
- Others



Figures denote vote share



maker Micron Technology is coming up with its maiden manufacturing facility in India with an investment of Rs 22,500 crore, which is expected to generate 20,000 jobs by 2025. GIFT City, meanwhile, has 550-plus operational entities offering over 26,000 jobs.

But in Shahpur village, adjacent to GIFT City, 65-year-old farmer Ganesh Vaghela paints a contrasting picture on the jobs front. “Locals are unemployed, while outsiders have got jobs in GIFT City,” he rues, sitting outside the gram panchayat office. “Even educated youths only find temporary, blue-collar work earning Rs 10,000-20,000 monthly.” While claiming his village will still vote for the BJP, Vaghela says the government must act faster on jobs and inflation. Even as a similar sentiment is echoed elsewhere too, Shah insists there is no dearth of jobs anywhere in the country, let alone in Gandhinagar. “The government has set up multiple ITIs (industrial training institutes). A mini ITI has come up in Sanand as well to equip local youth with industry-specific skills.... There are ample job opportunities for those willing to work,” he tells INDIA TODAY (*see accompanying interview*).

The BJP’s confidence is bolstered by the perceived lack of a formidable contest in Gandhinagar. Sonal Patel, a 62-year-old architect and All India Congress Committee (AICC) secretary, is the candidate representing the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA). In the past, the Congress had made unsuccessful attempts to breach this saffron bastion by fielding high-profile nominees like actor Rajesh Khanna (1996 bypoll) and former election commissioner T.N. Seshan (1999). Its 2019 candidate, grassroots leader C.J. Chavda, who secured 337,610 votes against Shah’s 894,624, defected to the BJP last

CHANDRADEEP KUMAR



“THERE ARE AMPLE JOBS FOR THOSE WILLING TO WORK”

Amid a gruelling day of road shows and rallies in Gandhinagar, Union home minister **Amit Shah** took a brief respite to sit down for a freewheeling chat with Senior Associate Editor **Jumana Shah**. Dismissing unemployment as a non-issue and voicing confidence in the BJP leadership’s ability to placate the protesting Kshatriyas, Shah says voters in his constituency remain committed to backing PM Narendra Modi. Excerpts:

Q. What are the key issues in Gandhinagar?

A. There are no issues left here. Strengthening Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s hand is the only agenda. Gandhinagar is a highly developed constituency. It has the bullet train (the upcoming Mumbai-Ahmedabad high-speed rail corridor) and metro rail connectivity, the world’s largest cricket stadium (Narendra Modi Stadium) and GIFT City (India’s first and only International Financial Services Centre). We have made a lot of effort to ensure all government schemes are implemented here effectively. There is not a single village that does not get round-the-clock electricity supply. No household is without an LPG connection

or drinking water or ration card. All schemes are saturated here.

Q. The Kshatriya protests are refusing to subside and have in fact spread across the state. How will it impact the BJP?

A. We are talking to the community... they are with us and I am confident that they will not vote against the BJP. Discussions are under way and a resolution will emerge soon.

Q. The BJP witnessed internal protests on half a dozen seats when the candidates were announced. How will that affect the party’s prospects?

A. Workers may have some differences of opinion, but everybody understands that strengthening

Modiji's resolve to make a Viksit Bharat by 2047 is more important than personal issues. All concerns are resolved. We have set a target of winning all 26 seats in Gujarat by a margin of 500,000 votes and we will achieve it.

Q. High unemployment among educated youth and inflation are some of the issues that people are talking about.

A. I do not agree that unemployment is a problem. Industries in Sanand and elsewhere invariably have boards put up to advertise vacancies. If youth want jobs, there are industries willing to give jobs. There are many opportunities to earn...I have acquired data that there are 22,000 delivery persons in Ahmedabad. Are these not jobs?

Q. But the youth are looking for stability and security in jobs. Not just gigs.

A. There are ample job opportunities for those willing to work.

Q. You have promised in your manifesto that the Summer Olympics 2036 will be hosted in Gandhinagar. But why Gandhinagar, when many Indian cities have the potential to host the Olympic Games?

A. Because hosting the Olympics requires elaborate infrastructure and much of it already exists in Ahmedabad-Gandhinagar. The Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel Sports Enclave houses the world's largest cricket stadium. Land is available around it for other infrastructure development...which complements the local economy.

Q. You have campaigned only for a day in your constituency. How will that work for you as a contestant?

A. I have grown up here, this is my home, these are my people. I have been an MLA here for 20 years. I used to paint the lotus (BJP symbol) and stick posters on the walls here. I am here only to give Modiji's message...to strengthen his hand. Our double-engine leadership and panna committee (party workers assigned a page each in electoral rolls to mobilise support) will ensure all voters cast their vote by 10.30 am on the polling day. ■

year and is contesting the simultaneous Vijapur assembly bypoll.

Countering the BJP's core Hindutva plank remains a challenge for Patel, who alleges displaying massive Ram temple hoardings and invoking Lord Ram's name in speeches violates the model code of conduct. The Congress candidate also dismisses Shah's perceived advantage, claiming there's a palpable anti-incumbency sentiment in the constituency. A Leuva Patidar herself, she says the demand for justice over the death of Patidar youths during the 2015-17 quota

candidate has stoked rumblings elsewhere too. With Kshatriyas accounting for 15 per cent of Gandhinagar's voters, state leaders concede that the row could dent Shah's winning margin, potentially costing the party half the community's votes. In Randesan village, local BJP leader Rajendrasinh Vaghela claims: "Traditionally, we voted the BJP en masse, but the Kshatriya issue has cast a shadow this time. We'll see what the community decides." Shah, however, is confident of finding a resolution before the polling day.



“ THE BJP’S CONFIDENCE IS MISPLACED. IT DOES NOT ENJOY UNCONDITIONAL SUPPORT FROM ALL THE COMMUNITIES IT HAS WRONGED SO FAR ”

SONAL PATEL, AICC secretary & party's Gandhinagar candidate

agitation still resonates in Gandhinagar, where the community constitutes 15 per cent of the electorate. Patel also alleges disquiet among women voters, stating: "When our women campaigners go door-to-door in villages, women express dissatisfaction with the government, but are too scared to voice it openly." She is confident, at least, of Kshatriya women voting against the BJP this time.

The Kshatriyas—traditionally the warrior caste—are up in arms after Union minister Parshottam Rupala's controversial remarks in March about members of princely states fraternising with the British imperialists and even marrying their daughters to them. While protests were initially confined to Saurashtra, the BJP's refusal to replace Rupala as its Rajkot

Besides a potential windfall of Kshatriya votes, Sonal Patel is also banking on the Dalit (15 per cent) and Muslim (10 per cent) support. Juhapura, one of the country's largest Muslim ghettos that was once part of the erstwhile Sarkhej assembly seat represented by Shah for 15 years, falls within this constituency. In keeping with its longstanding strategy, the BJP has made minimal Muslim outreach efforts. It has, though, fielded the Union home minister's wife and Patel's namesake, Sonal Shah, to neutralise the Congress candidate's "gender advantage" among women voters through active rural campaigning over recent weeks. With actual victory too tall an order, the question is whether the Congress can make an attempt at a moral victory at least in Gandhinagar. ■



UNDER SIEGE

**ASADUDDIN OWAISI AND HIS AIMIM
ARE FEELING THE PRESSURE IN THEIR
HYDERABAD BASTION**

BY AMARNATH K. MENON

Beginning in the 1950s, and especially over the past four decades, the Owaisis and their All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM) have run an unchallenged political monopoly in Hyderabad. While not losing the Lok Sabha constituency even once since 1984, the party has also done well in the assembly. Even in the November-December 2023 state polls, it won seven seats, largely in the Muslim quarters of the Old City. One of these, Nampally, in fact, falls outside the LS constituency. But this thumbnail sketch, implying total area domination, also conceals a few truths.

The key nuance is that since 2014, the AIMIM vote share in its traditional stronghold has come down in the Telangana assembly election. In fact, in the latest iteration, the party came close to losing two of its sure seats—Nampally and Yakutpura—scraping through in the latter by 878 votes. This is not counting the Goshamahal assembly seat in Hyderabad, which the party has always lost. This is where the controversial Muslim-baiter, T. Raja Singh of the BJP, who has 105 criminal cases against him, has won thrice since 2014.

So, is the AIMIM losing ground? Opinion is divided among Muslims, and that at a time when firebrand party chief Asaduddin Owaisi has dreams of taking the party national. The countervailing fact? While the AIMIM vote share in the assembly is down, the AIMIM supremo has won the Hyderabad LS seat by polling more than 50 per cent of the votes in 2014 and 2019.

FIGHT MODE

AIMIM leader
Asaduddin
Owaisi after
filing his LS
nomination
papers,
Hyderabad,
Apr. 19



ANI

Both times, his main rival was the influential Bhagavanth Rao of the BJP.

This time, the saffron side has fielded a woman, hospital owner Kompella Madhavi Latha. She hit the trail early, even before she had formally joined the party and the election schedule was announced in March, and is looking to consolidate the 230,000-odd catchment votes Rao would get and perhaps try for another 100,000 sympathisers to tilt the scales. Latha has already upped the ante. “I am here to fulfil PM Modi’s mission...he has sent me here to cut someone’s *patang* (kite),” she declared early on. The kite is the poll symbol of the AIMIM. Educationist Gaddam Srinivas Yadav (BRS) and district Congress president Sameer Waliullah are the other candidates in the fight.

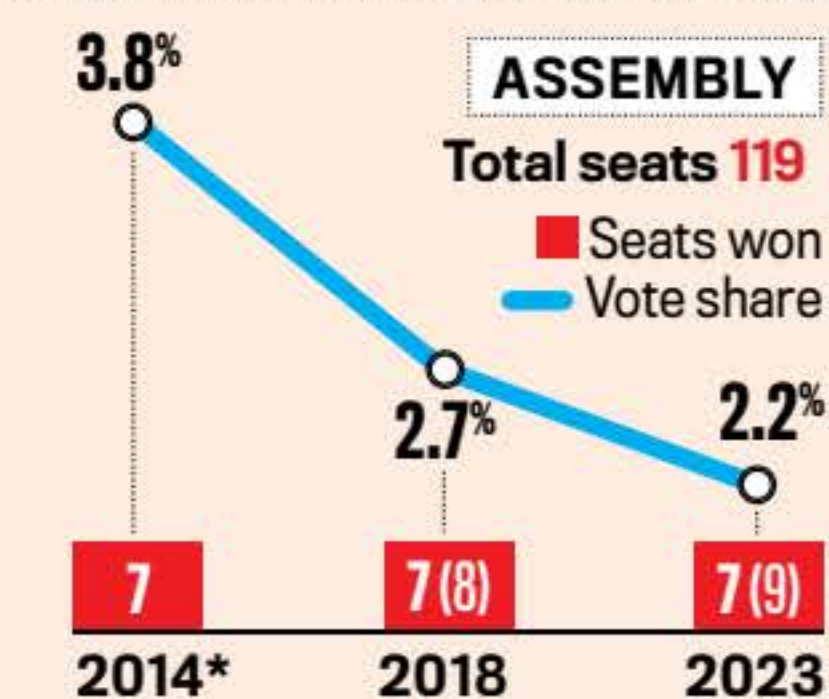
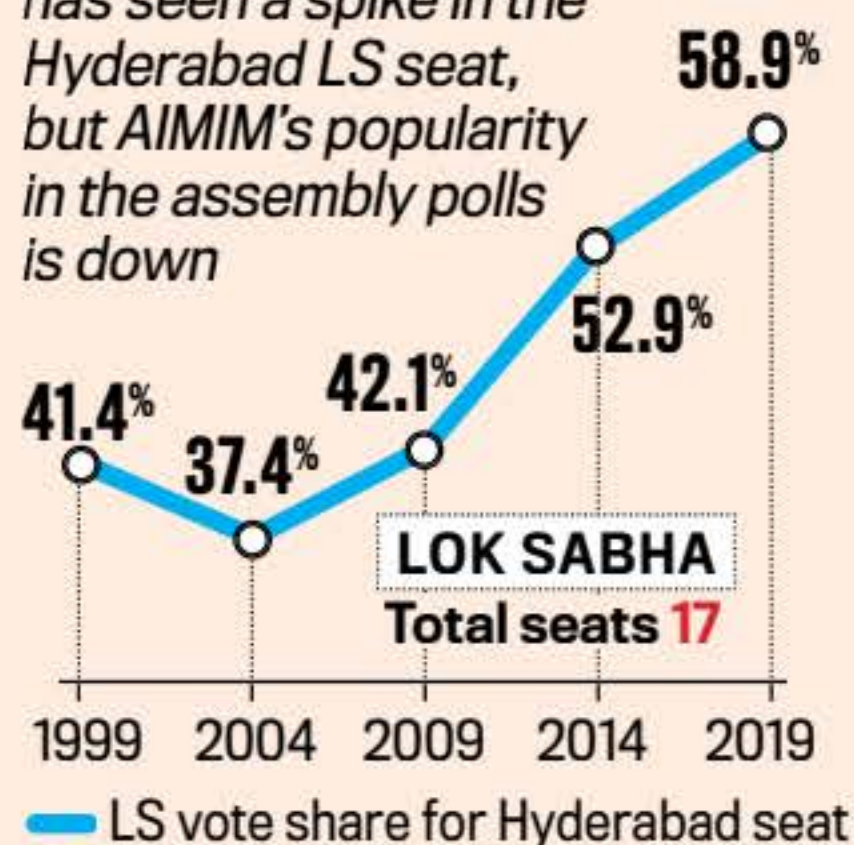
**THE AIMIM BARELY
SCRAPED THROUGH
IN TWO OF ITS
SURE SEATS IN THE
2023 TELANGANA
ASSEMBLY POLL**

However, on April 17, during a Ram Navami procession in the Old City, Latha found herself in a spot when a video of her shooting off an imaginary arrow at the Siddiamber Bazar mosque went viral. Stung by the outcry, Latha was forced to issue an apology on social media platform X. Owaisi, though, was determined to squeeze every ounce of advantage out of the outrage, wondering aloud why the Election Commission was turning a blind eye. “The people of Hyderabad have seen the BJP’s intentions.... Is this the ‘Viksit Bharat’ the BJP is talking about?” he asked. “Elections have their own place. What is more important is the peace of Telangana and Hyderabad...the brotherhood, fraternity prevailing here, which they (the BJP) want to destroy.” On a complaint, the Hyderabad police booked a case of deliberate and malicious intent to “outrage religious feelings” against Latha.

Still, analysts point to various factors behind the AIMIM being under pressure this time. For one, the party and the earlier Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS) government were quite supportive of each other. But the BRS’s electoral

FORTIFIED BASTION

Owaisi's vote share has seen a spike in the Hyderabad LS seat, but AIMIM's popularity in the assembly polls is down



AIMIM has won the same 7 seats in the past three assembly polls in Telangana

*2014 vote share extrapolated from undivided AP poll data, contested seats in ()

fortunes appear to be on a decline. Another is Muslim disaffection; they are staunch supporters, but there is a feeling that the AIMIM is not delivering on all its promises. Then, there's the perception issue. The Karnataka assembly election last year was the fifth in a row in which the AIMIM drew a blank (it had contested two seats). That said, party candidates have won local polls in several states—they even had five MLAs in Bihar, though four decamped later.

The AIMIM is an intriguing political experiment, borne aloft and encumbered by its USP. Though anchored in Muslim identity, it has yet to gain wide acceptance and political legitimacy as the 'party of the Indian Muslim'. The fragmented distribution of the community, which forms 14 per cent of India's population (2011 Census), also makes a pan-Indian Muslim party unviable in the context of a Lok Sabha election.

Yet, there is no other leader who has so consistently raised issues and concerns of the Muslim minority. It's also the only party (except for

the Muslim League or IUML) that gives space to the rising political aspirations of the Muslim youth. Back home in Hyderabad, the perception about the party goes down to brass tacks, assessing what the MLAs and those in local bodies, including the Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation, have done for the community. The verdict: they have not done enough, especially to develop infrastructure in the Old City areas. "The rise in the number of single mothers, increasing cases of substance and alcohol abuse, livelihood worries, all this is making the Muslim poor drift away from electoral politics," says lawyer and social activist Afsar Jahan.

At the national level, there is no denying the "nuisance value" of the AIMIM for fellow anti-saffron formations, especially in areas with a high Muslim concentration. In the 2022 Uttar Pradesh assembly election, the Samajwadi Party lost at least seven seats in close contests when the AIMIM candidates polled more votes than the losing margin. This has led to Opposition parties referring to the AIMIM as the "BJP's B team", and is perhaps also the reason Owaisi has been kept out of the INDIA bloc.

Owaisi's strength is being vocal on issues concerning the "rights of minorities". He says the BJP has only hatred for the minorities, and points to how the party even refuses to mention the word "minorities" in its manifesto. "Just check the BJP's advertisement on April 17 in various newspapers. When they talk about government loans or aid to start a business, it alludes to SC/STs and OBCs. The BJP refuses to even mention the word minorities, forget Muslims," says an indignant Owaisi.

But it's still no excuse for why his own legislators face charges of inaction. Hyderabad has stayed true to Owaisi all these years, but if the murmurs get louder, the AIMIM chief will have reason to worry. ■

► AAM AADMI PARTY

Falling Back on Ram

The party takes recourse to the Lord, promising governance inspired by Ram Rajya ideals

By Avishek G. Dastidar

It's not new from the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), led by 'Ram bhakt' Arvind Kejriwal, but worth noting because god is in the details. It was Ram Navami on April 17. And a perfect occasion for the embattled party, whose supremo has been in judicial custody since March 21, to launch its own vision of Ram Rajya as part of its poll campaign, with a website titled 'AAP ka RamRajya'. Its logo: an image of Kejriwal waving the national flag alongside a sketch of Lord Ram.

The website mostly has YouTube clips of some of Kejriwal's past speeches and interactions with the party's legislators in Punjab, Goa and Gujarat in which they discuss welfare work. It also has video clips of several of the AAP government's flagship schemes like mohalla clinics, free bus tickets to women etc. But the heart of the message is that the party would model its governance on the principles of Ram Rajya—a metaphor for the mythical, utopian rule of the Hindu deity in Ayodhya based on justice, equality and welfare. "The rule of Lord Ram in Ayodhya is considered an ideal model of governance in the world. We are inspired to

▼ **RIGHT TURN?** AAP leaders Saurabh Bharadwaj, Sanjay Singh and Atishi launch the 'AAP ka Ram-Rajya' website in Delhi, Apr. 17



ARUN KUMAR



run our government on those principles," Kejriwal is shown saying earlier this year in a clip.

An astute politician and a sharp communicator, Kejriwal has been invoking Ram for some time now. Around three years ago, much before the Ram temple in Ayodhya was to be a reality, he had elaborated his idea of Ram Rajya in Delhi.

The AAP has been mindfully ambivalent about religion and mostly positioned itself as a welfarist, religion- and caste-agnostic party. But unlike many of his allies in the INDIA bloc, Kejriwal has been steadfastly unwilling to cede the Hindu nationalist narrative entirely to the BJP. He was among the first chief ministers to visit the Ram temple and offer prayers. He recites the Hanuman Chalisa and visits Delhi's iconic Hanuman Mandir often. Recently, his wife Sunita also offered puja there after Tihar Jail authorities allowed the CM access to insulin. A popular scheme of the Delhi government—the Mukhyamantri Tirth Yatra Yojana—has taken senior citizens to the Hindu pilgrimage centres of Haridwar, Puri, Kanyakumari, Dwarkadhish and Ayodhya. So far, 36,000 people have taken part in these government-sponsored trips.

The AAP's outreach this time goes beyond Delhi and Punjab—where it holds power—to include Gujarat, Goa and even Assam. The party has for long years been trying to craft a pan-India message that covers more than just hyper-local planks like free electricity, schools and neighbourhood clinics. "Through this website, we want to send the message to the people of India that, if they vote for the right party, their life will transform," says Atishi, AAP leader and Delhi minister. However, the party is quick to point out that their Ram Rajya vision is different from that of the BJP. "There are two ideas of the Ram Rajya. One is Gandhi's and the other is [Nathuram] Godse's," says AAP leader Saurabh Bharadwaj. "Ours is Gandhi's Ram Rajya, which advocates welfare and secularism."

Clearly, the AAP has devised its entire strategy to leverage Kejriwal's arrest in the Delhi excise policy scam. This has enabled Kejriwal to occupy a significant space in the political conversations in Delhi, which was absent in the previous two Lok Sabha polls.

Soon after being sent to Tihar Jail, Kejriwal is said to have sought three books to read. One of them was the Ramayana. The AAP would like to be known for its welfare schemes. But surely, a sprinkle of Ram on top of that philanthropy may help. ■

A 'MAHARAJA' SEEKS MAJORITY

A WADIYAR RIDES AGAIN—THE BJP HOPES TO MILK REVERENCE FOR OLD ROYALTY, EVEN AS YADUVEER SEEKS THE COMMON TOUCH. BUT THIS IS ALSO SIDDA'S HOMETOWN

By Ajay Sukumaran



MADHUSUDHAN SR

IN

the Swachh Survekshan 2023—an annual cleanliness survey that's been conducted by the Union ministry of housing and urban affairs since 2016—Mysuru was ranked in 23rd position. The slot is quite a tumble for Karnataka's 'City of Palaces', which had been adjudged the cleanest in the country in the survey's inaugural edition and has since been consistently among the top eight cities. It's only logical to assume that the city would be eager to regain

lost ground and, leading by example, is the titular head of the over-600-year-old erstwhile royal family of Mysuru, Yaduveer Krishnadatta Chamaraja Wadiyar. On April 15, a day after a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) mega rally headlined by Prime Minister Narendra Modi was convened on the grounds of the Maharaja College in the city, the 32-year-old scion of the erstwhile royal family was seen at the venue, helping civic workers clean up the place. A graduate from the University of Massachusetts, he was anointed the 27th custodian of the Wadiyars in May 2015. For Yaduveer,

Yaduveer to be seen as a leader who can reach and represent the masses. It was something the BJP candidate stressed on as his open-top campaign vehicle snaked through the villages on the outskirts of Mysuru city on April 20. "My ancestors, too, were born and raised in the palace,



SIDDARAMAIAH HAS THROWN HIS WEIGHT BEHIND CONGRESS'S M. LAKSHMAN IN MYSURU-KOGADU, SAYING "IF LAKSHMAN WINS, IT'S AS GOOD AS ME WINNING"

yet they worked amongst the people. I will follow those same tenets." Mysuru's erstwhile rulers had ushered in a golden age in the region, he said, "In much the same manner, Prime Minister Narendra Modi is heralding a golden age for India. We have to support him."

The Mysuru-Kodagu parliamentary seat has been in the firm grip of the BJP since 2014. In both the past two elections, the party's sitting MP, Pratap Simha, defeated the Congress rival by over 31,000 votes and about 138,000 votes, in 2014 and 2019, respectively. This time, however, the BJP has brought in a fresh face in the constituency with Yaduveer. According to party insiders, fielding Yaduveer in Mysuru is being seen as a masterstroke, given the reverence the locals have for members of the erstwhile royal family.

The 32-year-old is not the first from his family to have tried his luck

in politics. Before him, his grand-uncle Srikantadatta Narasimharaja Wadiyar—whom Yaduveer succeeded as custodian of the Wadiyars—was a four-time Congress MP from Mysuru. The constituency votes for the 2024 Lok Sabha election in the second phase on April 26, and pitted against Yaduveer is the Congress's M. Lakshman who, as a Karnataka Pradesh Congress Committee spokesperson, has been a local face in the region. What the Wadiyar scion needs to contend with, however, is Karnataka chief minister Siddaramaiah. Mysuru—spread across two Lok Sabha constituencies, Mysuru-Kodagu and Chamarajnagar—happens to be the veteran Congress leader's hometown. The CM has thrown his might behind Lakshman and Sunil Bose, the Congress nominee from Chamarajnagar. "If you want to keep Siddaramaiah's credibility intact, you have to give Lakshman a lead," the CM said at a rally on April 3 when the Mysuru-Kodagu candidate filed his nomination. "If Lakshman wins, it's as good as me winning."

While the Congress is banking on its welfare guarantees and Siddaramaiah's popularity in Mysuru, it's equally playing up the caste card, as Lakshman is a member of the dominant Vokkaliga community, believed to be the second largest caste group in Karnataka. Meanwhile, Yaduveer's twin poll planks are heritage and development, which he says are the main concerns in Mysuru. "We want to have a very organic development of this constituency keeping in mind our heritage and Nature and moving forward," he tells INDIA TODAY. "Our village atmosphere and environment also require conservation, but we need all the facilities and development that we have in the city centres as well. So we need to do that jointly and preserve our ancient traditions as well as bring in every modern requirement."

The female vote will be key in deciding the winner, as they are the beneficiaries of the Congress's guarantees, says political analyst Muzaffar Assadi. "It will be a tough fight," he says, since the gap between the two candidates is narrow. ■

REACHING THE MASSES

Yaduveer Krishnadatta Chamaraja Wadiyar campaigns in Chamundeshwari



however, the cleanliness drive could mean more than an effort to restore Mysuru's lost sanitary shine. It is being seen as an attempt by the titular royal to prove wrong detractors who paint the 'Maharaja' in colours of inaccessible elitism since he "stays in a palace". As the BJP candidate for the Mysuru-Kodagu Lok Sabha constituency in the ongoing general election, it is important for

► HIMACHAL PRADESH

KANGANA, NOT 'RUN OUT'



ANI

As very much the native girl who grew up in her family haveli in Bhambla town, **Kangana Ranaut** doesn't have to try hard to switch on the Mandiyali dialect. Donning native attire, traipsing it up to Himachal's temples, doing the *nati* dance with local women...all that comes naturally to the dimpled star with a rapier-like tongue. Getting a bit of star power into politics is an old game. But then, the BJP may have got too much of a good thing happening with its celeb candidate from Mandi—with Kangana, stardom and power get along like a house on fire. It was to be expected that the B'wood A-lister would grab eyeballs among the public and in the media. But it's making life difficult for her poll managers. Partymen want the focus on issues. The crowds want the focus on themselves, posing with Kangana in countless selfies! Shooing them away wouldn't be a smart idea. With all the cameras around, there's also the pressure on her to look perfect. But BJP campaign managers crib that politics is a game where one doesn't always have vanity vans tagging along. Especially with Mandi being such a complex constituency, ranging down from the tribal areas of Barmaur all the way till the foothills of Mandi town. The good signs, BJP leaders say, are that she seems to be a quick learner. ■



MANDATE 2024 | POLLHOUSE |

► JHARKHAND

RISE OF THE FIRST LADY

Lest someone thinks Bihar is letting Hemant Soren live life hi-fi (complete with WiFi), the former Jharkhand CM's tagline on X now carries a disclaimer: "Account managed by wife **Kalpana Murmu Soren**." But of course, anyone who's been keeping an eye on the news knows Kalpana's role now transcends mere social media management; it's been taking on a shape and scale all its own. The INDIA bloc's 'Ulgulan Nyay rally' that she fronted in Ranchi on April 21 reinstalled the sense that the name 'Kalpana Soren' now carves out a small but distinctive niche nationally. She had already attained a degree of visibility at INDIA's Ramlila Ground rally on March

► KERALA

Pinarayi Unpl





31, called to protest Arvind Kejriwal's arrest. She formed a natural sorority with the Delhi CM's wife Sunita—her commiserations to whom carried a ring of honesty—but it was her own turn as the suffering wife that stole the show even then. Dignified, soft but clear in articulation, winsome and earnest by demeanour, if anything, she's probably proving to have more crossover carry than what her rather more saturnine husband may have managed. Imagine the revolutionary Santhal 'Hul' salutations ringing out on the national stage! Kalpana has also emerged as the pivot for the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha's campaign, including for the assembly polls later this year. With Hemant's WiFi looking to be on the blink for a while, big things likely await Kalpana Soren. Watch this space. ■

Illustrations by SIDDHANT JUMDE

ugged

The dour-faced **Pinarayi Vijayan** is often accused of being from the tribe of demagogues of whom it is said that they 'speak softly but carry a big stick'. So he could use a loudspeaker or two. But the sound systems in Kerala seem to be revolting against the chief minister. Whenever he addresses the public or the media, the mics fail—the gremlins have struck so often that it's become an internet meme by now. Microphones started protesting against Pinarayi in July 2023 when he was speaking at a function to commemorate the late Congress leader Oommen Chandy—as they started howling like wolves, he had to discontinue his speech! An overzealous police even registered a case of suspected sabotage against the microphone operator—Pinarayi intervened to get him off the hook. The 'mike strike' continued, though. On April 6, at a campaign rally in Kottayam, that howl picked up again—cutting into fine polemical words at key junctures. Two days later, it happened again as the CM addressed the press at Adoor, in Pathanamthitta district—so Pinarayi went unplugged. Ditto at a presser in Thrissur. "It seems that the problem occurs only when I speak," he said, smiling. We didn't seek any feedback from the mics. ■



► DELHI

Double Teamed

Mahabul Mishra, the 70-year-old Madhubani native, has always had decent traction among the Purvanchali voters who have made the national capital their home. In fact, the INDIA bloc's candidate from West Delhi expresses—in his own curious way—the pooling of votes between the Congress and AAP. He used to be with the Grand Old Party, having even been West Delhi MP in 2009; now he's with AAP. So he ticks the anti-BJP boxes on both sides. Even so, on Ramnavami, he thought it wise to visit the Ram mandir in Ayodhya anyway. ■



► WEST BENGAL

Maachh Fixing?

It must have been during a moment of Zen-like lucidity that a progenitor of the Bengalis coined the phrase ‘*Maachhe bhaate Bangali*’—to fully soak in that near-spiritual phrase, think something like ‘the Bengali soul resides in rice and fish’. Whodathunk in those innocent days that a day would dawn when political piscators would be angling for members of this gentle species while hounding them for their favourite cuisine—in fact, the mainstay for a lot of India, all along its long coastline and all places upriver. When Prime Minister Modi took a dig at Opposition leaders for eating non-vegetarian food during Hindu festivals—doing the usual rally thing from a podium in Udhampur on April

12—his original targets were the Yadav father-son duo Lalu and Tejashwi as well as Rahul Gandhi. The alleged peccancy? Some fried fish Tejashwi had tucked into during Navratri. And a Champaran Mutton that RaGa learnt how to rustle up under Lalu’s expert eye last year. At this stage, Modi probably wasn’t expecting a riposte from Bengal. But here was a chance to project saffronistas as natural foes of Bengalis...would the Trinamool walk past such a rich repast? Deputy sheriff Abhishek Banerjee fired the first shot, claiming Modi had tagged all Bengalis as ‘anti-nationals’ for eating fish. The

unputdownable Mamata Banerjee was quick on the draw too, telling bemused Jalpaigurians on April 16 that the BJP has an aversion towards fish-eaters. As if political discourse hadn’t already turned mustardy enough, a campaign is afoot under the slogan, ‘*BJP Hatao, Maachh Bhaat Khao* (Oust BJP, Eat Fish-Rice)’. An SFI poster had a plate full of non-vegetarian delicacies, punched with the caption ‘*Bangali key niramish dekhatay eso na*’—in effect, ‘Don’t come around trying to vegetarianise Bengalis’. Tejashwi, meanwhile, was seen coolly peeling an orange. Nagpuri, we presume. ■



ALAMY

► GUJARAT

EASE OF DOING POLITICS

Gujarat knows how to do its business in a business-like fashion. On April 22, when we hadn’t even reached the second round of the Big Bout of 2024, the BJP was already 1-0 up in the next Lok Sabha! This happened when party candidate **Mukesh Dalal** won Surat by technical knockout, getting elected unopposed after the Congress’s Niles Kumbhani was disqualified, apparently for ‘forged signatures’ on his nomination papers. A substitute party candidate suffered from the same infirmity. That was not all. The deed was fully accomplished only when, in a synchronised



NIRBHAY KAPADIA

NO CONTEST
Dalal (left) with
Gujarat BJP
chief C.R. Patil

beating the retreat, all the other eight candidates withdrew their nominations on the last day. Meanwhile, even before the Congress could scream “match-fixing” and “traitor”, Kumbhani had gone incommunicado, and is reportedly vacationing in Goa with family even as rumours of his flight to the BJP swirled around. But Operation Lotus may have overplayed its hand this time. Indignant Surties took to social media to blast all parties concerned for leaving them “disenfranchised” and demanding criminal action against Kumbhani if he was found to be a willing accomplice in the charade. ■

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SOUTH INDIA A BEACON OF HIGHER EDUCATION EXCELLENCE



South India, renowned for its rich cultural heritage and diverse traditions, has emerged as a prominent hub of higher education excellence in the last several decades, with a special focus on technical and professional education. The reasons for this are manifold.

Since ancient times, Southern India has been a centre of education. This legacy has now been carried on to the present. Add to that external factors like excellent connectivity, a peaceful socio-cultural milieu and English as the prevalent medium of studies and you have all the makings of a thriving education hub.

Educational institutions in the region pride themselves on excellent standards of education and good placement records. South India's

spend on higher education has been the highest. With high literacy rates, the region also enjoys some of the best Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) and Pupil-Teacher Ratio in India. Cities like Chennai, Coimbatore, Bengaluru, Mysuru and Hyderabad are major educational hubs and both public and private universities offer excellent courses and attract meritorious students. Among the southern states, Tamil Nadu shines prominently as a hub for advanced learning, attracting students from across the nation. As an education hub, Tamil Nadu has always attracted students for the quality of education

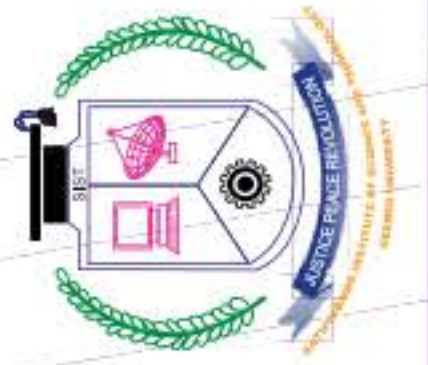
especially in the engineering and technical streams with a proven record in academics, a special focus on inclusive education and outstanding results in job placements across engineering colleges and universities providing good education quality. One of the most literate states in India, Tamil Nadu consistently leads in the NIRF rankings of the top 100 colleges in India and offers degrees in coveted disciplines like Medical, Engineering, Management, Law, Architecture and Mass Communications. According to the recently released All India Survey on Higher Education by the Ministry of Education, Government of India, Tamil Nadu's GER (the number of students enrolled in higher education as a percentage of the eligible population aged 18 to 23 years) was 47 per cent. According to the report, GER is "a key indicator of the level of participation in higher education within a given population. Higher GER values indicate greater enrolment in higher education among the specified age group". For comparison, the all-India average GER was 28.4 per cent in the 2021-22 period. Tamil Nadu has consistently maintained the highest GER among the larger Indian states.

Historical and Cultural Legacy

The roots of South India's prominence in higher education can be traced back to its rich

As an education hub, Tamil Nadu has always attracted students for the quality of education especially in the engineering and technical streams with a proven record in academics, a special focus on inclusive education and outstanding results in job placements across engineering colleges and universities providing good education quality.





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FOCUS EDUCATION



historical and cultural legacy. The region has a long-standing tradition of scholarship, dating back to ancient times when great centres of learning flourished here. Tamil Nadu, in particular, boasts a legacy of intellectual pursuit through its classical literature, art, and architecture, fostering an environment conducive to academic growth.

Robust Educational Infrastructure

One of the key factors contributing to South India's status as a hub for higher education is its robust educational infrastructure. The region is home to a plethora of universities, colleges, and research institutions, offering a wide array of courses across disciplines. These include both public and private universities. Tamil Nadu, with its extensive network of educational institutions, provides students with access to quality education and research facilities, fostering a culture of academic excellence.

Investment in Research and Innovation

South India has made significant investments in research and innovation, positioning itself as a leader in cutting-edge technologies and scientific advancements. The presence of research-oriented institutions and collaborations between academia, industry, and government agencies have propelled the region's reputation

as a centre for innovation and knowledge creation. This emphasis on research not only enhances the quality of education but also contributes to socioeconomic development.

Diversity and Inclusivity

Another factor contributing to South India's appeal as a destination for higher education is its cultural diversity and inclusivity. The region attracts students from different parts of the country and the world, creating a vibrant multicultural environment conducive to cross-cultural learning and exchange of ideas. Tamil Nadu's inclusive ethos and welcoming atmosphere make it an attractive destination for students seeking a diverse and enriching educational experience. The GER in Tamil Nadu

is 47.3% for women and 46.8% for men. Tamil Nadu also has the highest GER among students who identify as SC and ST (39.4 and 43.9 percent, respectively), among the major states.

Strong Academic Leadership

South India's success in higher education can be attributed to the strong academic leadership provided by its institutions and educators. The region boasts of eminent scholars, researchers, and academicians who have made significant contributions to their respective fields. Their expertise, coupled with a commitment to academic integrity and innovation, has propelled South India, particularly Tamil Nadu, to the forefront of higher education globally.

To conclude, South India, stands as a beacon of higher education excellence. The region's rich historical legacy, robust educational infrastructure, investment in research and innovation, cultural diversity, and strong academic leadership collectively contribute to its prominence in the realm of advanced learning. As South India continues to evolve as a hub for higher education, it reaffirms its commitment to fostering intellectual growth, innovation, and inclusive development, and continues to attract talented students from across India to its vibrant higher educational institutions.

The region's rich historical legacy, robust educational infrastructure, investment in research and innovation, cultural diversity, and strong academic leadership collectively contribute to its prominence in the realm of advanced learning.





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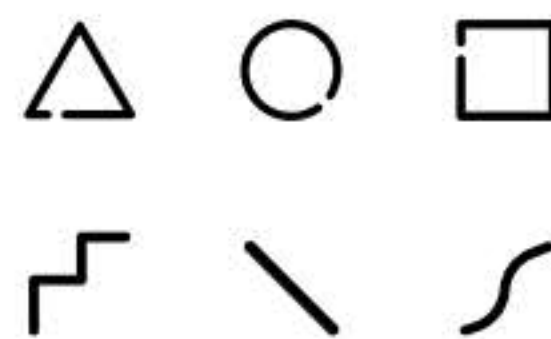
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MODINOMICS— HITS & MISSES

WITH THE STATE OF THE ECONOMY A MAJOR ELECTION ISSUE,
A STOCKTAKING OF THE MODI GOVERNMENT'S ACHIEVEMENTS
AND FAILURES ON KEY ECONOMIC PARAMETERS

By RAJ CHENGAPPA AND M.G. ARUN



THE ADVANTAGE OF DOING ONE'S PRAISING FOR ONESELF IS THAT ONE CAN LAY IT ON SO THICK AND EXACTLY IN THE RIGHT PLACES,' wrote Samuel Butler in his novel, *The Way of All Flesh*. While tabling a White Paper in Parliament this February, which compared Prime Minister Narendra Modi's economic agenda over the past decade with that during Manmohan Singh's tenure, Union minister for finance Nirmala Sitharaman said, "From the Fragile Five (under Manmohan Singh), we moved to the League of Top Five in just above a decade." It is true that the Indian economy has moved from being the tenth largest in the world when Narendra Modi took over from Manmohan Singh in 2014 to now being the fifth largest with a GDP of \$3.7 trillion (Rs 308 lakh crore). And from the depths the Indian economy had sunk to during the Covid-19 pandemic, the Modi government has resurrected it by clocking an impressive 7.6 per cent growth in FY2024. This has made us the world's fastest-growing large economy. Achievements that have become the leitmotif for the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)'s war

cry for Election 2024 and its bid to win a third consecutive majority at the Centre. Referring to himself in the third person, the prime minister in campaign rallies talks of 'Modi ki Guarantee' while enunciating his vision for a Viksit Bharat (Developed India) by 2047, when India will complete a century of Independence. There is also the more immediate promise of becoming the world's third largest economy in the next three years that he says will vastly improve the lives of the poor, the youth, women and farmers if he is given a third term.

Butler's comments about self-praise are apt even when it comes to denouncing others. To counter the BJP's economic pitch, the Congress, the country's main Opposition party, not only simultaneously released a Black Paper where it sought to counter the criticism against Manmohan Singh's economic track record, but also listed the Modi government's "failures", including "high rates of unemployment, economic catastrophes such as demonetisation and GST that have only increased the divide between the rich and poor and devastated the future of millions of farmers and daily wage workers". If the BJP can't stop singing its own praises, the Congress can't stop taking it down in its election campaign, with Rahul Gandhi calling it "a battle for *nyay* (justice) against *dus saal anyay kaal* (10 years of injustice)" and declaring a war on unemployment, rising prices and inequitable growth, turning them into the party's prime economic plank.

The economic discourse, especially over the lack of jobs, inflation and inclusive growth, has indeed emerged as a key factor in Election 2024, with even opinion polls recording its primacy in voter concern. Elections in India are won and lost on many counts, be it emotion, perception, national security, political stability or family and caste considerations, but economic issues

cut across all divides and have on many occasions even determined the outcome. In the wilderness after the Emergency, for instance, Indira Gandhi rode back to power in 1980 using soaring onion prices as one of her main campaign planks to oust the Janata Party government. More recently, Manmohan Singh earned a second consecutive term as prime minister in 2009, after the econ-

Elections in India are won and lost on many a count—emotion, perception, family, caste—but economic issues cut across all divides



THE BIG BOUNCEBACK

A GDP of over 7 per cent despite the pandemic and the wars augurs well for the economy, even though sustaining the momentum could be a challenge

THE POLICY PARALYSIS IN THE FINAL TWO YEARS of the UPA-II government led to the flight of both capital and investments. Perhaps why the NDA's narrative of higher growth, more investment and more jobs—*achhe din*, in short—resonated with the electorate and propelled Narendra Modi to power in 2014. But despite the reforms push to get private investment going and lowering corporate taxes, growth remained moderate in the initial years of the Modi regime. The Covid-19 pandemic was a further setback in its second term, with the GDP plunging to negative territory—right down to -23.9 per cent in the first quarter of FY21, and -5.83 per cent for the year.

The clawback from that economic abyss was slow, with consumer-contact service industries like travel, retail, hospitality and tourism the last to revive. But India did recover, on the back of high government capital expenditure. Growth bounced back to 9 per cent in FY22, albeit on a low base. FY23 provided a better picture of recovery, with GDP growth at 7.2 per cent. The Centre's 'White Paper on the Indian Economy' claims that while the average GDP per capita was \$3,889 (Rs 3.2 lakh) between FY05 and FY14, it was



Illustration by RAJ VERMA

“Consecutive years of 7 per cent growth are a good sign, but growth so far was driven by public investment. That is not sustainable at the same pace in the next two years”

AJIT RANADE, V-C, Gokhale Institute of Politics & Economics

\$6,016 (Rs 4.99 lakh) between FY15 and FY23. A Mumbai-based economist contests it, though, saying the periods can't be compared, “as base years (to

compute GDP data) have changed and the past series are extrapolations and, thus, prone to error”.

Latest government estimates predict 7.6 per cent GDP growth in FY24. A more optimistic Shaktikanta Das, Reserve Bank of India governor, says growth could exceed government expectations, and sustain through FY25. India's chief economic advisor V. Anantha Nageswaran, in his preface to the two-chapter 'The Indian Economy - A Review' thinks likewise. “If the prognosis for FY25 proves right, that will mark the fourth year post-pandemic the



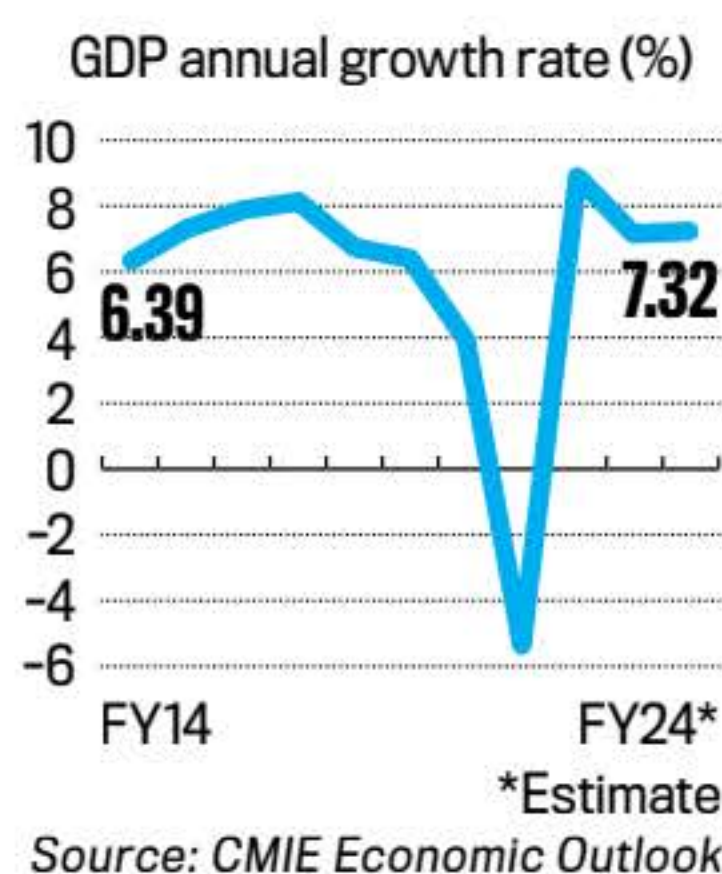
Unequal Benefit

While the organised sector turned a corner, the unorganised sector continues to lag, accounting for the K-shaped growth

omy recorded one of its highest ever average GDP growth figures. It was also an endorsement of the massive welfare schemes he had launched, including the flagship Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). Modi, too, has staked his claim for a third term on the basis of "Sabka Saath, Sabka

ABYSS AND AFTER

Covid derailed India's growth story, but India has climbed its way back up



Indian economy will have grown at or over 7 per cent, testifying to the resilience and potential of the Indian economy."

Economists applaud the achievement, but say more needs to be done. "Two consecutive years of 7 per cent growth is a good record and a good sign," says Ajit Ranade, vice chancellor, Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics, "considering we were up against recessionary events and a war. The growth so far has been a lot driven by public investment. That is not sustainable at the same pace in the next two years. Private investment has to replace public investment."

External factors pose a threat too, chiefly the wars in Ukraine and West Asia and the disruptions in the Red Sea. ■

-M.G. Arun

IT IS BY NOW CLEAR THAT, AMONG LARGE ECONOMIES, India is the lone bright spot.

However, many economists believe the country's recovery post-Covid is K-shaped—where growth in the demand of premium goods, driven by higher spending by the affluent segment of society, far outstrips the demand for the mass market goods. The government rejects this view, as do some experts.

This dichotomy is evident in the Index of Industrial Production (IIP), which measures growth rates of various industrial sectors. It has increased from 3.3 per cent in FY14 to 5.9 per cent in FY24 (till Jan.), primarily driven by growth in infrastructure, steel and cement spurred by government spending. However, consumer-led industries such as consumer durables and non-durables (food, apparel, groceries etc.) are seeing low or even negative growth. Premium product categories in automobile, real estate, apparel, consumer

“The unorganised sector still has not reached the pre-pandemic level of business, operating at a phased-down level. Hence, employment remains low, impacting earnings and rural demand”

-SUNIL KUMAR SINHA, Senior Director, India Ratings & Research

durables are growing much faster, whereas mass segment products—a much larger market—are either stagnant or are de-growing. Auto sector sales mirror this trend, with sales of compact cars such as hatchbacks experiencing a 42 per cent decline, and sub-Rs 20 lakh SUVs seeing a 25 per cent surge in sales.

Sunil Kumar Sinha, senior director of India Ratings & Research, attributes this to the formal sector making a healthy recovery post-Covid from the repeated blows of demonetisation, introduction of GST, and then the pandemic, and the unorganised sector unable to do so. An analysis by the rating agency shows that wages for corporates, representing the top 50 per cent of the income bracket, increased by over 10 per cent in the past two years—by 11.6 per cent in FY22 and by 10.7 per cent in FY23. However, lower income brackets, comprising of agricultural rural workers and unskilled workers in urban areas, witnessed negative or no-wage growth. Minimum wage for unskilled workers in urban areas reduced by 3 per cent in FY22 and by 0.55 per cent in FY23, whereas agricultural income, a proxy for rural wages, reduced by 3.4 per cent in FY22 and grew by just 1 per cent in FY23. This duality in the Indian economy will increase inequality and imperil sustainable growth in the near future. ■

-Sonal Khetarpal

SEPARATE WORLDS

Real Wage Growth in urban and rural areas

	NON-FINANCIAL PRIVATE CORPORATES (TOTAL WAGES)	RURAL/AGRI WAGES	URBAN (MINIMUM WAGES)
FY22			
Q1	10.5	-6.6	-3.1
Q2	12.7	-3.3	-2.7
Q3	10.7	-1.5	-3.1
Q4	12.5	-2.3	-3.6
Avg.	11.6	-3.4	-3.1
FY23			
Q1	11.3	0.1	-4.2
Q2	10.3	-0.3	-4
Q3	12	2.6	3
Q4	9.5	1.7	3
Avg.	10.7	1.02	-0.6

Source: India Ratings & Research



CHANDRADEEP KUMAR

“ Food inflation is a problem. The food basket has 45 per cent weightage in CPI. Agriculture has been underperforming ”

—D.K. JOSHI,
Chief Economist, Crisil

A STORM WEATHERED

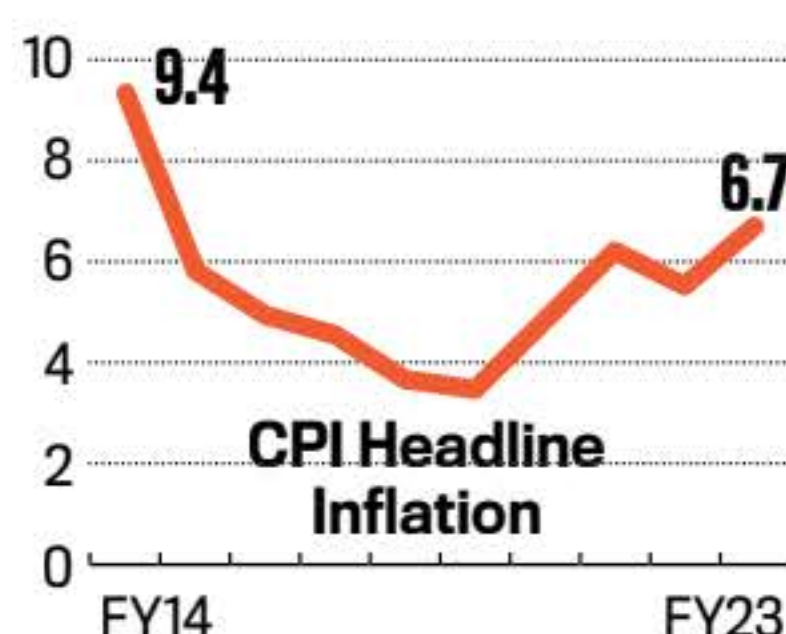
Policy measures and repo rate increases have helped India navigate the pandemic and war-fuelled price rise

HIGH PRICES HAVE BEEN A BUGBEAR FOR THE Narendra Modi government since 2014. The pandemic and the current conflagrations in Ukraine and West Asia made things worse in its second term.

Though multiple measures by the RBI and the Centre ensured consumer price index (CPI) inflation held at 5 per cent between 2014-15 and 2022-23 on average, inflation shot up to 7.2 per cent in April 2020 and peaked to 7.6 per cent that October, well above the RBI's 6 per cent limit. While the central bank was forced to keep interest rates low during the pandemic to boost consumption, the imperative reversed from May 2022 onwards. The RBI hiked the repo rate (at which it lends to commer-

THE PRICE PATTERN

Annual inflation in the Modi years has been 5 per cent on average



Annual inflation is the average of the monthly inflation rates during the year

Source: CMIE Economic Outlook

cial banks) by 2.5 percentage points—from 4 per cent in May 2022 to 6.5 per cent in February 2023; it remains unchanged even though inflation has eased. The Centre, meanwhile, reduced excise duty on petrol and diesel, prohibited wheat export, imposed duty on rice export and maintained buffer stocks for onion and pulses. While fuel inflation has been under check due to fears of a slowdown in global markets and the war, and core inflation (which excludes food and fuel) is down as input costs are moderating, food inflation remains a worry. That is because, as D.K. Joshi, chief economist with Crisil, explains, “The food basket has about 45 per cent weightage in CPI. Agriculture has been underperforming.” Average annual inflation between FY14 and FY23 declined to 5 per cent from 8.2 per cent between FY04 and FY14. CPI inflation stood at 5.09 per cent in February, within the RBI's 2-6 per cent tolerance band for the sixth consecutive month. However, RBI governor Shaktikanta Das has ruled out any further reduction in interest rates, holding on to the rate in its April 5 review. ■

—M.G. Arun

Vikas, Sabka Vishwas”, that devolves on development, inclusion and trust.

As claims and counterclaims about the economy—its progress or the lack thereof—fly thick and fast in the campaign pitches of both the ruling and the Opposition alliance, INDIA TODAY decided to shun the rhetoric and embark on a realistic assessment of the Modi government's track record on key pa-

If rights-based entitlements defined Manmohanomics, Modinomics is about fiscal prudence and investment-led development

rameters. Spanning both terms of the prime minister, they include both hits and misses, all documented and analysed in these pages.

“Rather than being just black or white, the truth about India's economic progress under the Modi government has plenty of shades of grey,” says Subhash Chandra Garg, a former Union finance secretary in the Modi govern-

PRAMOD RAGHAV

LEADING REVOLUTIONARY CHANGES INSPIRED BY PM MODI'S IDEALS

In a world often driven by self-interest, Pramod Raghav stands out as a beacon of integrity and compassion. His noble efforts are inspired by the Prime Minister of India, Mr. Narendra Modi. With a keen business acumen and a deep sense of empathy, he embodies the vision for a progressive and inclusive India.

As the founder of Niswarth Kadam, Pramod spearheads a mission closely aligned with the cultural values and unity represented by the Ram Temple, under the guidance of our Prime Minister. Driven by a strong sense of empathy and a desire to help others, he started Niswarth Kadam to uplift those in need.

Having witnessed the challenges faced by marginalized communities, Pramod committed himself to enhancing the welfare of every citizen. Over time, his ambition expanded to include various societal issues such as education, healthcare, women's empowerment, and environmental conservation. After all, these initiatives resonate deeply with the Prime Minister's vision of "Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas."

EDUCATION A TOP PRIORITY

Known for his amiable personality, Pramod's most notable contribution lies in the field of education, reflecting Prime Minister Modi's commitment to enhancing the skill set of India's youth. By constructing schools in underserved areas like Samalkha in Haryana and initiating a Vedic girls' Gurukul in Rajasthan, he has ensured that education reaches every corner of the country.

A COMMITMENT TO BROADER SOCIETAL IMPROVEMENTS

In addition to education, Pramod is actively engaged in enhancing healthcare, women's empowerment, and environmental conservation. Inspired by PM Modi's Start Up India and Mudra schemes, he prioritizes initiatives that support self-employment for women. Through these efforts, Pramod not only creates job opportunities but also empowers women to become self-reliant and economically independent.

PHILANTHROPY IN TIMES OF CRISIS

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Pramod's charitable efforts showcased his unwavering commitment to community service. Collaborating with NGOs and the government, he ensured that aid reached those in dire need.

COMMITMENT TO ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

In addition to raising awareness about the environment and speaking out against harmful products, Pramod supports

initiatives like PM Modi's Swachh Bharat mission and Atmanirbhar Bharat campaign. By promoting activities like taking selfies with trees and saying no to plastic, he encourages eco-friendly habits that are crucial for securing a better future.

PROFIT WITH PURPOSE

In his business endeavors, Pramod not only focuses on generating profit but also works tirelessly towards the betterment of society. By providing jobs and caring for the environment, he aligns his actions with PM Modi's goals of "Ease of Doing Business" and "Ease of Living," demonstrating a commitment to both economic success and social responsibility. Pramod explains, "In our business ventures, we focus not only on making money but also on improving society. We ensure that our work leads to positive changes in society and benefits the environment. Alongside earning profits, we continually seek opportunities to assist the community."

His goal is to advance selfless efforts in alignment with PM Modi's vision for India's growth and development. By focusing on areas like education, healthcare, and environmental conservation, Pramod Raghav is actively working to bring about positive changes in society, paving the way for a brighter future for India.



ment. For any prime minister to make a lasting impact on the economy, Garg believes a leader's core agenda for a developing country like India must tick three main boxes. The first is transforming

the structure of the economy in terms of interrelationships between government and business as well as domestic and foreign investors to ensure rapid economic growth. The second is the redistribution of resources in favour of the poor to ensure equitable and inclusive growth. And the third is the leader's ability to leverage

the rapid technological changes to further growth while respecting environmental imperatives for sustainable development.

In addition to these, say experts, every prime minister brings his or her own personal philosophy, ideology and conviction to bear on economic policy, thus making comparisons difficult. So, 'Manmo-

MISS UNEMPLOYMENT

Where are the Jobs?

An increase in the employment rate is on account of self-employment, which includes unpaid labour

THE PROMISE OF ONE CRORE JOBS TO THE country's youth had been a main plank of the Narendra Modi-led BJP in the run-up to the 2014 election. On the eve of a third bid at power, the prime minister is claiming that the unemployment rate in the country is at its lowest in the past six years.

On the surface, the unemployment rate, which measures the percentage of unemployed individuals over age 15 in the labour force, has declined from 6 per cent in 2017-18 to 3.2 per cent in 2022-2023, according to the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS). However, as labour economist K.R. Shyam Sundar, adjunct professor at MDI Gurgaon, points out, "Ground realities suggest an increase in poor quality of jobs—self-employed labour, contract workers, fixed employment workers."

Thus, of the 58 per cent who are employed or seeking work, 57.3 per cent are self-employed. A majority could be working as unpaid helpers in household enterprises (18.3 per cent) or running an unskilled small business (39 per cent) such as street vendors or tea stall/paanwala, work that ranks low on the job quality index. The remaining 21.8 per cent are casual labour. Regular salaried jobs, considered high-quality jobs due to benefits like insurance,

AATMANIRBHAR PANGS

A majority of India's working population is engaged in some form of self-employment

2022-23	57.3	20.9	21.8
2021-22	55.8	21.5	22.7
2020-21	55.6	21.1	23.3
2019-20	53.5	22.9	23.6
2018-19	52.1	23.8	24.1

■ Self-employed (%)
■ Regular wage/ salary earners (%)
■ Casual labour (%)

Source: Periodic Labour Force Survey; data in usual status for persons, 2022-23 refers to the period July 2022 – June 2023 and likewise for other years

pension etc., constitute just 20.9 per cent. Also, as Sundar points out, "While 12 million Indians enter the workforce every year, the salaried jobs are not keeping pace with the rising population, leading to rise in self-employment." Salaried workers have declined from 21.1 per cent in 2020-21 to 20.9 per cent in 2022-23; self-employed workers have risen from 55.6 per cent to 57.3 per cent in the same period. The

“ Ground realities suggest an increase in poor quality of jobs—self-employed labour, contract workers, fixed employment workers. The government can't assert it has addressed the macro-level employment problem ”

—K.R. SHYAM SUNDAR
Adjunct professor, MDI Gurgaon

problem of informality and lack of good quality jobs is also highlighted in the recently-released 'India Employment Report 2024', published by the Institute for Human Development (IHD) and the International Labour Organization (ILO).

It is a vicious circle. As experts say, enough jobs have to be created for consumption growth. Only if consumption growth is booming will companies' capacity utilisation improve, and they will invest more. Trouble is, thanks to the K-shaped growth, consumption is not picking up sufficiently.

The way forward for the government would be to implement a national employment policy, the ILO convention on which India had ratified way back in 1961. Acknowledging the problem is the first step in fixing it. ■

—Sonal Khetarpal



AFTAB ALAM SIDDIQUI



DR. NEELAM MOHAN

Dr. B.C. Roy National Awardee
Senior - Director Department of Pediatric Gastroenterology,
Hepatology & Liver Transplantation
Medanta The Medicity, Gurugram
www.drneelammohan.com

WORLD LIVER DAY

World Liver day is an annual event observed on 19th April and is dedicated to increasing awareness about importance of liver health. In India, 4 lakh people die annually due to liver related diseases. Nearly 20,000 people need liver transplantation in India for advanced liver diseases (10% of these are children), while we are performing 4000 liver transplants annually. With rising incidence of obesity and diabetes in adults and children, Indians are at a major risk for metabolic associated fatty liver disease, resulting in cirrhosis and liver cancer.



Q: What's the theme of World Liver Day 2024?

This year, 2024, The World Liver Day theme is "*Be Vigilant, Get Regular Liver Check-Ups, and Prevent Fatty Liver Diseases*". Liver is essential organ that performs over 500 functions including processing of nutrients, filtering toxins, storage of glucose, vitamins, minerals, fats, synthesizing several important proteins, and improving immunity besides producing bile to digest fats.

Q: What is fatty liver disease? What does it lead to?

Fat is normally present in liver however if it is more than 5 to 10 percent of liver weight, then it is called fatty liver disease (FLD). Indians have a tendency to central obesity and one in 3 develops fatty liver disease. Inflammation sets in 20-30% of FLD resulting in fibrosis, cirrhosis and liver cancer. Co-morbidities associated with FLD include type 2 diabetes, hyperlipidemia, hypertension, and coronary artery disease. These liver disorders often produce no symptoms initially, thus are often missed and present more than a decade later in advanced stage. The disease progression depends of a combination of genetic and environmental factors. Therefore, it is extremely important for us to undergo 'Regular Liver Check-Ups' and nib the disease in early stages.

Q: Do we see fatty liver disease in children too?

Fatty liver disease in children could be related to multiple

causes such viral hepatitis, several inborn errors of metabolism besides metabolic fatty liver disease related to overweight and obesity like in adults. One fifth of children globally are overweight and obese and at high risk for fatty liver disease. India is experiencing an alarming increase in obesity in children, recent statistics of 2020 reveal 12.5 million children are overweight and obese. The culprit is a change in the life style of our children with increase in screen time, reduced physical activity, increased consumption of processed high calorie junk foods. Evidence shows that 80% of obese adolescent children move on to be obese adults. It's high time for all of us to "Be Vigilant," prioritize healthcare, raise awareness, and promote preventive measures and safe guard the health of our children to ensure a bright future for generations to come. The focus lies on "*Preventing Fatty Liver Diseases*".

Q: Can fatty liver disease be reversed?

Research suggests that losing weight is the single best way to reverse or control metabolic associated fatty liver diseases called NAFLD/MAFLD. A good goal is to loose 10% of your total body weight while even a 5% can start improving liver health. Weight reduction resulting from a healthy diet in association with exercise is more effective in improving liver health.

Q: You have been a pioneer in setting up liver transplantation in India . How has been your journey so far?

I pioneered the development of pediatric liver transplants and advanced pediatric liver care in our country and with humility and gratitude share that I have been decorated with prestigious 'Dr. B.C. Roy National Award' for the same. We run one of the busiest liver transplantation program in India and have trained several youngsters who now practice across the country, I feel my journey of setting pediatric liver transplants in India has been truly rewarding. However, I am extremely happy to share that my focus is equally on various community based projects such as obesity, fatty liver disease, anemia and nutritional issues in children etc. through various government and non profitable organizations like IMA and Indian Academy of Pediatrics (IAP). In fact this year theme of IAP is "*IAP Ki Baat Community Ke Sath*" where focus lies on raising mass awareness through pediatricians pan India.

Q: How to keep your liver healthy?

Maintain a healthy weight through a balanced diet rich in protein, fiber, and antioxidants and incorporate regular exercises into your routine to support overall health. Avoidance of processed foods, sugar sweetened beverages/ juices and fried foods is the way forward. Minimize stress levels, avoid alcohol, smoking, and drug abuse, refrain from self-medications and illicit substances. Vaccination against hepatitis is recommended, and it's crucial to take precautions to prevent the risk of exposure to unprotected sex and contaminated needles, particularly during body piercing, dental procedures, nail filing, tattooing, and in healthcare settings. I would like to re-emphasize this year's theme "*Be Vigilant, Get Regular Liver Check-Ups, and Prevent Fatty Liver Diseases*".

hanomics' was focused on rights-based economics that worked towards ensuring entitlements for the individual, especially those belonging to the weaker sections. 'Modinomics' is about ensuring fiscal prudence, with massive investment-led development and welfare schemes. It is also about harnessing technology to ensure that beneficiaries get cash transfers directly rather than via intermediaries, making delivery efficient and free of corruption. A clear thread unites Modi's actions and schemes, all of which add up to a larger gameplan that may not be evident at first but reveals itself once all the parts are in place.

In his interview to INDIA TODAY in January, the prime minister talked of exactly this "progressive unfolding"

The JAM trinity helped bank the unbanked, directed cash benefits into their accounts and made India a global leader in digital public infrastructure

of his vision. And one of the examples he cited was the massively successful public digital infrastructure that his government had instituted. In his first term, Modi had launched a major drive to bank the unbanked through the Jan Dhan scheme, which saw over 500 million people open bank accounts. He then followed it up with directing the cash transfers for sundry government welfare schemes into these beneficiary accounts with the Aadhaar card as the basis of identification and the mobile number for digital payments. Called the JAM or Jan Dhan, Aadhaar and Mobile trinity, it has proved to be a game-changer, with these accounts boasting over Rs 2.32 lakh crore as their current balance.

THE MORALE BOOSTERS

Air India's sale and LIC's debut on the bourses signal a promising trajectory for India's privatisation goals



AP

A Slow Going

Despite ambitious plans of outright asset sale or privatisation, the government has fallen short of meeting its asset monetisation target, facing hurdles in implementation

A CATCHY PHRASE THAT HAD RESONATED WITH THE ELECTORATE when Prime Minister Narendra Modi took over in 2014 was "minimum government and maximum governance". It was widely expected at the time that the government would cede control of some key public sector assets through outright sale of equity, or bring in more private par-

ticipation into the operation and management of such assets and enterprises to make them more productive and profitable. But there was precious little the government achieved in its first term, spending much of its energies on welfare schemes for the rural poor to counter the Opposition jibe of being a 'suit-boot ki sarkar'.

In August 2021, finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced

FOR A GOVERNMENT THAT HAD no luck with its disinvestment plans, two events changed the unhappy course towards more positive tidings. In October 2021, the Tata Group made a winning bid to acquire Air India, offering Rs 18,000 crore as the enterprise value for the airline. In May 2022, the Life Insurance Corporation of India (LIC) came forward with its Rs 21,000 crore initial public offering (IPO), the largest to date on the Indian bourses.

The Tatas acquired Rs 15,300 crore of Air India's debt and will pay the remaining Rs 2,700 crore in cash to the government. The deal fructified at a time most economies had opened up after a debilitating pandemic. Air India had accumulated losses of Rs 70,820 crore as of March 31, 2020. Its debt stood at Rs 61,562 crore on August 31 that year. "Air India's privatisation is a game changer. We have two principal players now—Air India and IndiGo—with over 85 per cent market share in domestic traffic, and well capitalised," Amber Dubey, senior advisor, McKinsey & Company, said at an INDIA TODAY conclave in November 2023. Domestic



air passenger traffic rose by 4.7 per cent year-on-year in January 2024 to 13 million. In June 2023, Air India signed pacts to buy 470 new planes from Airbus and Boeing for an estimated \$70 billion (Rs 5.8 lakh crore).

LIC GOES PUBLIC

After delaying disinvestment in LIC for years, the Centre sold its 3.5 per cent stake in the insurance behemoth in an IPO that was worth Rs 21,000 crore. LIC manages Rs 45.5 lakh crore in total assets and 277 million individual policies. On January 17, less than two years after its debut on the stock exchanges, LIC became India's most valued company in the public sector with a market capitalisation of over Rs 5.75 lakh crore. On that day, LIC shares crossed its listing day price of Rs 904 for the first time.

However, other big divestment plans such as those of IDBI Bank, Bharat Petroleum Corporation, Container Corporation of India, Pawan Hans and Shipping Corporation of India are still hanging fire. Analysts expect the government to miss the target of Rs 61,000 crore for FY24 by Rs 20,000-30,000 crore. "There are challenges in implementation. The government could not go beyond LIC. By now, all the low-hanging fruit has already been plucked," says Madan Sabnavis, chief economist at the Bank of Baroda. The incoming government has its task cut out. ■

the National Monetisation Pipeline, which would allow the private sector to operate key infrastructure projects for 15-30 years or more. Asset monetisation, where government-owned assets are long-leased to private parties to operate them for an upfront fee, was an obvious 'low-hanging fruit' and perceived to be easier to implement than any outright asset sale or privatisation. The idea was to raise Rs 6 lakh crore over the next four years (FY22-25) to fund the government's ambitious infrastructure plans, bridge its yawning deficit and

“Many projects (earmarked for monetisation) involve criss-crossing involvement of several agencies, so untangling them would not be easy”

—MADAN SABNAVIS, Chief Economist, Bank of Baroda

revive private investment. Fourteen sectors, including roads, railways, power transmission, natural gas pipelines, telecom, warehousing, mining, aviation

and ports, were identified for this. In FY22, assets worth Rs 88,000 crore were monetised, but in FY23, it was only Rs 26,000 crore against the target of Rs 1.6 lakh crore, according to NITI Aayog. "In many cases, it seems not enough thought has gone into how the monetisation process would be implemented," says Madan Sabnavis, chief economist with Bank of Baroda. "Many projects involve criss-crossing involvement of several agencies, so untangling them would not be easy."

A recent media report citing a senior government official said the ministry of road transport and highways had raised Rs 40,314 crore through various modes of asset monetisation in FY24 against the target of Rs 28,968 crore. The National Highways Authority of India's total asset monetisation programme, he added, had crossed Rs 1 lakh crore. To meet the overall target, though, speed will be of the essence. ■

—M.G. Arun

₹ **6 lakh** CRORE

Aggregate monetisation potential of the Centre's brownfield infra assets over four years, as per the plan

₹ **1.14 lakh** CRORE

Value of assets monetised in FY22 and FY23, 19 per cent of the total targeted

14

Sectors identified for monetisation, including roads, railways, power transmission, natural gas pipelines, telecom, aviation and ports



MANEESH AGNIHOTR

ZOOMING AHEAD

The Modi government pulled the infrastructure sector out of the morass it was in. This is reflected in the eye-popping numbers and rise in global rankings

S **OOON AFTER ASSUM-**
ING OFFICE IN 2014,
Prime Minister Na-
rendra Modi made it
clear that his government's vision
for infrastructure, especially in
roads, railways, ports and ship-
ping, involved breaking the cycle of
under-investment that had plagued
these critical sectors for years. A
decade on, India now has a 2,500-
km Dedicated Freight Corridor
(DFC) on which goods move with
double the speed of a conventional
rail network. Meanwhile, the Vande
Bharat trains offer better comfort
and faster travel to passengers.

The railways saw annual average capital expenditure of Rs 1.3 lakh crore in the last decade, three times what it was in the 2009-14 period. Total capex in the railways has seen some Rs 15 lakh crore in investments, including Rs 2.4 lakh crore this fiscal. Some 26,000 km of new tracks have been laid since 2014, at a rate of 7.8 km per day. Around 60,814 km of track, or over 90 per cent of the broad gauge routes, is now electrified (over 37,000 km in the last decade).

ON A FAST TRACK

Infrastructure has not seen such growth ever

RAILWAY TRACK LAID (KM)

2004 - 2014



2014-2023



ELECTRIFIED (ROUTE KM)

2004 - 2014

5.188



2014-2023

37,000+

ROADS (KM)

Total length of national highways

2014

91,287 (₹31,300 cr)

2024

146,000 (₹2.8

Govt. investment in ()

PORTS & SHIPPING

800

MMT annual cargo volume handled; **43%** increase from 2013 levels



22

India's rank in International Shipment category, up from **44** in 2014

Source: Gol data

The highways sector, headed by Union minister Nitin Gadkari since 2014, continues to make headlines for the pace of construction, which stands at 30 km a day now. In the past decade, the country's national highways network has gone up from 91,287 km to 1.46 lakh km and the government's investment is up almost 10-fold to Rs 2.78 lakh crore (2024-25). Some of the flagship highway corridors include the Delhi-Mumbai Expressway, Delhi-Meerut Expressway, the Atal tunnel in Himachal Pradesh and the renamed S.P. Mookerjee tunnel linking Jammu and Kashmir—all providing all-weather connectivity around the year.

A similar story played out in ports and shipping. The ambitious Sagarmala project has seen 'port-led' development involving modernisation of existing ports and building of last-mile connectivity. The result: annual volume of cargo handled has increased by 43 per cent from 2013 levels to cross 800 million metric tonnes (MMT) now. Annual capacity doubled to 1,617 MMT in the same period.

The number of operational inland waterways is also up, from eight in 2013 to 24 now and, as a result, the annual volume of cargo handled on them too has risen, from 6.9 to 126.2 MMT—a massive 1,731 per cent. India now ranks 22nd in the International Shipment category, as against 44th in 2014.

Meanwhile, the National Infrastructure Pipeline (NIP)—the comprehensive plan for investing in various core-sector projects like roads, railways, energy and urban development—to upgrade the country's infrastructure has seen around Rs 100 lakh crore pumped in between 2019 and 2025. Launched in 2019, the NIP now has 9,288 projects under way with an outlay of Rs 109 lakh crore. ■

-Avishek G. Dastidar



Far Below Expectations

At some 14 per cent of GDP, manufacturing has failed to make headway despite the efforts of the Modi regime

DURING THE UPA YEARS, the share of manufacturing as a percentage of GDP was around 16 per cent on average despite efforts such as the New Manufacturing Policy. From 2014-22, this figure has hovered around the 14 per cent mark, as per World Bank estimates. In 2023, the contribution from manufacturing, which employs 27.3 million workers, was 17 per cent, according to Union minister for petroleum, housing and urban affairs Hardeep Singh Puri, which the government plans to increase to 25 per cent by 2025, through measures such as the production linked incentive (PLI) scheme.

First announced in 2020 targeting 14 key sectors, the PLI scheme, with an outlay of Rs 1.97 lakh crore, aimed to create manufacturing champions, six million new jobs and

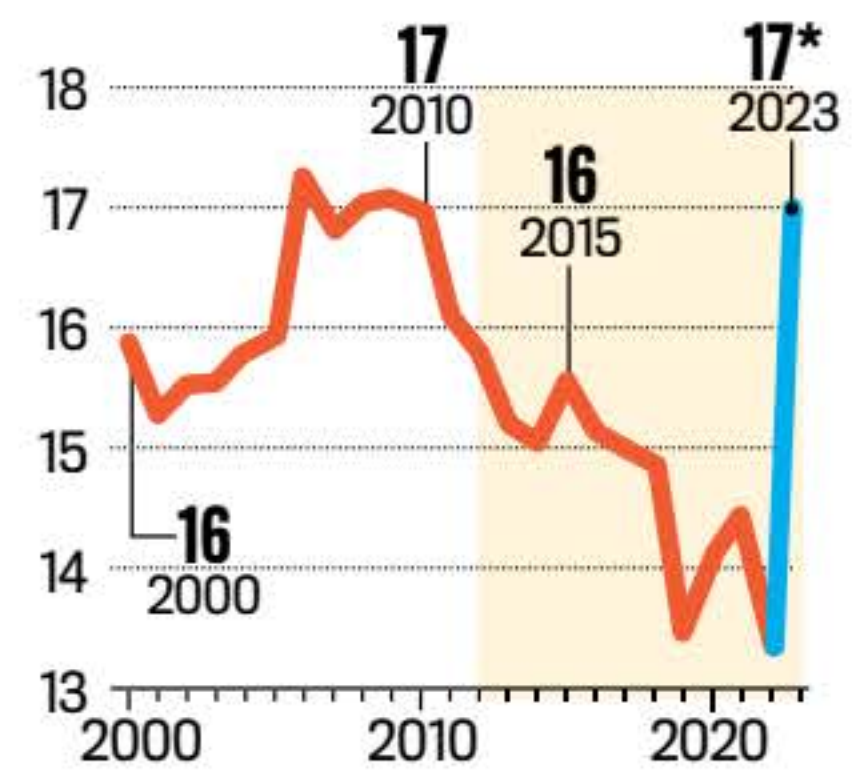
added production worth Rs 30 lakh crore over five years. The sectors included mobile manufacturing and specified electronic components, drug intermediaries and active pharma ingredients, medical devices and automobiles and auto components, among others. The Centre claims the incentives have boosted electronics manufacturing, especially mobile handsets, but critics like ex-RBI governor Raghuram Rajan say the scheme has only lavished subsidies on manufacturing firms. Earlier this year,



MANDAR DEODHAR

BRAKING GAME

Manufacturing, value added (% of GDP)



Source: World Bank; *2023 data according to central estimates

the Centre said the scheme has led to over Rs 1 lakh crore investments till November 2023, with exports surpassing Rs 3.2 lakh crore.

Indian manufacturing faces many challenges, including the maze of regulations, high logistics costs, lack of finance, lack of innovation and skills, to name a few. "Ease of doing business has changed relatively little from a decade ago," says Naushad Forbes, co-chairperson, Forbes Marshall. The regulations logjam, be it the new Sebi disclosure guidelines for publicly listed firms or the Company Law requirements for private sector firms, can still be intimidating. The PLI scheme has attracted a reasonable amount of investment, but the real test will be how companies fare once the subsidies dry up. ■

-M.G. Arun

India also emerged as a global leader in digital public infrastructure, with e-transactions surging to 134 billion last year, accounting for 46 per cent of all global digital payments.

When Modi assumed power in 2014 after several months of the 'policy paralysis' that afflicted the Manmohan Singh regime, the popular expectation was that his government would revive the economy quickly and create the mil-

Though corporate tax was cut significantly, private investment remained far below expectation, much to the Modi government's consternation

lions of jobs the country badly needed. He was also expected to roll out several reforms to pave the way for faster economic development while ensuring, as he put it, "more governance and less government". In his first term, Modi did usher in a slew of reforms, especially in the financial sector, besides initiating massive infrastructure development projects, especially in the roads sector. For the poor and needy, the prime min-

**HIT FISCAL DEFICIT**

The Right Balance

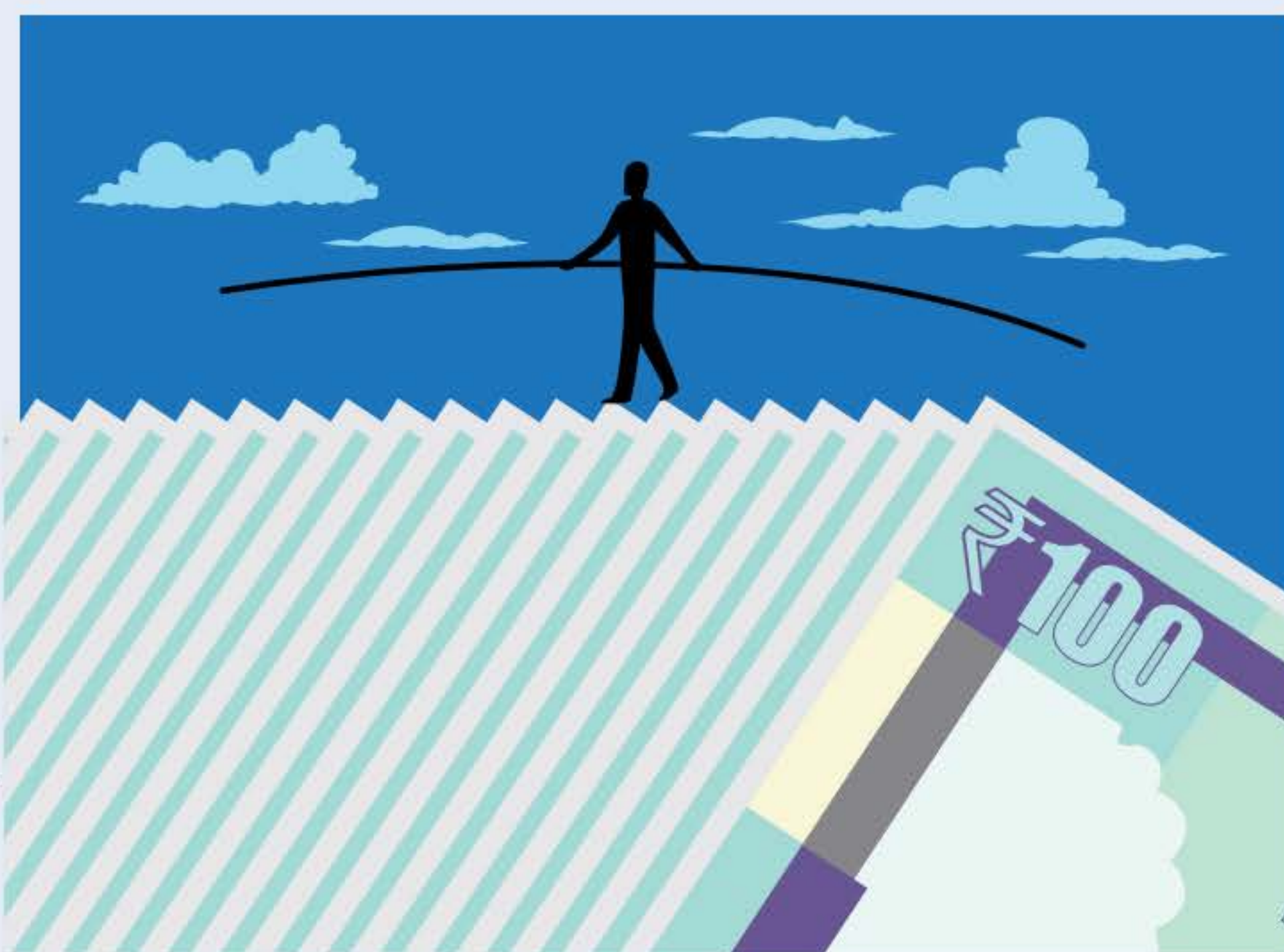
Despite the pandemic driving up fiscal deficit, the Centre did not resort to monetising it, remaining firm on its goal to cut down on off-budget funding, increasing revenue

WITH THE POST-COVID RECOVERY IN FULL SWING, MAINTAINING THE country's fiscal balance is a must. Union finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman was justly applauded for not hitting the panic button or taking drastic fiscal management measures during the pandemic, even though it pushed up the fiscal deficit—the difference between government revenue and expense as a percentage of the GDP that also indicates the level of borrowings by the government—to its highest point in a decade. It was 9.3 per cent in FY 2021, 6.71 per cent in FY 2022 and 6.4 per cent in FY 2023—much higher than the previous decade's range of 4–4.5 per cent. To aid an ailing economy, the temptation was great to resort to higher fiscal imbalance by mon-

etising the growing fiscal deficit through, say, printing currency and artificially stoking demand. The bold choice not to do that is helping control inflation in the economy.

The goal for finance ministry officials is to bring deficit numbers to less than 4.5 per cent by FY26. Post Covid, states were allowed to borrow more, but it was tied

Illustration by RAJ VERMA



ister launched comprehensive welfare measures to address their basic needs, including building toilets, providing cheaper gas connections and constructing houses for them.

Two major structural changes that Modi introduced in the finance sector stood out: One, he pushed through the landmark Goods & Services Tax (GST) to facilitate ease of doing business across the country. Two, he introduced the Insolvency and Banking Code (IBC) as one of the measures to address the massive crisis that banks were facing as their non-performing assets or NPAs ballooned to Rs 10.2 lakh crore. However, his shock decision in 2016 to demonetise high-value currency overnight to erase black money proved controversial and set back economic growth. The public had to endure the ensuing hardship and, worse, the Reserve Bank of India in August 2018 revealed that 99.3 per cent of the demonetised currency totalling Rs 15.3 lakh crore had returned to the banking system. In sharp contrast, his welfare schemes for the poor proved to be a huge success, so much so that he was able to convert the

**MISS PRIVATE INVESTMENT**

A Sluggish Pace

There is a need for broad-based private investment for sustained economic growth

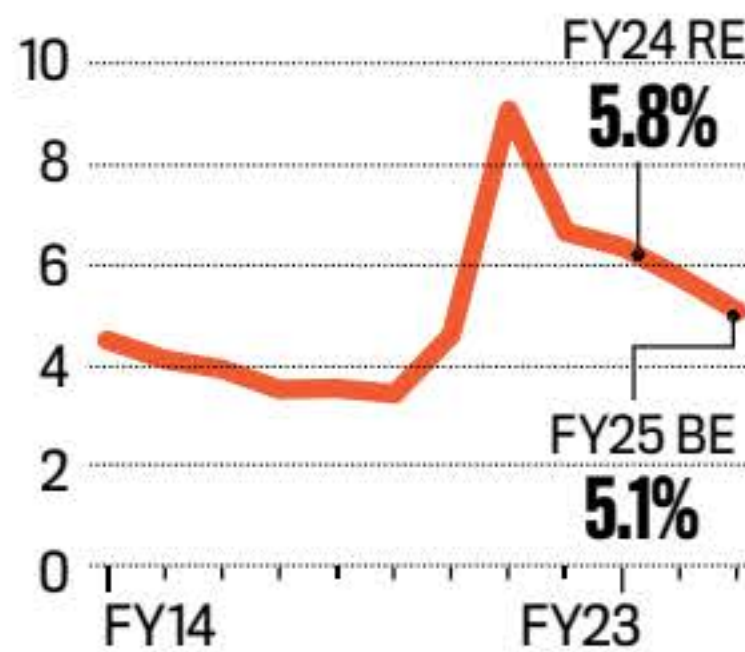
PPRIVATE INVESTMENT, ALONG WITH CONSUMPTION, government spending and exports, is a key component of growth. After the NDA came to power in 2014, private investment increased initially, but soon began to slow down. Total value of completed investment projects in the private sector rose from Rs 2.2 lakh crore in 2013-14 to Rs 3.9 lakh crore in 2016-17, shows CMIE data.

The government announced two key reforms in its second term to

drive private investment. One was the reduction of base corporate tax in September 2019 to 22 per cent from 30 per cent for companies that do not seek exemptions, and 25 per cent from the earlier 35 per cent for those that receive exemptions. For new manufacturing firms, tax was cut to 15 per cent from 25 per cent. The other was the production linked incentive (PLI) scheme to enable domestic companies to boost manufacturing capabilities. With an initial outlay of Rs 1.97 lakh crore, PLI

FIGHT FOR CONTROL

Fiscal deficit is 5.1% in the budget estimate for FY25. The goal is to get it to 4.5% by FY26



Source: Budget documents, speech | Reuters, Feb. 1, 2024

with conditions to ensure fiscal prudence. The FY21 disruption came when India was following the trajectory suggested in 2017 by the N.K. Singh-led committee formed to review the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management Act, which recommended bringing the fiscal deficit down to 2.5 per cent.

The pandemic disturbed the plan, but not the intention to back the reforms. In her budget speech in 2020, Sitharaman made a statement on extra budgetary resources (EBR) and committed to reduce it. EBR is a way for the government to finance its expenditure, where public institutions borrow money on the exchequer's behalf, so that the loan is not counted in the fiscal deficit. The Centre had in FY22 issued guidelines to discourage such off-budget funding in states. Sitharaman made provisions in her budget to pay off such loans. The states have time till FY27 to clean up their books by paying off off-budget borrowing. This will directly reduce the fiscal deficit.

On the revenue side, the introduction of GST in 2016 changed indirect taxation. India has been reforming direct tax from 2020-21, with a new income tax regime. If plans to create more revenues fructify, fiscal deficit could come down even more. ■

-Anilesh S. Mahajan

labharthis, as the beneficiaries were called, into a whole vote bank cutting across religious or caste divides, and whose support was significant in his return to power in 2019. For the middle class, the passing of the Real Estate (Regulation and Development) Act (RERA) in 2016 to protect homebuyers from unscrupulous developers in addition to boosting investment in the sector was also well-received.

His second term began with big-bang reforms, both on the political as well as on the economic front. Within months of taking over, his government abrogated Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir. On the economic side, the prime minister granted business a major boon when he reduced corporate tax from 35 per cent to 25 per cent and from 25 per cent to 15 per cent for new manufacturing firms. Simultaneously, the Modi government pushed for the disinvestment of several major public sector units. These included Air India, the loss-making public sector airline, which it sold to the Tatas for Rs 18,000 crore. It also put up the shares of the Life Insurance Corporation, another

schemes were announced across 14 key sectors in May 2020 as part of the Aatmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan.

However, despite a steady increase in government projects through a massive boost to capital expenditure, private investment has lagged. The value of completed projects in the private sector dipped from Rs 3.27 lakh

crore in 2019-20 to Rs 1.2 lakh crore in 2020-21. It again picked up to Rs 2.8 lakh crore in 2021-22, but slipped to Rs 2.6 lakh crore in 2022-23. Sluggish consumption in certain segments, the threat of inflation, low capacity utilisation and global uncertainties are cited as reasons for the drag.

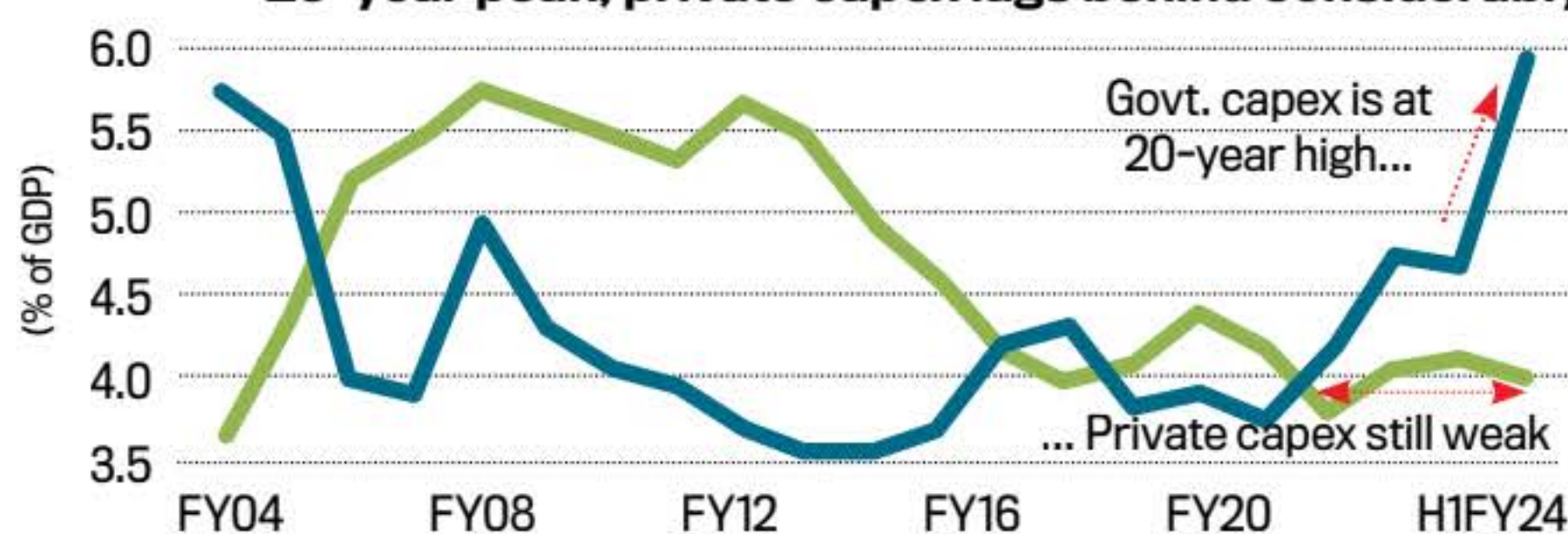
Capital expenditure of the public

sector (including Union government capex, grants to states for capital asset creation, and investment resources of central public sector enterprises) has increased from Rs 5.6 lakh crore in FY15 to Rs 18.6 lakh crore in FY24. "Budget 2024 continues this government's economic policies with a sharpened approach towards accelerating the economy through capital expenditure spending, green growth, digital infrastructure and innovation," says Neeraj Bansal, co-head & COO, India Global, KPMG. Experts say that while there has been some traction in private sector investment, especially in infrastructure, it is still not broad-based. For the country to sustain its 7 per cent or even higher growth, the private sector needs to invest more vigorously. ■

-M.G. Arun

VARYING TRAJECTORIES

While India's government capital expenditure is at a 20-year peak, private capex lags behind considerably



■ India's pvt capex ■ India's general govt. capex

Source: CMIE, Nuvama Research



THE CLEAN POWER DRIVE

From almost zero presence to becoming the 'fastest growing nation in adding renewable energy', the NDA government has done wonders



AFP

I**N 2014, WHEN PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA MODI** took over, one of his first big-ticket announcements was increasing the country's solar energy capacity to 100 GW and overall renewable-based energy to 175 GW in a decade. It's 2024 now, and a Central Electricity Authority (CEA) report says installed solar capacity is now about 74 GW (up from 2.6 GW in 2014), while for renewable energy as a whole, it's 191 GW (76 GW in 2014). "India is now the fastest growing nation in adding renewable energy," says Union power minister R.K. Singh, adding that the country has fulfilled its global commitments of getting 40 per cent of its installed power capacity from non-fossil fuels. Needless to say, efforts to push green energy have also had an impact on reducing the country's dependence on coal-based power generation.

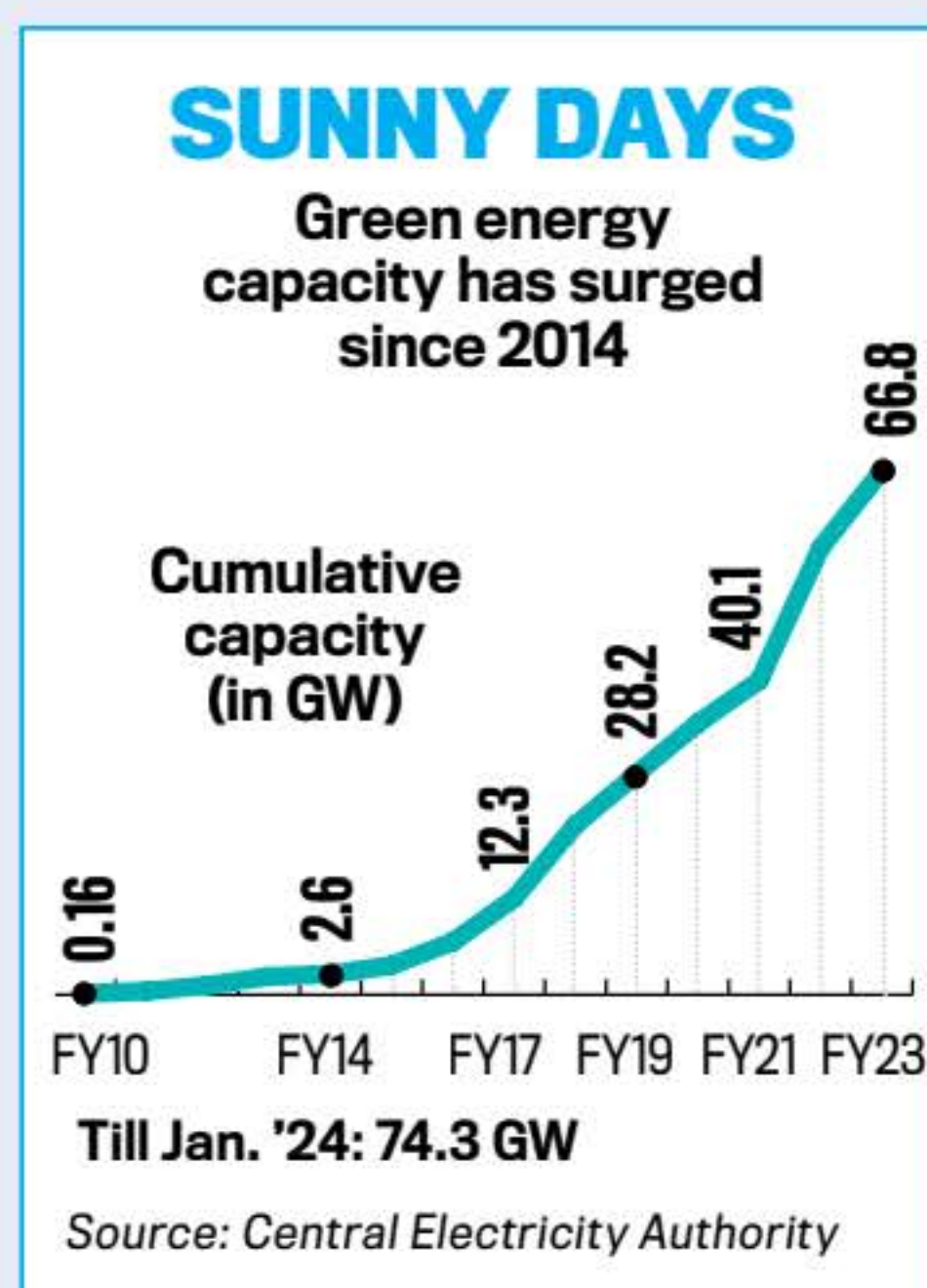
Today, the country has the capacity to add 10-12 GW of solar alone annually. The expansion of India's electricity transmission infrastructure, particularly the Interstate Transmission System (ISTS), has been key to the enhanced capacity to distribute renewable energy

efficiently. Initiatives such as the National Solar Mission and the National Hydrogen Mission have been instrumental in this journey. The government has innovated with tenders for 'firm and despatchable' power, allowing for hybrid renewable energy projects with energy storage. The Viability Gap Funding scheme—supporting infra projects

that are economically justified but fall marginally short of financial viability—announced in the interim budget will also kick off development of the offshore wind energy sector in the country. The production-linked incentive (PLI) schemes for energy storage, solar modules and e-mobility should also keep the clean energy manufacturing ecosystem running smoothly in India. India has set a target of an ambitious 500 GW of green energy by 2030, so fast-tracking projects remains a key priority.

"The private sector has to strengthen its ability to raise necessary capital and deliver projects on the ground. Speedier land acquisition processes and skill development of the labour force will also be key," says Sumant Sinha, chairman of the country's leading renewable energy company, Renew. Sinha's peers add that state support, in the form of lower taxation and levies, is also needed for manufacturers of Battery Energy Storage Systems. "This will be critical for cost-effective integration of renewable energy output to the grid." Its results will be revolutionary. ■

-Anilesh S. Mahajan



PSU behemoth, on offer to the public, the Initial Public Offering netting Rs 21,000 crore. Another promise included the monetisation of some key public sector assets via the private sector, estimating that potential to be Rs 6 lakh crore.

The black swan event of Covid, though, would prove to be a setback for

Modi's plans for major reforms. To the prime minister's credit, he stood firm and chose fiscal prudence over profligacy to pull the economy out of the crevasse the pandemic had pushed it into. He focused, among other things, on pumping massive amounts into building infrastructure across the country, committing Rs

100 lakh crore in 2020 to the National Infrastructure Pipeline over five years to enhance rail, road and sea connectivity and speed up logistics.

The prime minister's determination and assuredness seem to have paid off, as the economy bounced back strongly, with even world leaders applauding its

No Golden Harvests

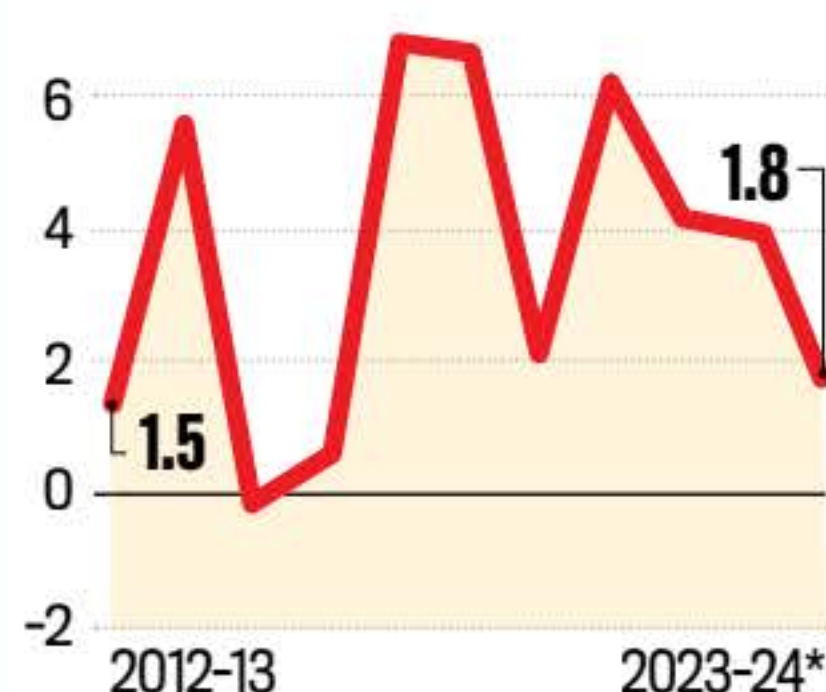
After the farm laws debacle, the focus has been on raising storage capacity and digitisation of co-ops to boost farmer incomes, which are still below par

YEAR-LONG PROTESTS BY SOME FARM UNIONS HAD PUT PAID to big-ticket reforms in the agriculture sector in November 2021, forcing their withdrawal. With that, the plans to open up corporate investments in the farming sector also went out the door. The Centre has now moved on to strengthening the network of cooperatives and FPOs (farmer producer organisations) across the country to build an agri-centric ecosystem. But this will take time to find its feet. Meanwhile, the numbers are worrying: some 42 per cent of the population is dependent on agriculture to make ends meet, the sector contributes about 17 per cent to the GDP annually, while annual growth averages out at a measly 4 per cent.

The ministry of agriculture was allocated Rs 1.26 lakh crore in 2022-23, almost five times the allocation in 2013-14 (Rs 27,700 crore). Even after all this, the sector is expected to grow at just 1.8 per cent in 2023-24, a steep fall from the 4 per cent growth in FY23. In February 2016, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had raised the bar, promising to double farmers' incomes by 2022. At the time, the average monthly in-

LOW YIELDS

The GVA for agriculture, forestry and fishing (at basic prices, in %) hasn't improved



GVA: Gross value added
*First advance estimates
Source: MoSPI

“ Farmers must get remunerative prices for their produce. Strengthening the cooperatives and digitalisation of the commodity markets is the way forward ”

-ASHWANI MAHAJAN

National co-convenor, Swadeshi Jagran Manch

come per agriculture household was Rs 8,059. In December 2022, a report tabled in Parliament says average monthly income was just Rs 10,218. To double real incomes, produce prices had to increase at a rate of over 10 per cent, but they went up by just 2.5 per cent. Getting this done requires structural changes; mere hikes in MSP will not do. Lack of storage capacity in the country, and not enough convergence of private processors with growers, has also hampered the latter. For the poorest farmers, there's now an income support scheme via PM-KISAN (Rs 6,000 annually), while subsidies run across the board to cut input costs.

The NDA regime has focused on digitalisation of cooperatives to bring in more transparency in operations and integrate them into the decentralised storages. In FY24, Rs 968 crore was earmarked for this. In 2021, the Reserve Bank of India laid the roadmap for usage of the electronic-Negotiable Warehouse Receipt (e-NWR), so that public sector banks can enter the segment and provide financing to the farmers (against these receipts). Efforts are on to set up massive decentralised storage capacity, too, many of which will be covered with e-NWR.

For the next government, the big task will be to convince farmers to diversify crop patterns, while also ensuring that they are paid ably and on time. This will require the strengthening of the farmgate-to-processing infrastructure, complemented with a comprehensive agricultural policy that understands the demands of all players and assures logistics. The enhanced storage capacity in the country will then add to the confidence of the farmers. ■

-Anilesh S. Mahajan



PRABHJOT GILL

healthy GDP growth numbers. The fiscal deficit, though at a high of 6.4 per cent in FY23, had a clear glide path on how to be brought down to manageable levels. Big goals were also set for green energy initiatives, capturing the imagination of large corporates and top investors at home and abroad. A buoyant sentiment pervaded Indian stock markets as well, with the Sensex breaching the 75,000-mark in April this year. India is increasingly being seen as a bright spot for investment opportunity, aiding the flow of overseas funds into Indian equities.

There are some dark clouds, too, to these silver linings. Barring Air India and LIC, the government's ambitious plans for outright asset sale or privatisation are hanging fire. The ambition to reform agriculture likewise had to be buried in the face of farmers' year-long

It was an unpopular move, but Modi chose fiscal prudence over profligacy to steer the country through the Covid-19 pandemic. It paid off

protest. Agriculture growth, therefore, has remained stagnant at 4 per cent across Modi's two terms and has slipped to 1.4 per cent in FY24, with farmers clearly unhappy about the policy drift. Labour reforms, too, are in a limbo as the central legislation passed in 2019-20 remains stalled. The reform process in land, another major factor of production, remains sketchy as well. A land acquisition ordinance passed during Modi's first term was allowed to lapse soon after.

The promise of enhancing manufacturing contribution from 15 per cent to 25 per cent of GDP and enabling job creation remains a pipe dream. With skill development programmes as well as logistics infra lagging, the desire to be an alternative global supply chain to China remains unfulfilled. And though exports have perked up in the past two years, they are still performing way below potential.

To boost manufacturing in India, the government had introduced the production-

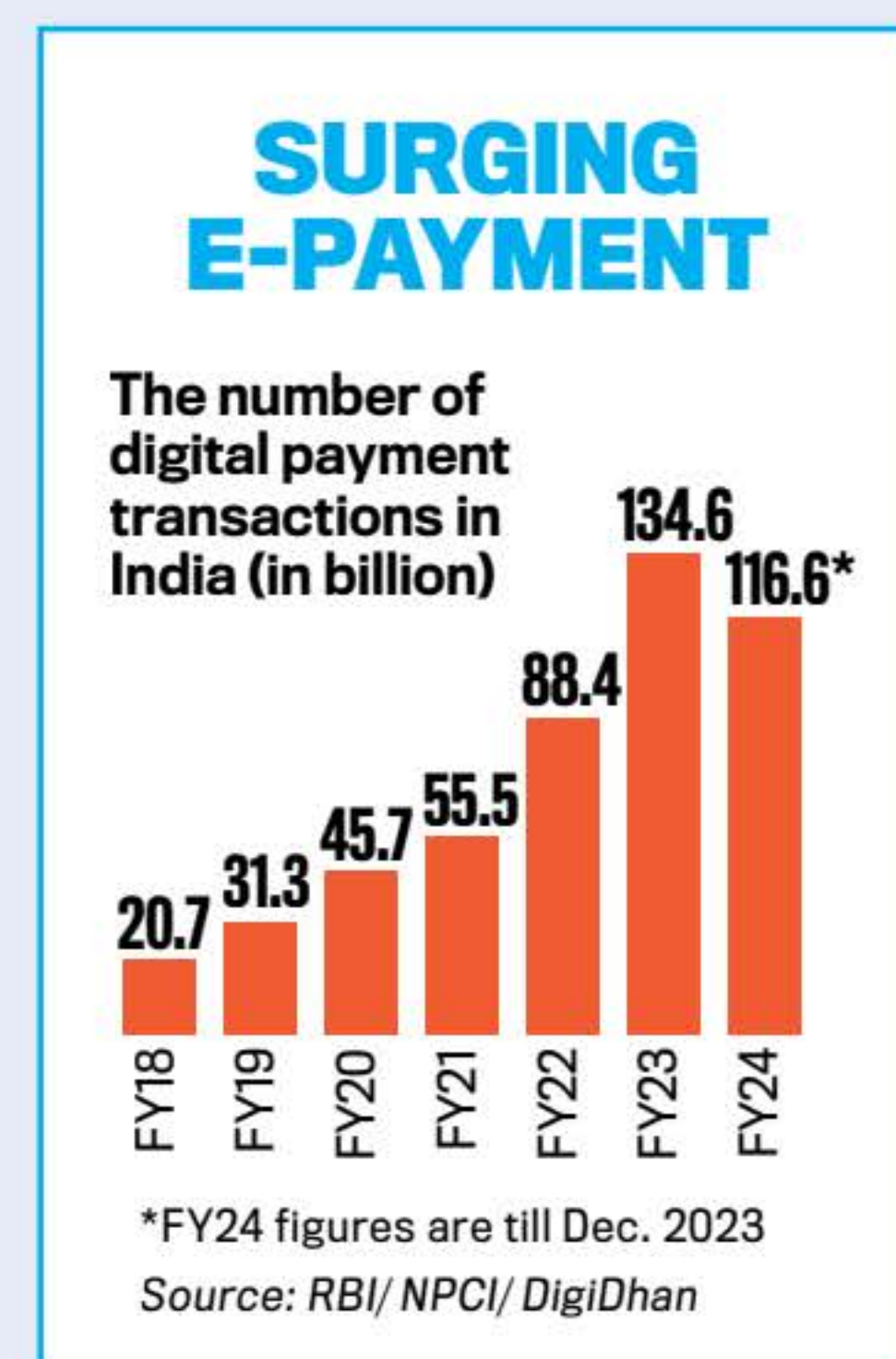
LEADING THE WORLD

With the advent of UPI, the volume of digital payments recorded a 550 per cent surge between FY18 and FY23, making India a model for other economies

ON FEBRUARY 2, THE INDIAN EMBASSY IN FRANCE MADE A BIG ANNOUNCEMENT

on X: "UPI formally launched at the iconic Eiffel Tower at the huge Republic Day Reception." Now, Indian tourists visiting this Paris landmark can buy its ticket by just scanning a QR code on their Unified Payments Interface (UPI) app, which marks the Indian payment gateway's entry into the European market.

Launched in 2016, UPI has emerged as a cornerstone of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's push for cashless economy and digital India—especially after the demonetisation move the same year. Consolidating a person's multiple bank accounts into a single app, it allows seamless fund routing and hassle-free payments. It also holds strategic significance for India,



as several countries look for ways to reduce their overseas payment dependence on the US-controlled SWIFT system.

Illustration by RAJ VERMA



The UPI has already ventured into other economies viz. Singapore, Bhutan, the UAE, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Mauritius. The National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI) reported 117.6 billion UPI transactions worth Rs 182.25 lakh crore in 2023, up 59 per cent in terms of volume and 45 per cent in terms of value compared with 2022. According to the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), while India accounts for 46 per cent of all digital payments globally (as per 2022 data), nearly 80 per cent of e-transactions taking place domestically are via the

“The India Stack and public digital infrastructure have enhanced efficiencies in transactions and opened avenues to take services deeper into our society”

-ADITYA MALIK, Member, BoG, Council for International Economic Understanding

UPI. But the penchant for cash remains intact, with its circulation at about 13 per cent of GDP, up from 8.7 per cent just after demonetisation, partly due to limitations in digital payments' accessibility, dispute resolution and rural outreach.

The RBI is now focused on two game-changing initiatives: the blockchain-based digital rupee and the Aadhaar-enabled Payment Service (AePS). A tool for financial inclusion, the AePS allows online banking services at a PoS (Point of Sale) through business correspondents using Aadhaar authentication. So, even as it eyes the global stage, the Modi regime is ensuring its towns and villages aren't left behind. ■

-Anilesh S. Mahajan



MISS DEMONETISATION

The Black Money Chase that Wasn't

A catalyst for digitisation of Indian economy aside, demonetisation failed to achieve its main objective, that is, curbing black money



M ZHAZO

WHEN PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA MODI ANNOUNCED IN A LATE

evening telecast on November 8, 2016, that all currency notes of Rs 500 and Rs 1,000 would be scrapped from that midnight onwards, it caught the entire country unawares. The action put 86 per cent of the total currency in circulation out of use. The three broad objectives, claimed the government, were to fight black money, corruption and terror, and added the digitisation of economy as a goal later on. The World Bank had estimated the size of India's shadow economy at 23 per cent in 2007, lending credence to the need to hunt black money.

Apart from the inconvenience

“The government's assumption and equation of black money with cash was wrong. Cash is just a small manifestation of black money”

-SUBHASH CHANDRA GARG, Former Finance Secretary

it caused to the common man, the move led to widespread economic disruption. To be fair, digitisation of the economy did pick up with the advent of UPI. But this has not reduced the amount of currency in circulation (see *Cash Economy*). In fact, in August 2018 itself, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) revealed that 99.3 per

cent of the demonetised currency, totalling Rs 15.3 lakh crore, had returned to the banking system. This meant that either the government had grossly miscalculated the quantum of black money, or that most of the unaccounted money found its way back into the banking system. ■

-M.G. Arun

CASH IS STILL KING

Currency in circulation has doubled than what it was around the time of demonetisation





HIT GOODS & SERVICES TAX

GOOD WORK IN PROGRESS

The biggest reform in indirect taxation, GST replaced a complex and fragmented system, unified the tax structure, led to smoother logistics and boosted government revenue

THE IRELAND-BASED FIRM RESEARCH AND MARKETS recently predicted that India's warehouse market size would grow at around 15.6 per cent to reach \$35 billion by the end of FY27, from around \$14.6 billion in FY21. This is on top of the 17 per cent annual growth between FY16 and FY21. It was the time when the Centre started implementing a major indirect tax reform, Goods & Services Tax, in June 2017

that removed tax barriers and encouraged logistics firms to lease or set up larger warehouses. In one of the biggest reforms in the indirect ecosystem, the new tax replaced the 17 taxes levied by the Centre and states, including excise duty, service tax, value-added tax (VAT), and others. It brought uniformity in the tax structure across India, eliminating the cascading effect of taxes on prices of end products, since it is levied at each stage of the

supply chain, from the manufacturer to the consumer. It is applied to value addition at each stage, allowing for the seamless flow of credits and reducing the tax burden on the consumer.

The positive effect of GST also reflects in smoother logistics movement, with goods-laden trucks not having to stop at the entry and exit points of states, eliminating the need for multiple compliance documents. It also expands tax revenues, with reduction in the process cost of tax collection. In FY24, the gross GST collection was Rs 20.14 lakh crore—crossing the Rs 20 lakh crore milestone for the first time—an 11.6 per cent increase over the previous year.

However, there are issues related to products, like liquor, electricity, tobacco, octroi, stamp duties on land

There is no consensus on merging taxes on petroleum products. The different tax slabs need to be harmonised too

SUMIT KUMAR



MISS MSMEs

Struggling for Survival

The government's relief schemes have failed to uplift the MSME sector, which is hit by commodity price fluctuations and a global demand slowdown

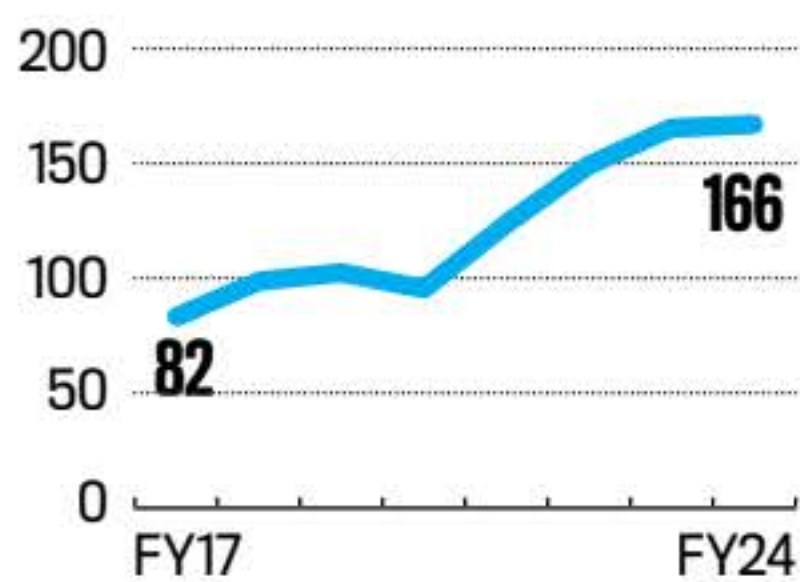
THE MSME (MICRO, SMALL & MEDIUM ENTERPRISES) SECTOR was among the worst hit in the Covid-19 pandemic. Numerous units shut shop due to a lack of consumer demand and liquidity. To help businesses stay afloat, the government implemented various schemes, including the Emergency Credit Line Guarantee Scheme and the Credit Guarantee Trust for Micro and Small Enterprises. Furthermore, the focus on digitisation, evident in initiatives like the Goods & Services Tax and the online registration portal Udyam, accelerated formalisation in the sector. So far, around 25 million MSMEs have registered to avail government benefits.

However, the sector's challenges seem to see no end. As though the slowdown in western markets wasn't enough, the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war has subdued demand further. Fluctuations in commodity prices, particularly of crude oil and steel, have further complicated production planning and pricing for MSMEs across manufacturing sectors. "If the challenging situation persists, layoffs and increased bad debts might become inevitable," cautions Prashant Patel, former president of the Federation of Indian Micro and Small & Medium Enterprises (FISME).

The share of MSME output in India's overall manufacturing output has remained relatively stagnant at 36.6 per cent, 36.9 per cent and 36.2

LEAP FORWARD

Monthly average GST collection
yearwise (Rs '000 crore)



Source: Ministry of Finance

& vehicle purchase etc. as well as zero rating GST on export of goods and services. Similarly, there is no consensus on merging taxes levied on petroleum products (crude, petrol, diesel, ATF & natural gas). GST is categorised into different tax slabs—5 per cent, 12 per cent, 18 per cent and 28 per cent. These slabs need to be harmonised for

simplification of the process.

The idea of a nationwide GST was first proposed by the Vijay Kelkar Task Force on indirect taxes in 2000. The objective was to replace the prevailing complex tax structure with a unified system. The Constitution Amendment Bill was introduced in 2011, but faced challenges regarding compensation to states and other issues. The Constitution (122nd Amendment) Bill, 2014 aimed to amend the Constitution to enable the implementation of GST. It was decided that a GST cess will be levied so that “loss”-making states can be compensated. Parliament passed it in August 2016. The GST Council with the Union finance minister and representatives from states was formed to make decisions about GST, including tax rates and exemptions. It played a crucial role in shaping the GST framework in India. ■

-Anilesh S. Mahajan

linked incentive or PLI scheme in 2020 and expanded it to 14 sectors with an outlay of Rs 1.97 lakh crore. The aim was to create manufacturing champions and generate over six million jobs over five years. But critics like ex-RBI governor Raghuram Rajan say the scheme has only lavished subsidies on manufacturing firms and there is no guarantee these companies will stay the course once the subsidies dry up. Rajan argues that the money could be better spent in boosting the services sector, which now contributes to over 55 per cent of India's GDP and has emerged as the highest employment generator averaging 7 per cent year-on-year growth. In FY23, exports of services set a new record of \$322 billion with a compound annual growth rate of 26.7 per cent compared to FY22. Tourism, for instance, has tremendous potential for growth, but the key lies in investing in skilling and training people to meet the demand.

Agriculture has been a blight on the government's record, as is manufacturing. Exports have perked up, but are still way below potential

More than anything, it's the government's record on unemployment and inflation that is under the greatest public scrutiny, given that we are in an election year. The ruling BJP claims that unemployment rates are down from 5.8 per cent in 2018-19 to 3.2 per cent in 2022-23 while labour force participation rate has increased from 50.2 per cent in 2018-19 to 57.9 per cent in 2022-23. Experts dismiss this as a convenient fig leaf to hide the naked truth that the real growth is among the self-employed, which is a factor of underemployment. Only 20 per cent of India's work force is engaged in formal jobs. Finance minister Sitharaman in an interview with INDIA TODAY says solid employment data is hard to come by, which makes any conclusion difficult but does point to the growth of start-ups, the increasing offtake of MUDRA loans by small entrepreneurs, the growth of new green energy sectors and the big investments in infrastructure projects to say that massive numbers of jobs are being generated (*see interview*).

per cent for FY20, FY21 and FY22, respectively. Similarly, the share of MSME-specified products in India's total exports has seen a steady decline—from 49.4 per cent in FY21 to 45 per cent in FY22 and 43.6 per cent in FY23. Among their list of demands, FISME wants the govern-

ment to remove impediments, such as certain regulations, to allow the sector to grow.

The stress is challenging to pinpoint, partly due to the absence of precise data on its size. As per the MSME Annual Report 2022-23, India has over 63 million MSMEs, based on the NSSO (National Sample Survey Office) data collated in 2015-16. However, the MSME definition underwent significant changes in 2020 and then again in 2021.

Economist and senior professor M.H. Bala Subrahmanya at the Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru, argues: as the sector undergoes modernisation and new enterprises emerge led by the transformation of rural areas into urban ones, having updated data is crucial to crafting effective policies to stimulate growth.

Without this piece of the puzzle, the contribution of MSMEs to India's growth narrative will remain elusive. ■

-Sonali Khetarpal

A SAD STATE

Exports from MSMEs have mostly declined since FY17

Leather & leather goods	5,308	4,967	-6%
Textiles (excl. readymade)	16,402	18,136	11%
Readymade garments	17,359	16,170	-7%
Handicrafts*	1,925	1,684	-13%
Gems & jewellery	43,360	37,884	-13%

■ FY17 ■ FY23 (in \$ mn) ● % change
(#excluding handmade carpets)

*Source: CMIE Economic Outlook

The government seems to have fared better on inflation control. Despite supply chain breakdowns on account of Covid first and then the conflagrations in East Europe and West Asia, which impacted the global prices of basic items, average inflation from 2014-15 to 2023-24 (till November) was only 5.1 per cent, compared to 8.2 per cent during the 10 years of the Manmohan government (2004-14). Food inflation, though, remains high, especially during an election year, with the average being around 8.7 per cent since

Lack of jobs and high food prices are figuring high in the voters' concerns currently. K-shaped growth has also meant rural wages as well as demand remain low

July 2023. Moreover, while parts of the economy are doing well, others are lagging, resulting in what economists refer to as a 'K-shaped' growth. Small and micro industries, which constitute a bulk of the sector's jobs, are still to recover from the aftershocks of Covid, though the government claims to have helped them through various schemes. Another aspect of that K-shaped growth is that while corporate wages have grown by an average 10 per cent, rural workers, including agriculture labour, and a segment of

HIT BANKING

THE CLEAN-UP ACT

The Modi regime has worked towards restoring the health of the banking sector by reducing bad loans and bringing judicial discipline in the insolvency process

THE GLOBAL FINANCIAL CRISIS OF 2008 SAW SEVERAL COUNTRIES resort to fiscal stimulus to bolster their economies. India was no exception. However, the massive capital infusion led to profligacy and a subsequent bad loan pile-up, triggering the 'twin balance sheet problem'—where corporates overleveraged themselves to the point of being unable to repay loans, and banks came under severe stress due to mounting non-performing assets (NPAs).

From around Rs 60,000 crore in March 2010, NPAs saw an over three-fold surge to Rs 2 lakh crore by March 2014, just before the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) assumed power at the Centre. By March 2018, they had further escalated to a staggering Rs 10.2 lakh crore, with public sector banks (PSBs) accounting for a whopping 80 per cent.

This enfeebled the banks, hampering their lending capabilities. With numerous companies grappling with issues related to land acquisition or procuring feedstock, a comprehensive code to address insolvency and bank-

ruptcy of corporates and individuals also became imperative, ushering in judicial discipline in the process. The Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC) 2016, thus, aimed at addressing inadequacies in the process of winding up companies in the Companies Act 1956 and 2013. Even the Sick Industrial Companies (Special Provisions) Act 1985 had failed to deliver on this front. In all, 887 insolvent firms saw a resolution between late 2016, when the IBC was adopted, and December 2023. The total realisation for creditors stood at

about Rs 3.2 lakh crore, or nearly 32 per cent of their admitted claims. This meant banks had to take huge 'haircuts' on their loans, but nevertheless saw some part of the dues being repaid. Meanwhile, further measures were implemented to reduce bad loans. By the end of CY2023, gross NPAs came down to Rs 4.85 lakh crore, the reduction attributed to the recovery of loans by banks as well as some big write-offs, though some critics have termed it as "window-dressing".

The Centre also carried out a major consolidation of PSBs to strengthen their balance sheets and improve their ability to lend. It started with the State Bank of India (SBI) acquiring five of its subsidiary banks in 2017. Today, there are only 12 PSBs, down from 27 that year. "We are happy to have restored the Indian banks to good health, but the entire sector needs a lot more vibrancy and we need a lot more banks," Union finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman told INDIA TODAY. This would be a mix of big and small banks, she added. ■

-M.G. Arun

₹4.85
LAKH CRORE
Gross NPAs
in Dec. 2023,
down from
Rs 10.2 lakh
crore in FY18

₹3.2
LAKH CRORE
Total realisa-
tion proceeds
to creditors of
insolvent firms
(2016-23)

12 No. of public sector banks,
down from 27 in 2017



Trade Tantrums

India has yet to realise its export potential, which can derail the Viksit Bharat dream and prevent the country from cashing in on the China+1 opportunity

EXPORTS HAVE LONG BEEN INDIA'S ACHILLES' HEEL.

The Modi government's hope that its policies of the past few years—be it Aatmanirbhar Bharat or the performance-linked incentive (PLI) scheme for chosen sectors—would boost exports has been marred by the continuing unrest in eastern Europe and West Asia, disruptions in the Red Sea and the slow recovery of global markets.

If exports of goods and services accounted for 25 per cent of the GDP in 2013, they stood at 22.8 per cent in 2022, per World Bank data. According to commerce ministry numbers, India's overall exports (merchandise and services) in FY24 are estimated to be \$777 billion, a tiny sliver of growth of 0.04 per cent from the year before. India's share in global exports was 1.8 per cent in 2023, according to the World Trade Organization.

If there's any relief in this gloomy scenario, it is in India bringing down its trade deficit to \$78 bn in FY24 from



\$121 bn in FY23. It has also been able to diversify its exports basket in the past decade, welcoming new sectors like petroleum, machinery, medicines and pharmaceuticals, electrical and electronics, automobiles and auto components, biotechnology etc.,

even though the traditional labour-intensive sectors such as apparels and textiles, leather, gems and jewellery, and handicrafts are losing their sheen, affecting job creation.

Also, as economist Ajit Ranade, V-C, Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics, says, "We have done well in services exports and inward remittances. We need to do better in our merchandise exports."

Most experts agree that India needs to develop more products of global standards at competitive prices and explore new markets. Post-Covid, there has been a growing sentiment in the developed world for new sources to host the Global Value Chain, or GVC, manufacturing, which China dominates currently. India is competing hard with ASEAN countries such as Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia as well as neighbouring Bangladesh to claim a slice of the pie.

Work is also being done to build an ecosystem for exports by digitising processes, addressing logistics costs and improving exports-related infrastructure. This includes constructing highways, expanding rail networks and dedicated freight corridors to improve freight movement. What India has had limited success in developing is a shipping line of global repute. "We are losing over \$80 bn in freight remittances. Once we move towards \$1 tn exports, it may go up to \$200 bn. An Indian shipping line, getting 25 per cent of the business, can save \$50 bn on a year-on-year basis," says Ajay Sahai, DG & CEO, Federation of Indian Export Organisations.

There is a shift in policy too. Traditionally suspicious of free trade agreements (FTAs), the Modi regime had suspended most talks after 2014; in 2019, India walked out of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. Now, India has decided to focus on FTAs with trade-positive economies. If in 2021 it signed the Comprehensive Economic Cooperation and Partnership Agreement with Mauritius, in 2022, it inked a similar deal with the UAE, and this year, with the EFTA bloc. ■

-Anilesh S. Mahajan

“We lose over \$80 bn in freight remittances. If we reach \$1 tn exports, it may go up to \$200 bn. An Indian shipping line, getting 25 per cent of the business, can save us \$50 bn year-on-year”

-AJAY SAHAI, DG & CEO, FIEO





SPREADING CHEER

The government's welfare schemes have achieved remarkable success in providing essential services nationwide



HINDUSTAN TIMES

A ROBUST PRINCIPLE BEHIND THE MODI GOVERNMENT'S WELFARE SCHEMES

is *antyodaya* (no one is left behind). The programmes to ensure drinking water from taps, cooking gas connection, housing for all and health coverage have done just that.

The proof is in the numbers and geography of coverage. For example, the flagship PM Awas Yojana has already constructed over 30 million houses; the Swachh Bharat scheme has built 117.2 million toilets; the Har Ghar Nal Se Jal Yojana has seen 146.7 million households with tap water, and 96 million gas connections have been provided under the PM Ujjwala Yojana.

"One scheme that stands out the most for me in terms of its impact on our welfare is Ayushman Bharat," says healthcare expert and NITI Aayog member Dr V.K. Paul. Data shows that in the past 10 years, 60 million treatments worth Rs 77,298 crore have been

provided. The government estimates that this has saved the country a whopping Rs 1.25 lakh crore in out-of-pocket expenditure. This has been further helped by Jan Aushadhi outlets, which provide affordable medicines—there are over 10,000 outlets now. Experts say several significant achievements have been possible after Covid-19.

"It was an unforeseen crisis, but the measure of success was our vaccination programme where we delivered 2.2 billion made-in-India vaccines," says Dr Paul. Other key gains of that time, much of which continue to play a role in healthcare infrastructure now, include the increase in ICU beds from 2,168 to 144,000, oxygen-supported beds from 50,583 to 514,000, and sanctioning of 1,500 PSA (medical-grade oxygen) plants.

The government has also invested in human resources for healthcare. If one adds Ayush doctors, the doctor-patient ratio is 1:834. "We have manpower

policies for nursing, skilling, education, pharma and dental, which will show its impact on the ecosystem in the years to come," says Dr Paul. A total of 57,592 MBBS seats and 39,489 PG seats have been added to medical institutions since 2014, and 15 new AIIMS and 225 other new medical colleges have been set up.

Digital healthcare remains a crucial part of the government's focus—150 million teleconsultations have been done through Ayushman Aarogya Mandirs. The government has set up 164,000 such centres where comprehensive primary healthcare is provided by strengthening sub health centres and primary health centres.

Many say the real success has been the foundation laid for primary healthcare. "When you invest in health, you must focus on all aspects, including the ground-level basics," says Dr Randeep Guleria, former director, AIIMS, Delhi. As a result, the sex ratio is 1,020 women per 1,000 men for the first time, and the maternal mortality rate declined to 97 per lakh live births in 2018-20 from 130 in 2014-16. Experts credit this to the 39.4 million free antenatal check-ups and the training of ASHA and Anganwadi workers to provide maternal and child care, as well as spread awareness on the benefits of having girls. It is through the close to 1 million ASHA and 1.3 million Anganwadi workers that the healthcare measures have aligned with the government's welfare goal—that no one is left behind. ■

-Sonali Acharjee

75%

of villages are open defecation-free

96 MN

cooking gas connections provided under PM Ujjwala Yojana

30 MN

houses built under PM Awas Yojana

76%

households have tap water supply under Har Ghar Nal Se Jal Yojana

60 MN

hospital admissions under Ayushman Bharat

10,000

Jan Aushadhi outlets are operational

2.2 BN

Made-in-India vaccines given during Covid

>97,000

seats have been added to medical institutions



Mind the Gap

If India wants to become a \$5 trillion economy, plugging the skill gap of its working population needs to be taken up on a war footing

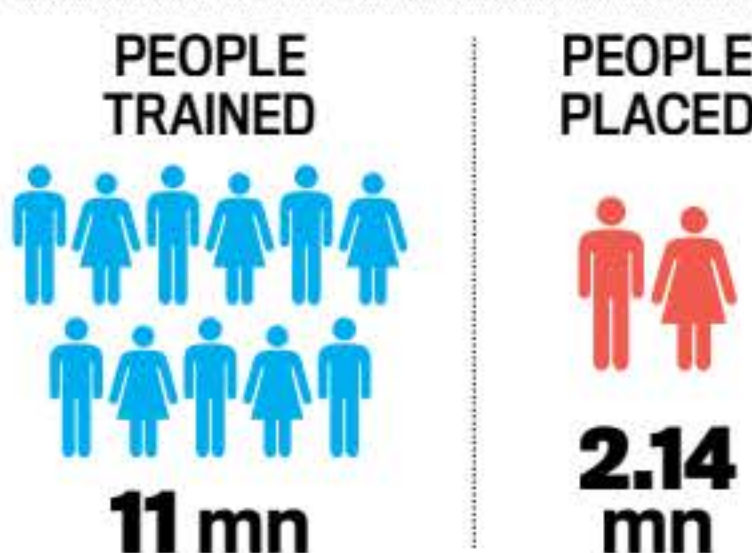
PRESENTING THE INTERIM BUDGET FOR 2024-25 ON FEBRUARY 1, finance minister Nirmala

Sitharaman reeled out some big numbers to highlight the impact of the National Skill Development Mission (NSDM) launched in 2015-14 million youths skilled, another 5.4 million upskilled and reskilled, and the establishment of 3,000 new Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs), the backbone of vocational training in the country. In a rapidly ageing world, India's demographic dividend is considered to be a boon for its ambitious growth targets. But without the right skills and jobs, India's advantage of having 65 per cent of its population under the age of 35 years could easily slip away.

So, under the NSDM, skill training is being provided to the youth through various schemes. Among them is the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY)—a short-term training programme of the ministry of skill development and entrepreneurship (MSDE). While the stress

REPORT CARD

Just about 20% of those trained under the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana 2.0* got job offers



*FY17-FY23 (till Jan. 2023)

Source: Ministry of skill development and entrepreneurship

“Government-funded schemes like PMKVY have cannibalised the fee-based market of superior industry-led skilling”

-JAYANT KRISHNA

Former CEO & COO, National Skill Development Corporation

is on skill training, data reveals, employability remains an issue. Under PMKVY 2.0, for instance, about 11 million persons were trained between FY17 and FY23 (as of Jan. 5, 2023), but just about 2.14 million, or 20 per cent, of them got placed.

One of the key reasons is the lack of industry-relevant skills offered in the training programmes. In India, the skilling courses are primarily led by the government, which has proved to be counterproductive. “The best people to teach and train,” says Jayant Krishna, former CEO and COO of the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC), “are the people who practise.” While subsidised skill training should be available to the poorest of the poor, adds Krishna, intensifying industry's role in skilling is very important.

No wonder, there is also a skill mismatch for the trained candidates. According to the ‘India Skills Report 2023’ by the online remote proctored testing firm Wheebox, only 50.3 per cent of the 375,000 test-takers across various domains nationally were found to be ‘extremely employable’. There is a need for a “paradigm shift”, says Nirmal Singh, founder and CEO, Wheebox, as new technologies and jobs look at skills training as a “lifelong process”. ■

-Sonal Khetarpal

urban workers too have seen their wages grow by only one per cent or less in the past year. The Modi government has indirectly acknowledged their distress by extending the supply of free grains to 810 million poor by another five years from the launch of the scheme in the midst of Covid in April 2020. The lack of surplus money in the hands of vast amounts of the labour force has contributed to the dip in consumption, which in turn has

suppressed the private sector's appetite for investment and expansion of goods and services. Non-BJP states, particularly in the South, are also unhappy with the Centre over tax-sharing, citing a mismatch with their contribution.

How will all this play out in the voters' minds as India wades deeper into the general election? Of the four engines of growth, only one—massive public expenditure—is still firing. Exports have

flattered to deceive. Private investment and consumption are beginning to pick up, but could do much, much better. The FM, in her interview, says Modi 3.0 will move more rapidly on all key economic issues if the prime minister is re-elected. As in all great democracies, the Indian voter will decide whether the prime minister and his government did a good job on the economic front and deserve a third consecutive term. ■

“IN MODI 3.0, TECH-DRIVEN CHANGES WILL BE OUR TOP PRIORITY”

As General Election 2024 gets under way, Union finance minister **Nirmala Sitharaman** has stepped out of the hallowed precincts of North Block into the heat and dust of the electoral battlefield. Despite that hectic campaigning schedule, she finds time for an in-depth interview with Group Editorial Director **Raj Chengappa** and Managing Editor **M.G. Arun**, shedding light on a whole gamut of issues around the economy, including uncomfortable ones like unemployment and inflation, and what we can expect from Modi 3.0 if the BJP comes to power a third consecutive time. Edited excerpts from the interview:

..... Photographs by **BANDEEP SINGH**



It has been 10 years of Modinomics. What would you say have been the four main pillars of the Modi government's policies that have seen the economy not just recover after the pandemic but do so with a robust growth of 7.6 per cent?

The four things that readily come to my mind are: the effort taken to remove that wrong perception about India that you're capable of nothing, that you can't really come up, that you're corrupt, that your red-tapism will be permanent.... Second, ensuring that policies were in tandem with people and their requirements—not so radical that they get rejected, but taking India up the ladder, stable policies that would attract people towards our country, give our own citizens that confidence that governments can deliver and deliver not just for the poor and the needy but also for systems to be improved. Third, making sure you identify areas in which India's policies are tailored to meet the demands of the 21st century, including sustainable growth. And fourth, identify areas in which India can lead globally, invest in them and support people to go into them and give India the advantage.



Q. You talked about keeping balance in the reforms that were taken up. Yet, in 2016, we saw demonetisation shake up the economy. What are the lessons from its implementation?

The fact remained that for a major step on that scale for removing black money because of high denomination notes, people accepted it. They said Prime Minister Modi's intentions are very clear; yes, there are difficulties, we'll face them. A corollary to it is the way people went into digital mode of payment post that, even more because of Covid. And you're saying that India has set a leadership role for itself, not just the leaders, (but also) common people, the way in which they've adapted to it. Some of the leaders who come from abroad are fascinated by the way the *nariyalpaniwala* uses it, the *thelawala* uses it, even in the remotest villages.

Q. And yet some people say cash is back in full amount and, therefore, the whole purpose of demonetisation stands defeated, it is a failure.

What did they expect? Did they have a blueprint of what demonetisation was before the prime minister brought it in? Can the PM, particularly when you're bringing in demonetisation of all high-value currency, sit with all parties and say, "Look, you tell me the muhurat, I'll introduce it and then we'll do it?" What was their argument at that time? You're attacking the stock of black money, you're not talking about its flow. Here is a prime minister who comes in in 2014 and the first file he signs is to set up a special investigation team to look into matters of black money. Post that, one after the other, legislative measures are taken to make sure action is taken against people who are stacking money abroad. Post that, you bring in certain KYC (Know Your Customer) practices into banks, run banks professionally, see where the money is going, whose money is coming. Politically sensitive individuals, or (those who fall afoul of) the FATF (Financial Action Task Force) Act, are expected to be red-flagged as and when a major quantum of cash is transferred from one account. These are all steps Prime Minister Modi has taken.

Q. And has the quantum of black money reduced?

At least you are able to track it all down and take action. And look at the way the Enforcement Directorate or the Central

Bureau of Investigation is going after stacks and stacks of money kept in homes or in toilets or in farmhouses. Are these not efforts towards eliminating black money? When we do it, they say, "Oh my God, you unleash these agencies." And when we don't, they ask, "What have you done about it?"

Q. A major issue that has come up this election is the lack of jobs. Opinion polls, including those by INDIA TODAY, are showing that unemployment is the No. 1 issue in the country today. What do you have to say?

There's no denying the fact that you need more data to talk meaningfully about jobs. India doesn't have it, and I'm not saying that with a sense of complacency. I fully recognise that there is a need for good, reliable data, both for jobs in the formal sector and, equally or more importantly, about informal sector jobs. Once we get some data for the formal sector, we seem to reach a conclusion for the entire economy, which is not right. The informal sector today has shown much buoyancy. Let's answer these questions. Do startups function in isolation? The last figure, I think, was 97,000 start-ups, which got registered in the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT). That is, after 2016, when (the Start-up India scheme) was launched. You think they don't create jobs? Are they one single person running a company? Second, the new sectors coming up—renewable energy, green ammonia, solar particularly—how many are we seeing in terms of large solar firms? Do you think they run with one individual? Then, through the PM SVANidhi, and the PM Mudra, the number of people who have taken loans which are collateral-free. I want to ask the Congress which talks of Nyay, when loans are going to small people, you ignore them completely and instead condemn them saying Modi is giving loans only to his friends. So, are these

Ambanis and Adanis? Also, under the government Rozgar Mela, in the past 12 months, commencing November 2022 to October 2023, 10 lakh jobs that were vacant have been filled.

Q. The criticism is regarding self-employment, which is largely disguised employment or underemployment, in comparison to formal jobs.

This underemployment logic cannot work when people are taking money from the bank and doing their own business.

“You need more data to talk meaningfully about jobs. India doesn't have that data. We tend to draw conclusions for the entire economy from data on formal jobs”

“The informal sector today has shown much buoyancy. Do startups not create jobs? New sectors—solar, green energy—are coming up. Are they run by one individual?”

Underemployment was significant as a factor in economics when you were talking about an excess number of people dependent on agriculture. In the past decade, there is a clear move out of agriculture into other skills. That is why, when the e-Shram portal was launched, much to the surprise of the ministry itself, there were more than 200 trades that were registered in which people were engaged, and which the National Skill Development Council is working on now. So, underemployment is never the issue when self-employment comes in. Today's economy is moving towards people doing their own work, it's all about being entrepreneurial.



Q. Another big election issue is high prices. Government figures show that inflation is under control, but when the common man goes out to buy a basket of goods, they find the prices high. Is there more that could be done to rein in inflation?

On inflation, my answer is that any amount of effort, because of the nature of goods that come into the market and that make it to the poor man's thali, will always be inadequate. And that's not to say I wash my hands of (the problem) there. Not at all. Whether it's onions or potatoes or edible oil, whether it's making sure that vegetables reach in time, whether it's pulses that we don't produce adequately, importing them in time and in bulk. At least, 5-6 years ago, because of the incentives

given, many of the farmers moved to producing pulses. But after that, there was a disinterest because of procurement-or price-related issues. In this, state governments also play a role. Now, after a point, the imported inflation also adds to your burden. Edible oil prices are fluctuating. Crude, of course. Post-Covid, urea prices reached Rs 3,000 a bag. A bag that a farmer buys at Rs 298 is completely imported. I had to highlight this to the PM and he was very clear. He said you will import. There shall not be a shortage, despite the price you will import and the burden will be on our government. It was a clear instruction. So, we are managing that input cost and making sure the fuel, which is a big component, is also maintained. Because of the leadership of Prime Minister Modi, we didn't fear sanctions and could still get imported crude from Russia, after the Ukraine war, at a discount. We kept national interests in mind and didn't hold back.

“At least now you can track down black money and take action. Look at how the ED and CBI are going after stacks and stacks of money kept in homes or toilets or in farmhouses”

Q. The advantages of Russian oil are now waning in some sense, and fresh disruptions are happening in West Asia. What will be their impact?

I think it's three wars as well as the major disruption in the Red Sea. There is going to be great volatility, including in the movement of freight on the high seas. All countries, including India, will have to brace for these uncertainties. Crude prices have breached 90 dollars a barrel (on April 18 and 19). In spite of Covid, in spite of so many wars, in spite of disruption in the high seas, in spite of the China-US problem, we are still managing inflation and keeping it well within the limit.

Q. Experts are pointing to a K-shaped growth in the economy where the rich are getting richer, and the poor, poorer. Shouldn't it be a matter of concern?

Just look at the way your GST collection is going. GST is not in its favourable grade structure yet. We will have to do some work on rate rationalisation. We will also have to look at the direct tax collection. There was a time when people said GST is earning more than direct taxation. That's not true. Direct taxation is contributing much, much more now and that's how it should be. What Prime Minister Modi's economic vision is is to make everyone create wealth for themselves. Like there's a proverb in Tamil—*viralukketha veekkam*—the size of the finger will determine the quantum of swelling it

will have. Like that, each according to their size. If people are able to earn on their own, save on their own, have some property of their own, that itself lifts them from where they are to the next level. It is that kind of targeted approach which can help remove inequality and which is also recognised by people who have looked at multidimensional poverty. Around 25 crore people have been pulled up from extreme poverty. Garibi Hatao didn't do that in 50 years.

Q. The Congress disagrees.

Inequality is the kind of debate Congress loves to have because they are anti-wealth creation. Do you think throwing that one lakh rupees, as the Congress promises, will meet a person's medical requirements, of education, of having a house or of getting drinking water in the house, or of getting cooking gas. It clearly shows the mentality of the Congress. Throw money at poverty and poverty will go away. That's why they also use this expression, "I have a magic wand with which I can remove poverty". You should have told your grandmother, even as a *bachcha* (child), that this is a magic wand but that you should use it, *Indiramma*, to remove poverty! These are very irresponsible ways of creating an illusion about how simple the problem is.

Q. Coming to private investment, are you disappointed that despite the government's actions, including reducing corporate tax, it remains sluggish? That corporates have not returned to the economy the profits that they have gained?

About the point whether they have returned to the economy, I think they have done it in the form of giving better dividends to their own shareholders. Most are not individually owned companies. There are small investors who put money in them who are also sitting and waiting for that golden day when they will get that money. So, dividends have gone to private, small investors as well. Second, they have paid tax. They have paid the banks back. So, your banks' health has been restored. It's not as if they have really not done much with it. But equally, I would also want our attention to go towards the investments that are happening in the newer areas, those who are investing in electric vehicles, setting up wind and solar parks. Then, in today's India, whether it's government bonds, or commercial borrowings, people find markets in India with money available for anybody to borrow from. The expression "crowding in" is actually happening now. Private money is coming into the markets. Companies are able to borrow from it. Government borrowing from the market has not put them out.

Q. So are you satisfied with the private investment that is coming in?

I would want it to be even more. There are newer areas. Renewable energy, API, medicines, large generic drug manufacturing are expanding in India. Look at the way API or



“Any amount of effort to contain inflation, because of the nature of the goods that come into the market and that make it to the poor man's thali, will always be inadequate”

active pharmaceutical ingredients are coming back into India. India was a leader in API at least 30 years ago. Gradually, we lost to predatory pricing from China. Today, government policy has made it attractive for companies to come back and set up API-producing units. And they are very high investment units, because API production involves a lot of processes that can pollute. To handle that pollution, they have to invest in pollution treatment plants and so on. Government is not setting up API units, the private sector is setting them up.

Q. Although we saw the landmark sale of Air India, a few other disinvestment announcements remain pending. What are the reasons and will they be taken up if your government is re-elected?

The cabinet has already given a list of items where disinvestment was approved. If we have not completed the disinvestment of those for which approval has been obtained from the cabinet, it's not as if we've left them there languishing. The valuation of such public sector companies has increased manifold. In fact, the lowest increase in valuation is 150 per cent. Some have even crossed a 1,000-fold increase in

valuation. We are serious about disinvesting them, and will find an opportune time to do so.

Q. Disinvestment is also a political hot potato. Are you concerned about the backlash from trade unions of the companies on the privatisation list?

Constantly putting that argument forward doesn't augur well. In Air India's case, consultations with the trade unions went on till the last minute. Tell me, after giving it over to a private bidder, has anyone been removed from a job? If anything, they have been given increased responsibility. And whoever has wanted to leave has been given a handshake that they couldn't even have imagined. So, when we are disinvesting, we are not unmindful or uncaring about the requirements of the people working there. Trade unions today are very realistic. They know what they are in for. They want the unit to be working, running and making profits. They want those institutions to work. They do not want them closed. So, our disinvestment is not for closing them. They are for selling them out as growing firms and their jobs are going to continue.

Q. What about asset monetisation? There are areas where not much progress seems to have been made.

In real estate, REITs (real estate investment trusts) and InvITs (infrastructure investment trusts) are two new tools of investments that have successfully managed to keep that sector alive. Today, real estate is doing well because there is demand and inventory too is getting cleared. Today, in the real estate sector, we work together with the states, and state governments have also conveniently changed registration stamp duties. Maharashtra, in particular, has done brilliant work, as a result of which all inventory has been cleared.

Q. Will the other areas of asset monetisation be taken up with more gusto?

We have to move on them, there's no doubt. The decision of the cabinet cannot be negotiated or disputed. But when and what is the opportune moment for doing that is the question.

Q. Manufacturing has remained stagnant with a contribution of just around 15 per cent to the economy on an average. Don't we need to kick it up to at least 20

per cent for jobs to grow?

I'm not even fixing a number. Manufacturing will have to grow. What model it has to take is a different story. Some would say "Copy China". Some would say don't do so. India will have to be *aatmanirbhar* (self-reliant) on many things it consumes, which the country is capable of producing. We need to prioritise things that we are currently importing but, eventually, it shouldn't stop there. It should expand to include other things as well. You need to have some manufacturing base without doubt.

“Do you think throwing one lakh rupees, as the Congress promises, will meet a person's medical requirements, education, having a house or getting drinking water?”

“PM Modi's vision is to make everyone create wealth for themselves. If people can earn on their own, save on their own, buy property, that itself lifts them to the next level.”

Q. What more can be done for the MSME (micro, small and medium enterprises) sector, which is a major engine of growth?

I don't want to begin by saying we've done a lot. But we have done a lot for MSMEs—changing their definition, giving them loans within 59 minutes on the ticker. They have to just go register and say this is the amount they want, and the approval comes within the 59th minute. Post that, they can always avail of the details. Sidbi (Small Industries Development Bank of India) has been given more and more money to finance MSMEs directly. I've sat with Sidbi to say there are some 300 clusters of MSMEs in this country, you should be present in most of them, physically. We've asked them to open branches in each of these clusters and where they cannot because of distance or something else, they deal with them online. Other than this, the 45-day payment—they said nobody is paying us (our dues) within 45 days. It had been an MSME law since 2008 or 2006. Nobody was obeying it. We made sure that payment is made within 45 days so that their monies were not locked up. For MSMEs, we are constantly sitting and listening to them and taking their suggestions forward. We'll continue to do that.

Q. Coming to Modi 3.0. What are the things we can look forward to if your party gets a third term?

The emphasis on infrastructure will continue. There will be a lot more access to different regions that even now are far-flung. The digital infrastructure will certainly be ramped up. Education, health will continue to see the concern they have been getting in the past few years. Skilling—we need people to be ready as soon as they finish their university courses to

be in a recruitable position. Today, industry grudges the fact that the graduates who come out of colleges take nearly a year on the job to get trained. That is not the investment any industry wants to make. We need our graduates to come out ready for jobs. And many of them who go abroad for jobs should have the necessary skill set along with the language of the country they go to. So we'll be placing a lot of emphasis on that. Also looking at artificial intelligence, getting people to become savvy in using tools that can be derived out of artificial intelligence, sunrise sectors—investments to be coming in for rare earths, utilisation of green ammonia, making sure that India continues to have that lead in the services sector, other than making sure manufacturing happens in India as in the defence sector.

Q. What are the key areas where further reforms or big changes are likely?

Technology-driven changes are going to be top priority. Of course, start-ups in the area of fintech, technology for solutions for rural livelihood, the mission lifestyle for environment. You need equipment, technology that can make our lives simpler and sustainable. We are also looking at India's capabilities in the field of generic drugs. Reforms can no longer be itemised, they have to be continuous and systematic. Systemic reforms, which have been waiting for some time, will have to be undertaken and taken down to the panchayat and local body level. Permission for setting up a unit in a panchayat, for instance. You think the panchayats are doing it simpler? You need to get them to do it a lot more transparently and simply.

Q. Will GST also see some changes, including rationalisation?

It's not an area ignored. There is a group of ministers and their report will have to be taken up to the next level after the post-election meeting by the GST Council.

Q. There are still many rough edges around Centre-State relations on GST and its sharing. How do you propose to address that?

I think this is a completely political game that the Opposition parties are playing. I challenge anyone to tell me if payment has been denied to a state, which is its due. I can, from the ministry of finance, tell you that, if anything, payments as per the recommendation of the Finance Commission have been done in time, sometimes well ahead of time. What I have to pay in January, I paid in December. What I have to pay in December, I have paid in November itself. But if you have a further issue to take up because of your performance or because of your population, or because of efficiencies that you brought in, you must talk to the next Finance Commission. It has already been constituted.

Q. This is what Tamil Nadu chief minister M.K. Stalin has said at election rallies, that of the one rupee his state contributes to the central exchequer, it gets back only 29 paise as its share of taxes.

What kind of an argument is this, sensationalising and creating rift between people? What if within Tamil Nadu, Coimbatore and its neighbourhood, who contribute substantially to the state's revenue, say, "No, give it all back to us." The district from where the chief minister comes—Thanjavur—will not get money. Or Sriperumbudur. Is this how they want the country to be covered? Are ports and international airport terminals not being constructed in Tamil Nadu? Are Vande Bharat trains not going to Tamil Nadu? Who pays for all this? For a product manufactured in Tamil Nadu, the buyers are from all over India. So the money you get as tax is not your own. It's contributed by all countrymen. How convoluted are these arguments?



“Manufacturing will have to grow. What model it will take is a different story. Some would say ‘Copy China’. Some would say don’t. India will have to be *aatmanirbhar*”

Q. It's not just Tamil Nadu, all the southern finance ministers have raised this question.

That's why I'm saying it is very political. Karnataka is raising it now because they have made unsustainable promises in the name of freebies and their own deputy chief minister goes about saying "I don't have any more money to give for development. That's it. Sorry, I've given it all for this." And then says, "Modi, you're not giving me money." Tell me which money Modi has not given you? These are completely politically distorted, opportunistic arguments. And if they have a point to make in terms of efficiencies that they have brought in, they should talk to the Finance Commission and not blame the Government of India.

Q. How would you address the delays in the IBC (Insolvency & Bankruptcy Code) process, which is still by far the most adequate mechanism to address insolvency issues?

IBC per se is not to be faulted, I think. It has been amended as per industry requirements so that it is more nimble. It is

“Reforms can no longer be itemised, they have to be continuous and systematic. Reforms that can be taken to the panchayat and local body level”

more ready to keep companies as going concerns rather than liquidating them. But there are certainly problems in filling NCLT (National Company Law Tribunal) and NCLAT (National Company Law Appellate Tribunal) vacancies, getting more true resolution professionals who come with certain skill sets and also have to be trained. Then, there are times when you will see a setback, when people game the system so that the old, discredited promoter himself wants to come in through the back door. We are, therefore, trying to build firewalls so that this doesn't happen. It is teething issues like these that have marred the progress of the IBC, but the IBC itself is not the problem. It's more the system that will have to be spruced up further so that it stands the test of time.

Q. Will Modi 3.0 see more consolidation of PSU banks and licences given to new private banks?

India needs a lot more banks, no doubt. A lot more big banks. At the same time, a lot of small banks as well, you need them on the ground, accessible in local areas. Small financing institutions are doing well and we need more of them as well. So, the banking system sector will have to be a

lot more vibrant. We are happy that we have restored Indian banks to good health, but the entire sector requires a lot more vibrancy and we need a lot more banks.

Q. How will the weakening rupee, along with the rising crude prices, impact the economy?

It will be a challenge, no doubt. But the rupee and its fluctuation against the dollar is not the story of the rupee against other currencies. It has been steady against other currencies, the fluctuations have been minimal. If it is fluctuating against the dollar, it's because of the strength of the dollar. And the US economy has given indications that it will become only stronger. So, we will have to see how we can meet that challenge, whether it's crude prices, exchange rate fluctuations, particularly against the dollar. And, on that, the Reserve Bank is also keeping a continuous eye.

Q. In the white paper that you brought out on the UPA's handling of the economy, you had criticised it for allowing the rupee to fall 36 per cent between 2011 and 2013. But the rupee has been falling substantially under the NDA too.

Isn't there a difference between the dollar becoming weak during the fragile five economy and today's economy, which is stronger, faster-growing where your GDP is expanding and you're aiming to become the third-largest in the world?

Q. The Sensex breaching the 75,000 mark. What does that reflect?

A sense of confidence in the Indian economy. Confidence in a stable majority government, with stable policies. Confidence in taxation, which does not keep going up and down. No flip-flops. That's what the stock market is showing.

Q. The prime minister is pitching for India to become a developed economy by 2047. Conservative estimates say you have to grow at close to 12 per cent compound annual growth rate. Do you have a blueprint to ensure that the target is met?

There are several things that I've told you already. We have to be consistent in our policy. We have to be supportive of every section of society. We need to root out corruption, otherwise people will be pilfering others' wealth and not really allowing the economy to grow. Every section of India has potential for export. Agriculture has big potential for export. Manufacturing has to come back to its good, glorious days. Similarly, the support being given to the services sector will have to be widened. Our defence exports have shown that if our policy mix is correct, they can perform. We need to do all this and continue doing it. But on a lighter note, we need people, at least in the Opposition parties, who believe in India. They don't have to tout the idea of India if they don't believe in our own people. Please don't undermine India's own people's credible achievements. ■

Summer Breeze

21°

COOL INNOVATIONS EXPLORING THE LATEST ECO-FRIENDLY AIR CONDITIONING TECHNOLOGIES

In an era where sustainability and energy efficiency are of paramount importance, the air conditioning industry has been working diligently to develop innovative technologies that address environmental concerns. In the first half of this article, we will delve into the sustainability aspect of modern air conditioning systems, while the latter half will focus on the cutting-edge technologies that have emerged in recent years.

Sustainability in Air Conditioning

The impact of air conditioning on the environment cannot be ignored, as traditional AC systems consume significant amounts of energy and contribute to greenhouse gas emissions. With increasing awareness about climate change and the need for eco-friendly solutions, manufacturers have been prioritizing the development of sustainable air conditioning systems that minimize environmental impacts while maintaining comfort and convenience for users.

One of the key sustainability trends in the air conditioning industry is the shift towards using eco-friendly refrigerants. The most commonly used refrigerants, hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs), have been found to be potent greenhouse gases with high global warming potentials (GWPs). As a result, the industry has started to transition towards using refrigerants with lower GWPs,

such as hydrofluoroolefins (HFOs) and natural alternatives like carbon dioxide and ammonia.

Another critical aspect of sustainable air conditioning is energy efficiency. High-efficiency air conditioning systems, particularly inverter-driven units, can significantly reduce energy consumption and, consequently, lower greenhouse gas emissions. Moreover, government regulations and energy efficiency standards, such as the SEER (Seasonal Energy Efficiency Ratio) and EER (Energy Efficiency Ratio) ratings, have encouraged manufacturers to develop more efficient systems.

Additionally, the integration of renewable energy sources like solar power has opened up new possibilities for sustainable cooling solutions. Solar-assisted air conditioning systems utilize solar thermal collectors or photovoltaic panels to supplement the electricity required to operate the AC unit, reducing the overall energy consumption and carbon footprint.

Emerging Technologies in Air Conditioning



As we shift our focus to the technological side of modern air conditioning, it's clear that innovation is driving the industry forward. One such advancement is the development of smart air conditioning systems. These units utilize advanced sensors and internet connectivity to optimize performance, improve energy efficiency, and enhance user convenience. Features such as remote control through smartphone apps, voice control compatibility with smart home systems, and machine learning algorithms for adaptive temperature control are transforming the way we interact with our AC units.

Another promising innovation in air conditioning technology is the implementation of air purification systems. As indoor air quality becomes a growing concern, many manufacturers are incorporating advanced filtration technologies, such as HEPA filters, activated carbon filters, and UV-C light disinfection, into their AC units. These features not only ensure a comfortable temperature but also provide cleaner and healthier indoor air by removing pollutants, allergens, and pathogens.

Thermally driven air conditioning systems, which use heat sources instead of electricity to

power the cooling process, are also gaining traction. These systems rely on absorption or adsorption chillers and can utilize waste heat or renewable energy sources, such as solar or geothermal power, to provide efficient and eco-friendly cooling.

Lastly, advancements in materials science have led to the development of phase change materials (PCMs) for use in air conditioning systems. PCMs can store and release thermal energy, helping to regulate indoor temperatures and reduce the workload on the AC unit. By incorporating PCMs into building materials or integrating them into AC systems, energy consumption can be further reduced, contributing to a greener and more sustainable cooling solution.

In conclusion, the air conditioning industry has made significant strides in both sustainability and technology, with eco-friendly innovations driving the sector forward. As we continue to prioritize environmental concerns, it is crucial that we embrace these advancements in air conditioning to ensure a more sustainable and comfortable future.

BRING HOME WOOD-FINISH, NATURE-INSPIRED ACS & REFRIGERATORS BY GODREJ APPLIANCES



Elevate your home décor with appliances that complement and add warmth into your home. A survey of Indian households showed over 70% homeowners want more options of appliances that suit their home décor better and more than half wanted everything to be well-matched in their home. The survey also revealed how Indian homes exude warmth while appliances operate in a relatively cold space with glass and steel in blacks and silvers.

Furthermore, rapidly changing cities with large multi-storeyed buildings are replacing

independent houses and consumers are getting distanced from nature. Taking inspiration from nature, Godrej Appliances has launched 'Eon Vogue' series of nature-inspired wood-finish Refrigerators and Air Conditioners to complement Indian homes, while keeping the practicality intact. With a unique blend of aesthetics and technology, these appliances offer the best of all worlds – aesthetics and functionality, and are also water, stain, and scratch resistant making them easy to clean and durable.

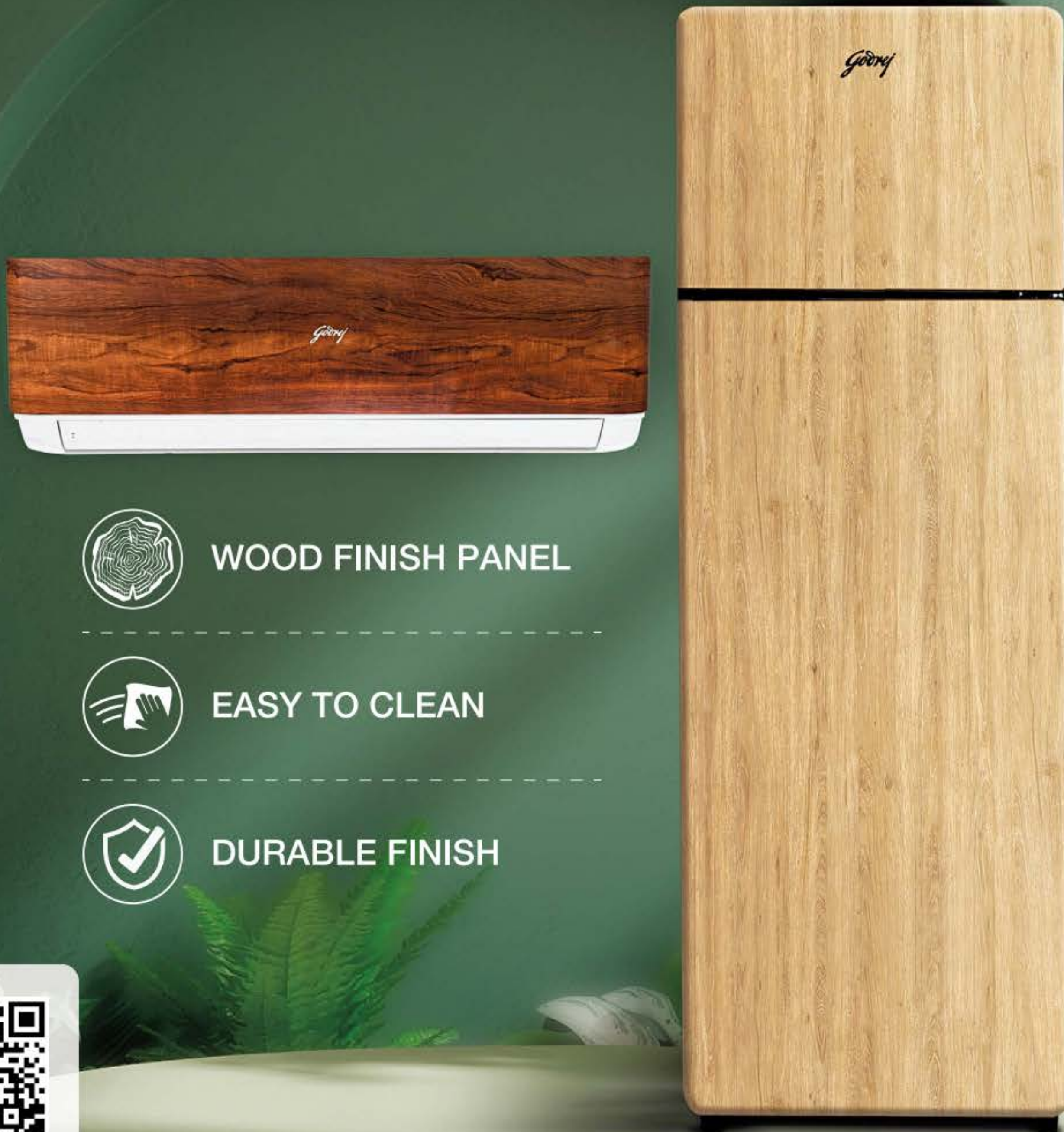
The Godrej Eon Vogue refrigerators are

available in two shades oak and walnut wood, in 272 L and 244 L capacities with distinct features such as 95%+ surface disinfection through Nano Shield Disinfection technology (patent applied), larger vegetable storage, and patented Cool Shower Technology amongst other features. The air conditioners are available in three shades - cypress, teak and mahogany in 1.5 Tr. capacity and comes equipped with 5-in-1 Convertible Technology for power saving, 4-way swing for more comfort, and heavy-duty cooling even at 52°C.

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MANDATE 2024 | CHHATTISGARH

CONGRESS 'EQ' VS BJP 'IQ'

TEAM MODI IS RIDING ON ITS ASSEMBLY POLL MOMENTUM, BUT THE CONGRESS'S CLEVER CANDIDATE MIX MAY PREVENT A WASHOUT

BY RAHUL NORONHA

F

ive years back, an upbeat Congress in Chhattisgarh went into the 2019 general election riding high on the success of the 2018 assembly polls in which it had won 68 of 90 seats and unseated the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the state after one and a half decades. Good fortunes seemed to await even in the Lok Sabha election. However, in stark contrast to the assembly election outcome, it was the BJP that emerged victorious, winning nine of the 11 Lok Sabha seats in Chhattisgarh. Now, with the state voting in three phases for the 2024 general election, the question on most people's minds is whether the Congress can pull a BJP on the BJP, and reverse the

verdict of the 2023 assembly polls, which saw 54 of 90 seats painted saffron. It won't be an easy feat, concede political observers, as the BJP retains the one weapon in its arsenal that had helped it steal a march over the Congress in 2019—the overwhelming public support for Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Yet, despite that draw, the Congress is not out of the race in Chhattisgarh, feel some.

The three-phase polling schedule in the state has been drawn up primarily with an eye on security arrangements in Chhattisgarh's Maoist-hit areas. While Bastar, a hotbed of Maoist insurgency, voted on April 19, Mahasamund, Rajnandgaon

and Kanker will hold elections in the second phase on April 26 and the seven remaining seats in Chhattisgarh go to the polls on May 7. The counting of votes will take place on June 4. The Congress has taken care to play its cards well, fielding candidates who combine political gravitas with the right caste arithmetic. "PM Modi remains the single-largest factor for the BJP in Chhattisgarh, as in other states. However, the Congress, by choosing strong local candidates successfully, has sown the idea that there is going to be a real contest in certain seats, and victory [for the BJP] is not a foregone conclusion," says Sudeep Shrivastava, political analyst and senior advocate at the Chhattisgarh High Court.

This seems especially true in seats like Bastar, Kanker, Rajnandgaon, Janjgir-Champa and Korba, where the Congress is perceived to have a competitive critical mass vis-a-vis the BJP, unlike in Raipur, Bilaspur, Mahasamund, Durg, Surguja and Raigarh where the latter is seen to have a clear advantage. The forecast is partly based on the performance of the 2019 election in which the Congress had won Bastar and Korba and lost Kanker by a small margin of 6,914 votes.

The voter turnout in Bastar—where one Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) jawan was killed on polling day in an accidental grenade explosion and an assistant commandant of the CRPF was injured when an IED allegedly planted by Naxals went off—was 68.3 per cent. This year, the Congress fielded seasoned politician and former minister Kawasi Lakhma in Bastar. He was pitted against the BJP's Mahesh Kashyap, a fresh face. In Kanker, the Congress candidate is Biresh Thakur, son of late Congress MLA Satyanarayan Singh Thakur. Biresh, who had contested unsuccessfully from the same seat in 2019, has been active in the area in the past five years and expects to benefit from constituency-level anti-incumbency. Perhaps in an attempt to counter this, the BJP candi-

What works for the two parties



BHARATIYA JANATA PARTY

➤ **The Modi factor. There appears to be no viable alternative to the PM, making him the single-largest poll plank for BJP**

➤ **Well-oiled BJP election machinery and organisation, which has recently delivered Chhattisgarh to the party in the 2023 assembly election. Also, more financial muscle**

➤ **Delivery on major election promises made ahead of last year's assembly polls**



CONGRESS

➤ **The Congress manifesto is said to be finding resonance among women voters and youth**

➤ **Presence of traditional vote bank of Congress in the state among tribals and Scheduled Castes**

➤ **Better social engineering on display in ticket distribution**

date here is Bhojraj Nag, who replaces sitting party MP Mohan Mandavi. In Rajnandgaon, the Congress has fielded former CM Bhupesh Baghel, who is not just expected to secure the support of his Kurmi caste but also get the votes of other farming communities owing to his pro-agriculture initiatives as CM between 2018 and 2023. He had attained good popularity during his chief ministerial stint, and the Congress's assembly poll defeat last year is usually ascribed to the BJP's superior election management and Congress infighting—not any individual deficit. Moreover, Santosh Pandey, the BJP's sitting MP who has been fielded again from the seat, is facing a degree of anti-incumbency, say political observers.

Further, in keeping with what appears to be a carefully drawn-up list of candidates, the Congress has given tickets to two members of the influential Sahu community in the state, whereas the BJP has given ticket to only one. The move seems to be an attempt by the opposition party to hunt right inside the rival's territory—Sahus, a part of the other backward classes (OBCs), have traditionally voted for the BJP and are believed to have been a major contributing factor to its victory in the 2023 assembly election. Similarly, the Gonds, said to account for around 55 per cent of the state's tribal population and the single-largest tribal group in the state, have also gone unrepresented in the BJP's ticket distribution. The party has instead fielded non-Gond tribals in the four seats of Kanker, Bastar, Surguja and Raigarh, which are reserved for candidates from the Scheduled Tribes (ST). While the Congress is doing its best to use this against the ruling party—it has fielded Gond candidates in all four seats—the BJP in its campaign is seeking credit for giving the state its first tribal CM. Vishnu Deo Sai is a member of the Kanwar tribal community, with a sizeable presence in northern districts like Surguja.

The saffron party is also seek-



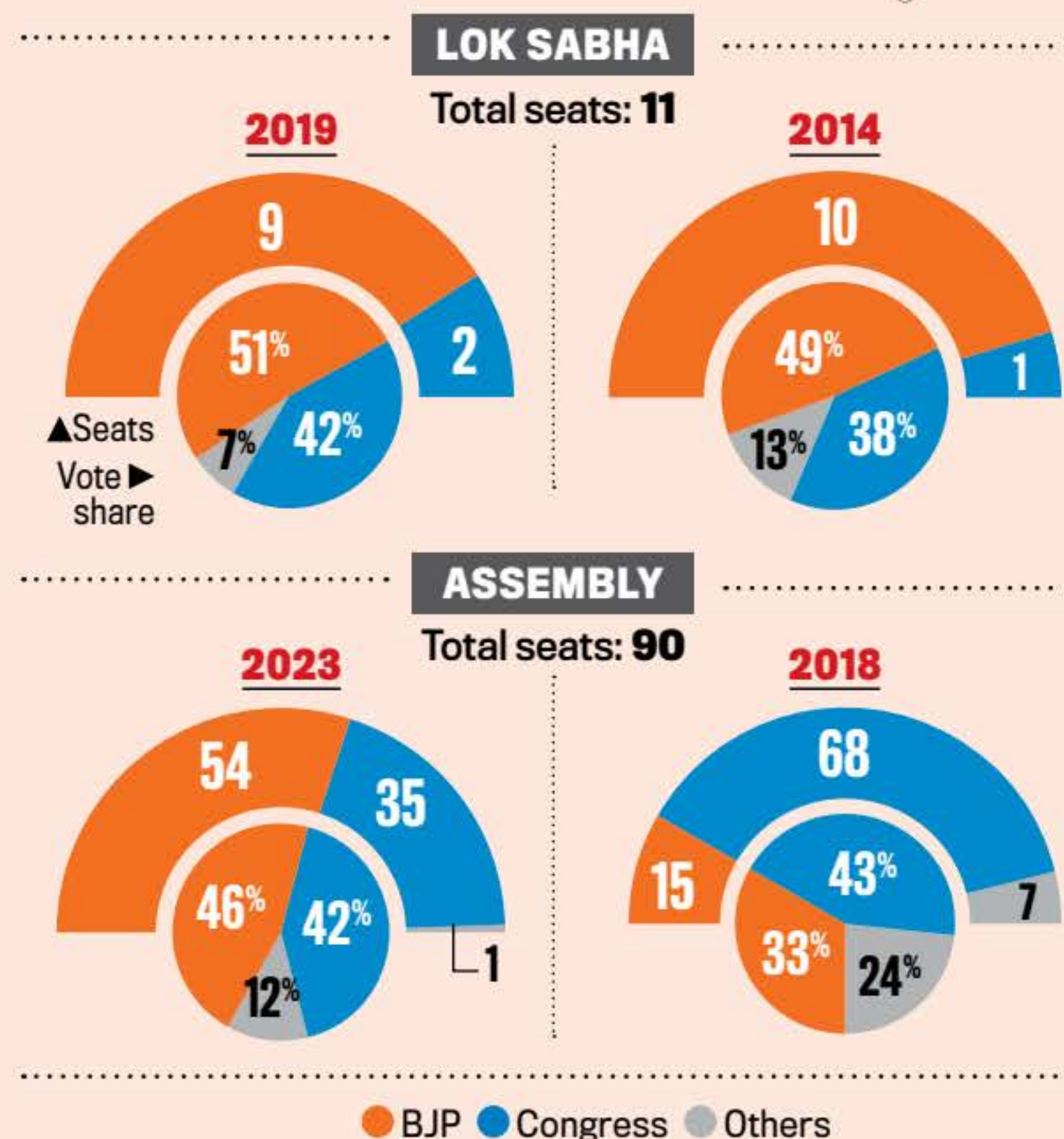
ing votes citing the “delivering on poll promises of 2023” and using its tried-and-tested Hindutva and “Christian conversion” cards to reach out to voters. The killing of a Yadav youth in Chhattisgarh, allegedly by Muslims, ahead of the consecration of the Balak Ram idol at the Ram mandir in Ayodhya in January, is being repeatedly revisited, especially on social media platforms.

As far as the state is concerned, the honouring of promises made to the electorate before the assembly election, including procurement of paddy at Rs 3,100 per quintal, payment of bonus of past two years [on paddy procurement], launch of the Mahtari Vandan Yojana [under which Rs 1,000 is paid per month to eligible women], all within 100 days of the Vishnu Deo Sai government taking over, are issues that the BJP is raising. At the national level, the works done by the Modi government in the past 10 years are being highlighted,” says Pankaj Jha, media advisor to the Chhattisgarh CM. He further claims: “Conversely, the absence of a credible choice as PM in the Opposition ranks and the corrupt government run by the Congress in the past five years in Chhattisgarh will cost the party dear in the state.”

However, the Congress seems intent on taking a page out of the BJP’s own book. While ahead of the 2023 election, the BJP had got its cadre to go door-to-door to fill up forms for the proposed Mahtari Vandan Yojana, the Congress is doing the same now for the Rs 1 lakh annual scheme for eligible women announced as part of its 2024 manifesto. “All issues relevant for other states are relevant for Chhattisgarh too. We are raising the failure of the Modi government to provide jobs to the youth, failure on the environmental front, not giving women their due. The promises made by the Congress in its manifesto, especially the Mahalaxmi Scheme under which eligible women would get Rs 1 lakh per year, will be a game-changer,” declared Chhattisgarh Congress spokesperson, Sushil Anand Shukla. Despite its confident

SAFFRON SPREAD

The Modi wave had ensured victory for the BJP in 2014 and 2019, even though the Congress managed one assembly win in 2018



THE 2023 VERDICT WAS ASCRIBED TO THE BJP’S TACTICAL SKILLS AND FEUDS WITHIN CONGRESS. BHUPESH BAGHEL, IN THE FRAY FROM RAJNANDGAON, WAS A POPULAR CM

demeanour, however, the Congress is battling defections in the state—former Bilaspur mayor Vani Rao, former state general secretary Chandrashekar Shukla, sitting Jagdalpur mayor Safira Sahu and Bilaspur district panchayat president Arun Chauhan are among those who have quit the Congress to join the BJP ranks ahead of the election. The Bahujan Samaj Party’s two tribal Christian candidates—Innocent Kujur and Sanjay Ekka, fielded from Raigarh and Surguja, respectively—are also likely to cut into the Congress vote bank in these seats, with political observers hinting at a possible tacit understanding between the BJP and the BSP.

As a senior BJP leader told INDIA TODAY, “The BJP has displayed higher political IQ in the state time and again but, looking at the ticket distribution, the Congress has displayed greater EQ [emotional quotient].” Victory would require a balance of both. ■

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FASHION

The Master of Drapes

Fashion grandee **Tarun Tahiliani** speaks about his upcoming craft showcase in Venice and his recent commemorative volume

Photograph by BANDEEP SINGH

Tahiliani's pichwai, **The Shikargah**, will be part of the Homo Faber exhibition in Venice in September

I

"I think some of the best things in life happen by accident," says celebrated couturier Tarun Tahiliani. Over the past three decades of his illustrious run, he has scripted several milestones—each of which can be credited for reinforcing the 'India Modern' aesthetic much before it became a buzzword.

Tahiliani's design language has always been rooted in Indian craft. So it's hardly surprising that one of his works—a Pichwai called 'The Shikargah'—that was earlier showcased at the India Art Fair 2024 will now be part of the Homo Faber

craft of surface embellishment," says Tahiliani.

He recalls the time during the first Covid lockdown when uncertainty loomed large over the future of migrant labour. To keep the artisans busy and offer them reassurance, the idea of making wall hangings was conceived. "This wasn't an altruistic project, but it certainly gave us something to think about. We painted motifs, printed the designs, experimented with them and, eventually, I went to this master craftsman in Lucknow who runs a unit in aari embroidery," he shares.

"We then brought in mother-of-pearl from Banaras, and a supplier in Jaipur who would hand-cut these champa flowers and shells. It somehow became a fun collaboration. There was no financial mo-

Tahiliani admits to having drifted to embroideries over time but he continues to be excited about the possibilities of everyday wear

exhibition in Venice in September during the biennale season.

'The Shikargah' is akin to the mythical Garden of Eden, as observed through intricately detailed *jaalis* on a door framing its archway. Within this enchanting scene, fantastical flora and fauna harmoniously co-exist. It employs techniques like the Dob (the art of embroidering on paper or cardboard inserts) alongside French knots, mother-of-pearl hand carving and layering. "Embroidery represents the highest form of Indian craft, and our craftsmen are the best in the world. It's also partly economic because a lot of people from villages do not get to go to school...so this is the traditional

tive or immediate plan on what to do with this," Tahiliani elaborates.

When they came out of the lockdown and the Tarun Tahiliani Design Studio began using this technique on lehengas, it became their top-selling collection. Eventually, the embroidery was spotlighted on walls at their stores. "It helped look at embroidery organically, not just as something meant for clothes, but as an art form on its own," he says.

Tahiliani is not just a 'master of drapes'—a moniker he has earned over time—but also a storyteller par excellence. His recent commemorative volume, *Journey to India Modern*, co-authored



Indic Arts

An eye-catching repository of quintessentially Indian design elements

with journalist Alia Allana, offers a peek into exclusively commissioned photography and spans the quantum of Tahiliani's life from his early years, the launch of the iconic Ensemble in 1987 that gave Indian designers a platform for the first time, to the eventual culmination of the legacy he has created with his eponymous label and brand since 1995. "*Journey to India Modern* was also to show that in our society, we rely principally on the drape form and a little thing called a *nada patti* which can be seen on a churidar, petticoat or on the back of a choli," he adds.

Reminiscing about his showcase at the Milan Fashion Week way back in 2003, Tahiliani says they were the first designers to show from India. "It was a catalyst to doing modern clothes...I started the show in Milan with just a sari and ended it with three lehengas. There was a whole world in between...wrap corsets, jodhpur trousers, chikan-kari pantsuits and more. We were ahead of our time."

Tahiliani admits to having drifted to embroideries over time but he continues to be excited about the possibilities of everyday wear. "My next project is to start a really cool ready-to-wear line using just one element. Wouldn't someone love to wear a plain shirt with a fine chikan collar that can be paired with a skirt, sari or pants?"

It's not just this collection that has him on his toes but also a standalone museum show, to be held in February 2025 at the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore. "We are juxtaposing work with beautiful treasures from the museum," he says. Tahiliani is also dressing a philanthropist at the Met Gala, the biggest night in fashion. "I never thought so much effort goes into one dress and look...in that sense, it is fashion's biggest parade," he says. ■

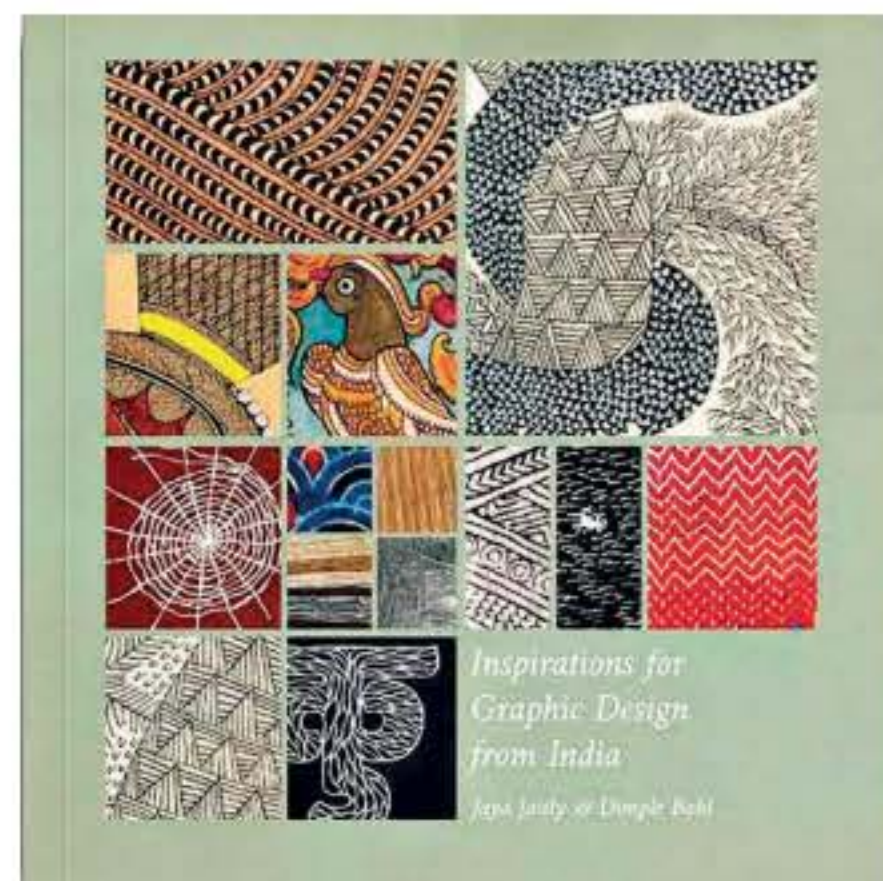
—Geetika Sachdev

INSPIRATIONS FOR GRAPHIC DESIGN FROM INDIA,

by Jaya Jaitly & Dimple Bahl

ARTHSILA TRUST

₹1,500; 156 pages



Inspirations for Graphic Design from India is a beautifully produced book, revelling in the many luscious examples of the traditional crafts of India. They are a delight in design, colour and boldness, and filled with an undeniable graphic quality.

This is of interest for two reasons. First, many of these are living traditions, threatened by industrialisation but conserved by the efforts of governments since the 1950s, especially in the area of textiles. These efforts have now taken root, and these traditional designs are being welcomed into modern living, going beyond the urban elite that first eagerly consumed them. The traditional and the modern are in a creative tension that we are navigating in our own ways, every day.

Along with this, the design commentary, perhaps exhausted by modernism, or consumed by an aching for its roots, often cries out for an 'Indian' design idiom. The relevance

of this is a fraught subject too large for this space. But from it arises a tendency to quote, to copy and paste, traditional art into modern containers. Such quotation is not assimilation, where an influence is internalised and not obvious, which *sookshma drishti* (a subtle vision) alone could recognise as *prerana*, the breath of inspiration in the design, rather than becoming its body or decorating its surface.

The book's title may suggest such an exploration. It presents its body of works as examples of the *bindu* (point/dot), *rekha* (line), *aakar* (form) and several others. These overlap with the foundational elements used to teach graphic design in the European birthplaces of modern

graphic design education. What could be more fundamental? To be reminded that a line divides—and creates texture—is useful refresher material to any designer, and revelatory to the interested non-designer.

The introduction tells us that these design fundamentals were known to the ancients, but I did not find wonder at this; I would have been surprised if the ancients, always smart fellows, had not thought these up. At other times, the commentary offers a stripping of the design element down to its very metaphysics. Coupled with the Sanskritic and other sources, they may serve to impress or mystify rather than enlighten.

But don't let my scepticism stop you. This book, with its traditional and contemporary examples, repurposes the traditional design arts of India. It is also a gateway to other collections and books, and a compact source of inspiration. Of course, the pleasure of looking is its own reward. ■

—Itu Chaudhuri

To be reminded that a line divides, and creates texture, is useful refresher material to any designer





▶ Let the Music Play

MUSIC



▶ EK THA RAJA Badshah

Rapper and pop star Badshah follows up last year's collab-heavy EP *3:00 AM Sessions* with yet another star-studded lineup of guest stars on his new album *Ek Tha Raja*. He teams up with former *Mafia Mundeer* crewmate Raftaar and frequent collaborator Aastha Gill on the club-friendly 'Like a Snake', trades bars with indie rappers Seedhe Maut ('Bajenge') and Raga ('Alag Hai'), and even drafts Arijit Singh and Nora Fatehi for vocal duties.



From commercial hip-hop to old-school conscious rap, from **peppy, pop-leaning indie-rock** to **earthy avant-folk** experiments, these new releases have something for everyone

D.O.N.L.Y.F ◀ Shaikhspeare

One of the OGs of Mumbai underground rap, Shaikhspeare returns to the lime-light with *D.O.N.L.Y.F*, a boombap-infused conscious rap album that takes a stark look at India's contemporary ills. The rabble-raising 'Bol'—which features a guest verse by Kolkata rapper EPR Iyer—borrows its hook from a Faiz Ahmed Faiz poem and takes aim at the communalisation of contemporary politics. 'Ashfaqullah Khan' is a braggadocio cut where Shaikhspeare recasts himself in the mould of the Indian independence icon. Elsewhere, the inward-looking 'Aamir' chronicles the rapper's journey to music as a child from a conservative Muslim family.

MUSEUM, Tejas ▶

Mumbai indie singer-songwriter Tejas Menon fuses Indian classical music with his trademark blend of pop, soul and synth-wave electronics on his new EP *Museum*. The sarangi and Hindustani classical vocals rub shoulders with shimmering synths and gospel choirs on song-length ruminations on identity and personal history, inspired by the recent passing of his father. It's four tracks of grandly ambitious and intimately cathartic music.



AN ODE TO LOVE

IP Singh and Rajarshi Sanyal—the duo behind **Faridkot**—tell us about their new collection of tracks, *Ibtida*

One of India's most popular pop-rock bands, Faridkot—composed of the duo IP Singh and Rajarshi Sanyal—is back after a hiatus with *Ibtida*, an EP with five tracks. This EP with music giant T-Series, says Sanyal, has everything to do with love. "It's the first time we've made an entire album on love that manifests in different forms. It's not just romantic love but love for our art, nature or humanity."

Ibtida includes tracks like 'Ek Samay' and 'Main Na Jaanu Kyu' with singer Jubin Nautiyal and 'Chhad



KATTAR KINNAR

Kinari

Formerly known as Finsta, rapper Kinari combines the flamboyant sexuality of *mujra* and ballroom dance with the rough rhythms of North Chennai *gaana* and the hazy belligerence of contemporary New Delhi trap. Over producer Nasbandi's sparse, moody compositions, Kinari raps in explicit, softly sinister rhymes about life as a Tamil trans woman in New Delhi, with its sultry joys and grimy material struggles. Steeped in a strong, thoughtfully enunciated critique of mainstream Indian society, *Kattar Kinnar* is an explicit portrayal of queer life and love, unrestrained by the straight gaze or notions of 'respectability'.



(Below left) Rajarshi Sanyal; IP Singh



Ke Na Jaa' with Raghav Chaitanya, among others. As always, their soft spot for collaborations takes centre stage in this EP. "Every time such versatile artists come on board, they bring their unique character and soul to our tracks. Their voice has helped to take our music to a new dimension," says Singh.

Between their last album in 2014, *Phir Se*, and now, the musicians released several

SATURN RETURN

Dee En



On their upcoming EP *Saturn Return*, New Delhi band Dee En trades the jangly guitars and fuzzy psychedelia of their earlier work for cosmic grooves and gleaming synths. The EP's six tracks draw from contemporary hip-hop and 1980s electronica to craft a cosmic new sound with the slickness and sophistication of space-age pop. Disco synths and glitchy percussion of opener 'Darling' are anchored to the ground by guest musician Rohit Gupta's earthy trumpet, while Sijya contributes her ethereal voice to the shimmering club-pop of 'Troglydte', songs that—like the rest of the EP—reference Saturn's 30-year-trip around the sun as a metaphor for the journey from birth to adulthood.

An alumnus of Bengaluru's forward-thinking indie-electronic label and collective *Consolidate*, Rishabh Iyer (aka Khus Fir) already has a reputation for defying categories. He continues in the same vein on the independently released *Forts and Forests*, its 10 tracks incorporating Indian folk percussion, hand-picked acoustic guitar and warbling electronics into a sound that belongs nowhere and everywhere. Over it all soars Rishabh's voice, occasionally crooning, occasionally in a Bob Dylan-esque drawl, always enchanting.

—Bhanuj Kappal

FORTS AND FORESTS

Khus Fir



singles, including the chartbuster 'Nasha' in collaboration with Amar Jalal, later featured in Ayushmann Khurrana's *An Action Hero*. "Previously, people were listening to singles and making

their playlists. With the Covid-19 lockdown, more attention was paid to new music. Today, albums are gradually making a comeback with people listening to music in longer stretches. We thought it was the right time to release this collection of tracks," adds Sanyal.

Thus, it's almost fitting that *Ibtida* also translates into 'new beginnings'. "We would also like to dedicate this EP to

our new studio that we opened this year in Mumbai. It's a happy, warm space to create music," mentions Singh.

After 2014, the duo moved to Mumbai and admit it took them some time to adapt. "It was exciting and scary at the same time and took up a lot of our energy. We are comfortable where we are, and are hoping to release more albums," says Singh. ■

—Geetika Sachdev

Ibtida includes tracks with singers Jubin Nautiyal and Raghav Chaitanya, among others

THE HOME THAT WAS

A soon-to-launch gallery at the Partition Museum in Delhi will showcase artefacts capturing 'The Lost Homeland of Sindh'

Across much of the literature, cultural discourse and historiography around the Partition of India, stories from Punjab and Bengal tend to dominate—these were, after all, the places where the most bloodshed and suffering took place during the 1946-48 period. However, the Sindh region also saw substantial migration in this era, with one big qualitative difference. While the Punjabi and Bengali migrants or refugees had states or regions they could call 'home' in the newly-formed India, Sindhi migrants had no such recourse. Partially as a result of this, today those migrants and their families lament the diminishing influence of Sindhi food, language and culture.

The Partition Museum in Delhi, in association with the Sindhi Culture Foundation, is launching a new gallery called 'The Lost Homeland of Sindh'. Aruna Madnani from the Sindhi Culture Foundation is the curator for this Sindh-specific gallery. Following the style of the existing galleries at the Partition Museum, 'The Lost Homeland of Sindh' will feature a range of artefacts across media—recreations of ancestral homes, objects carried



by Sindhi refugees during their exodus, news clippings from the late 1940s, video interviews with Sindhi migrants/refugees that visitors can watch/listen to on headphones.

Kishwar Desai, chairperson of the Arts and Cultural Heritage Trust, which runs the Partition Museum, says, "Aruna Madnani, myself and a few others who had been involved with the Museum from day one, wanted a gallery dedicated

LOOKING BACK IN TIME (Clockwise from the right) 'The Lost Homeland of Sindh' gallery at the Partition Museum in Delhi; and Kishwar Desai (left) with Aruna Madnani

Photographs by RAJWANT RAWAT



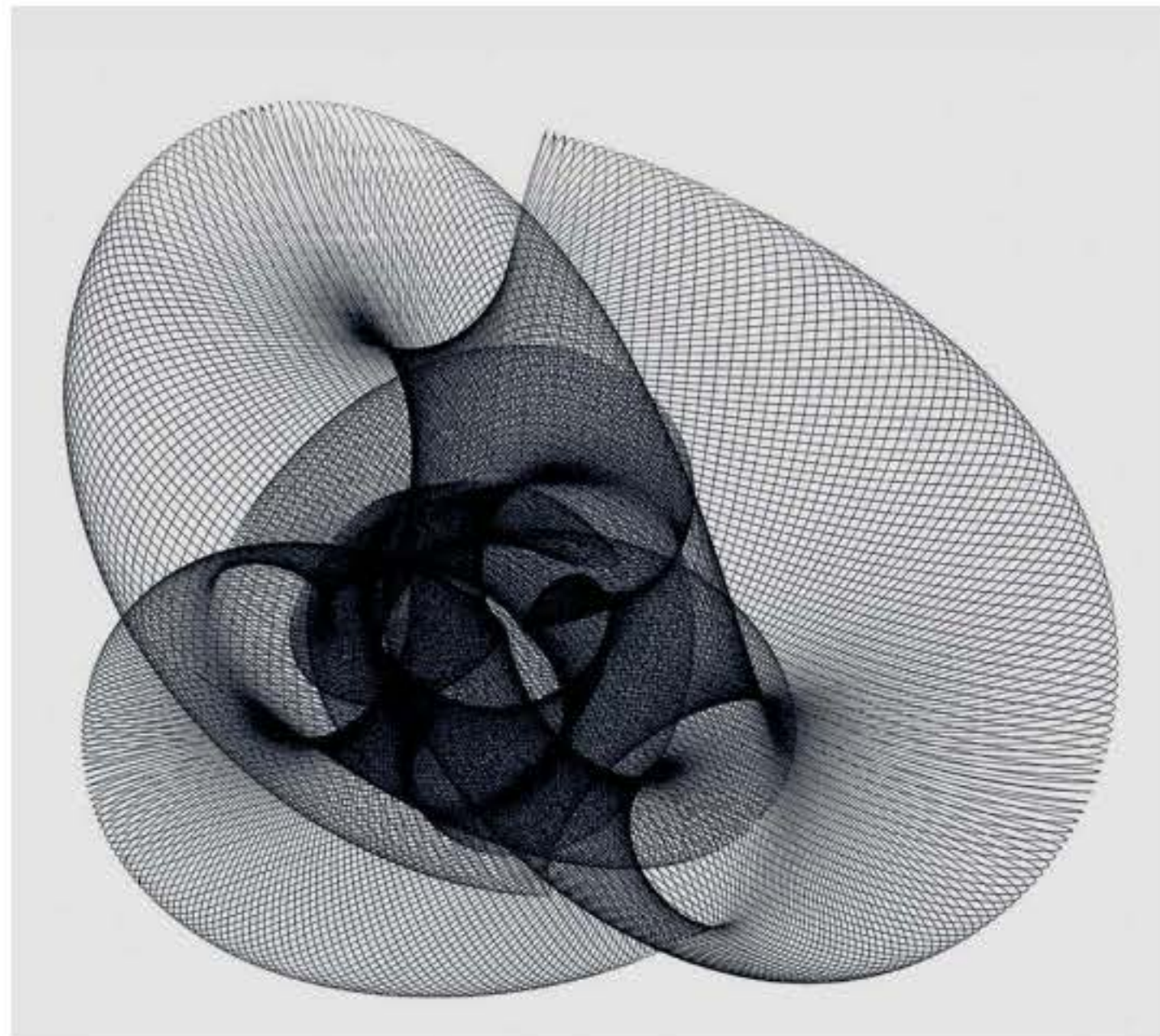
to Sindh for a long time. Like Punjabi or Bengali migrants, Sindhis were people who lost everything: their land, their families, their culture, and they rebuilt everything here from scratch, in a lot of cases. These stories deserved to be told."

Even before the creation of this gallery, the Partition Museum had always featured a number of historically important exhibits pertaining to Sindh. For example, there is a news clipping that talks about Harijans in Sindh being forcibly prevented from migration—the Pakistani authorities cited 'the Essential Services Ordinance' to keep the Harijans (most of whom were engaged in janitorial/cleaning work) in Pakistan. Choithram Gidwani, the then president

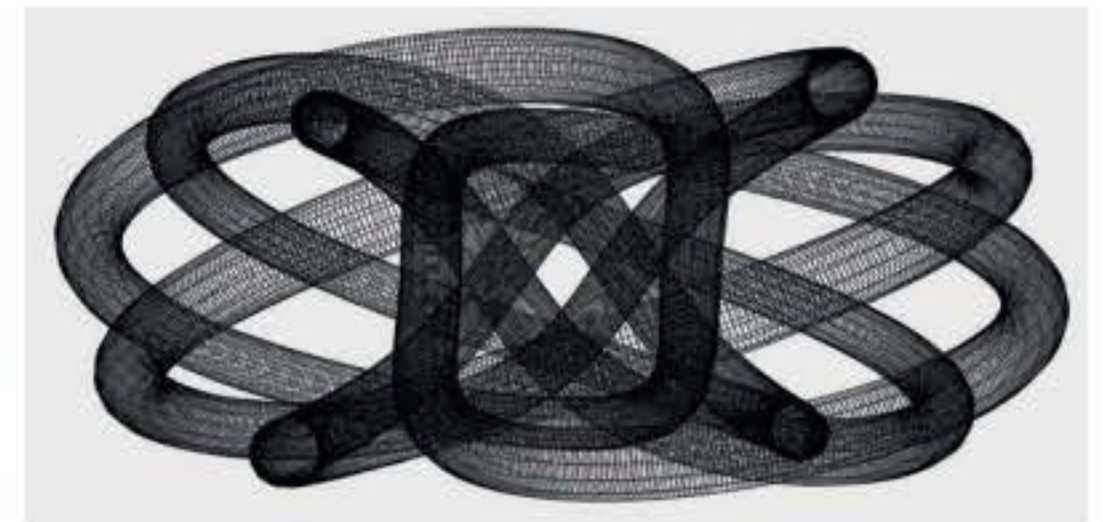
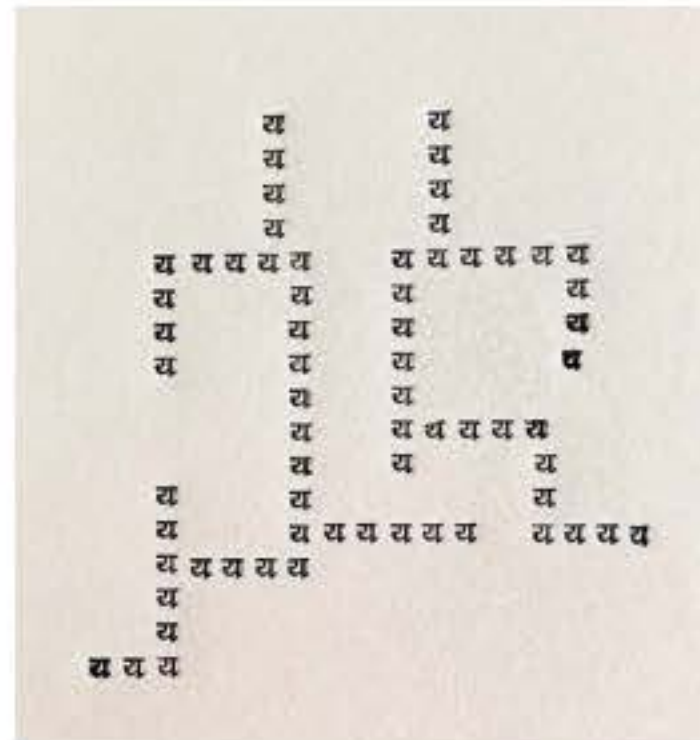
of Sindh's Provincial Congress Committee, wrote to B.R. Ambedkar (then the law minister of India) complaining about this and requesting help. Similarly, there are video interviews with migrants who tell us the story of how Gandhidham (in Kutch, Gujarat) was visualised and set up as a place of re-settlement for Sindhi migrants. A piece of cloth embroidered by a Sindhi migrant, photographs of 'Sindhi camps' in Delhi and elsewhere are other pertinent examples.

"The response to the Partition Museum, especially from Sindhi visitors, has been fabulous and so heartening," says Desai. "We hope that they will find their voices represented in 'The Lost Homeland of Sindh'."

—Aditya Mani Jha

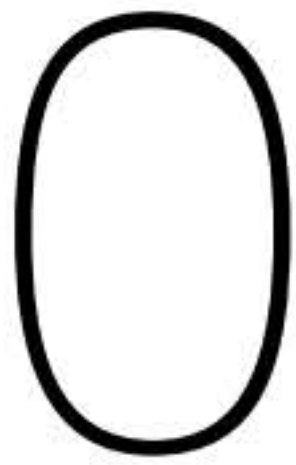


ON DISPLAY(Clockwise from the right) Primers from Poonam Jain's Practice Book series, Yogesh Barve's *Figure of Line-Torus Knot in Ortho*; Jain's Year 66 Devanagari; and Barve's *Figure of Line-Stardust*



EXHIBITION *Subversive* IN SUBURBLIA

A MONTH-LONG SHOW AT ART AND CHARLIE, MUMBAI, SHOWCASING THE WORKS OF **POONAM JAIN** AND **YOGESH BARVE** POSES SEVERAL QUESTIONS TO THE VIEWER



One visionary curator plus two talented artists with subversive tendencies who've known each other for over a decade equals one extraordinary exhibition that asks *Three Questions At Once* (like its title), if not several more! The show by Poonam Jain and Yogesh Barve will be on between April 26 and May 25, at Art and Charlie in Mumbai's hip suburb of Bandra.

Curator Zeenat Nagree tells us how, at the core of the exhibition, is the idea that in whatever we create in our lives, and even in our daily activities, we carry certain questions with us. These questions even question how we engage with the world. While Jain's take is more of an examination of the past and its fast-fading relevance in the present, Barve's gaze is towards the future and whether or not we should

hop on to the trajectory of technology. So different in concept and creation and yet so complementary as a theme.

This is an exhibition where you can leave all rules at the door. Nagree explains how this plays out, with her curatorial text printed on two decks of cards, one for each artist. The decks feature text on artworks but also cheeky instructions on how one can engage with the artworks. She says, "I want[ed] to use this to challenge how an exhibition is viewed. Even if people do not enact the instructions, the ideas are inserted in their minds. For example, what if you read the letters on Poonam's prints out loud? What if you tried to count the lines on one of Yogesh's drawings?"

Expect drawings, letterpress prints, etchings, a video, and an interactive installation, and singer and actor Suman Sridhar reading Jain's letterpress prints of Devanagari letters as scores on opening night. The ground floor of the space

is filled with kilos and kilos of the small circles produced when a set of papers is punched for spiral binding. "The audience will have to wade through this paper as if they are on a beach. Our usual instinct is to not touch paper with our feet, but this breaks that rule. We are confronted with residues of the kind of archiving activity that happens around us every day. The work addresses what is left out, what falls through the

holes," says Nagree. The space also has an LCD screen on which Barve's video *Global III* plays. The video isn't visible to the naked eye as the screen's polariser film has been taken off and the video can only be seen through polarised glasses. Apparently, this strategy came from concerns with passive engagement.

Whatever way you interpret the diverse work, one thing is for sure, the show gives you a fresh feel of freedom and unpacks some food for thought too. ■

—Priya Pathiyan

At the core of the exhibition, is the idea that in whatever we create in our lives, and even in our daily activities, we carry certain questions with us



THE HACHETTE BOOK OF INDIAN DETECTIVE FICTION
 Edited by Tarun K. Saint
 HACHETTE
 ₹1,299; 848 pages

BOOKS

WITH OUR OWN DESI SLEUTHS

Indian detective fiction gets its due in this massive, two-volume compilation from Hachette

In the introduction to the two-volume *The Hachette Book of Indian Detective Fiction*, editor Tarun K. Saint writes that the project's intention is "further reinvention" of the genre "in a subcontinental context with cutting-edge work".

To that effect, only a handful of entries successfully satisfy this tall order, the standout being Sumit Bard-

han's 'Death of an Actress' that serves a bizarre but satisfying twist to the contemporary private detective story.

The 36 stories across 900 pages can be graphed across an X-Y plane: amateur and police detectives on the X axis, historical and futuristic fiction on the Y axis. Mixed-genre and experimental stories hover somewhere in the centre. The best among these

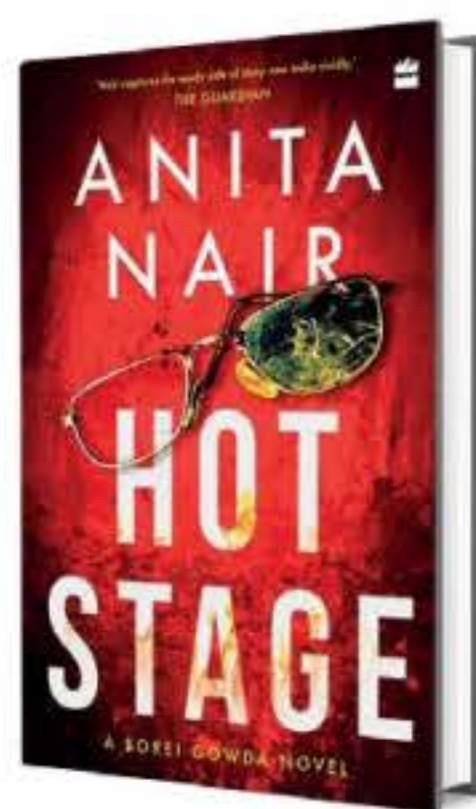
BOOKS

GOWDA KNOWS

Hot Stage, the third book in **Anita Nair's** Inspector Gowda mystery series, is here

If you're a Sherlock Holmes fan, you'll remember the passage from 'The Greek Interpreter' where Sherlock describes his elder brother Mycroft—supposedly, a greater deductive mind. But the man had "no ambition and no energy" to follow up on the leads his great mind opened up. This Sherlock/ Mycroft distinction is also, in a way, the difference between detective and police work. The latter is a considerably larger skill-set that goes beyond the cold precision of 'pure' deductive reasoning.

Anita Nair's Inspector Gowda is a great example of this distinction and also of character growth within a series. Ever since we first met him in *Cut Like Wound* (2012), he has been a talented investigator—but by the end of the third book, *Hot Stage*, we realise that he has become much more. He has learned to be more restrained in high-pressure situations, less likely to take the bait when a vengeful senior officer is trying to get a rise out of him. In *Hot Stage*, the murder before him is that of Professor Mudgood, a rationalist and anti-superstition activist who draws the ire of right-wing Hindu groups in Bangalore (clearly inspired by the murder of



HOT STAGE
 A Borei Gowda novel
 by Anita Nair
 HARPERCOLLINS
 ₹499; 444 pages

Narendra Dabholkar in 2013). Everybody thinks the killing is politically motivated, but Gowda, astute as ever, unravels a larger conspiracy.

The novel's three-dimensional characters are its biggest strength. The righteous Prof. Mudgood, we are shown, was a petty and mischievous man who was deeply patriarchal. Gowda's junior Santosh is a bright-eyed chap who idolises Gowda and is eager to learn but, through this overenthusiasm, ends up placing him and his team into trouble.

Hot Stage and its predecessors are books that are extremely well-versed in the science of footprints, blood spatters and gunshot residue et al. This does not mean that Nair underestimates the value of good, old-fashioned, observational investigation, things like noticing the body language shift in a room full of potential suspects.

Without giving away too much, I will say this—I enjoyed how it tied in with concerns longtime citizens have about Bangalore, about its lopsided development, and its vanishing civic spaces. *Hot Stage* confirms the now 51-year-old Borei Gowda as arguably the most interesting sleuth in Indian literature, and certainly the most resilient one. ■

—Aditya Mani Jha

hybrid stories is Rabindranath Tagore's irreverent parody of the form, simply titled 'Detective'. Anil Menon and Tanuj Solanki's meta-entries attempting to deconstruct the genre, or, rather, the soul of the detective, are interesting exercises.

The ones that fall apart are overcooked, blending too many disparate elements (fantasy, occult, time travel, horror) in too short a word limit. Sri Lankan writer Navin Weeraratne is unfortunately unable to do complete justice to his conceit in the ambitiously titled 'DeathGPT'.

The police detective stories are more robust and enjoyable than the ones with amateur detectives

set in the present. Amateur detectives are perhaps a relic of the past, which is why the best of the lot are from yesteryear writers: Feluda and Byomkesh in particular. Tamilvanan's 'Tokyo Rose', featuring a globetrotting superdetective, is a mad romp drawing from Tamil masala movie traditions.

Among the police stories, Rajarshi Das Bhowmik's 'Detective Kanaicharan and the Missing Ship' is unique in that the detection is near-academic, involving extensive poring over maps and government archives. Vi-

kram Chandra's 'Kama', featuring his hit character Sartaj Singh, subtly comments on the politics of desire and fascism without drawing attention to the themes.

At least a couple of stories offer rich descriptions of settings and sociopolitics. Practising psychiatrist Anirudh Kala's 'No Thermometer for Insanity', set in a mental asylum, stands out for its haunting environment. Likewise, Shashi Warriar's vision of rural Tamil Nadu circa 1946 in 'Murder in the Monsoons' is a grim account of an India that was and still

is behind the shadows.

Vaseem Khan's 'Ghosts of Partition' is a sensitive short story built around post-traumatic stress disorder. The other historical detective story that impresses is Nev March's 'Arsenic and the Shepherd'.

The collection is overburdened with at least 10 Bengali writers. Marathi, Tamil, Malayalam, Hindi and Urdu crime fiction is underrepresented. The collection would be better served with more translations from these languages. Perhaps Hachette will roll out volumes three and four, in which these gaps in the editor's attempt to represent subcontinental detective fiction will be filled. ■

—Devarsi Ghosh

THE POLICE DETECTIVE

stories are more robust than ones with amateur sleuths set in the present



BOOKS

The Mysterious City

Anuradha Kumar's *The Kidnapping of Mark Twain* paints an intriguing portrait of Bombay around the time of the American writer's visit



Looking for a juicy period mystery that involves some famous foreigners and lots of local colour? Then *The Kidnapping*

of Mark Twain by Anuradha Kumar might be one to consider.

Set in Bombay of 1896, the story brings you a well-crafted web of mystery that revolves around the visit of American writer Mark Twain. Fact and fiction come together in a tale that embellishes on Twain's actual travelogue from the time—*Following the Equator: A Journey Around the World*—which describes the people and places he encountered. Kumar deftly weaves the warp of class and caste issues, the social milieu and believable characters, into the weft of Twain's observations to create a tapestry of insight and intrigue. And, in this case at least, east may be east and west may be west, but the twain do come together in a burst of epic events.

Unfortunately, while Kumar has clearly researched the book extensively, she often gets caught in a vortex of her own making, allowing the information she's gathered to overshadow the story's progression.

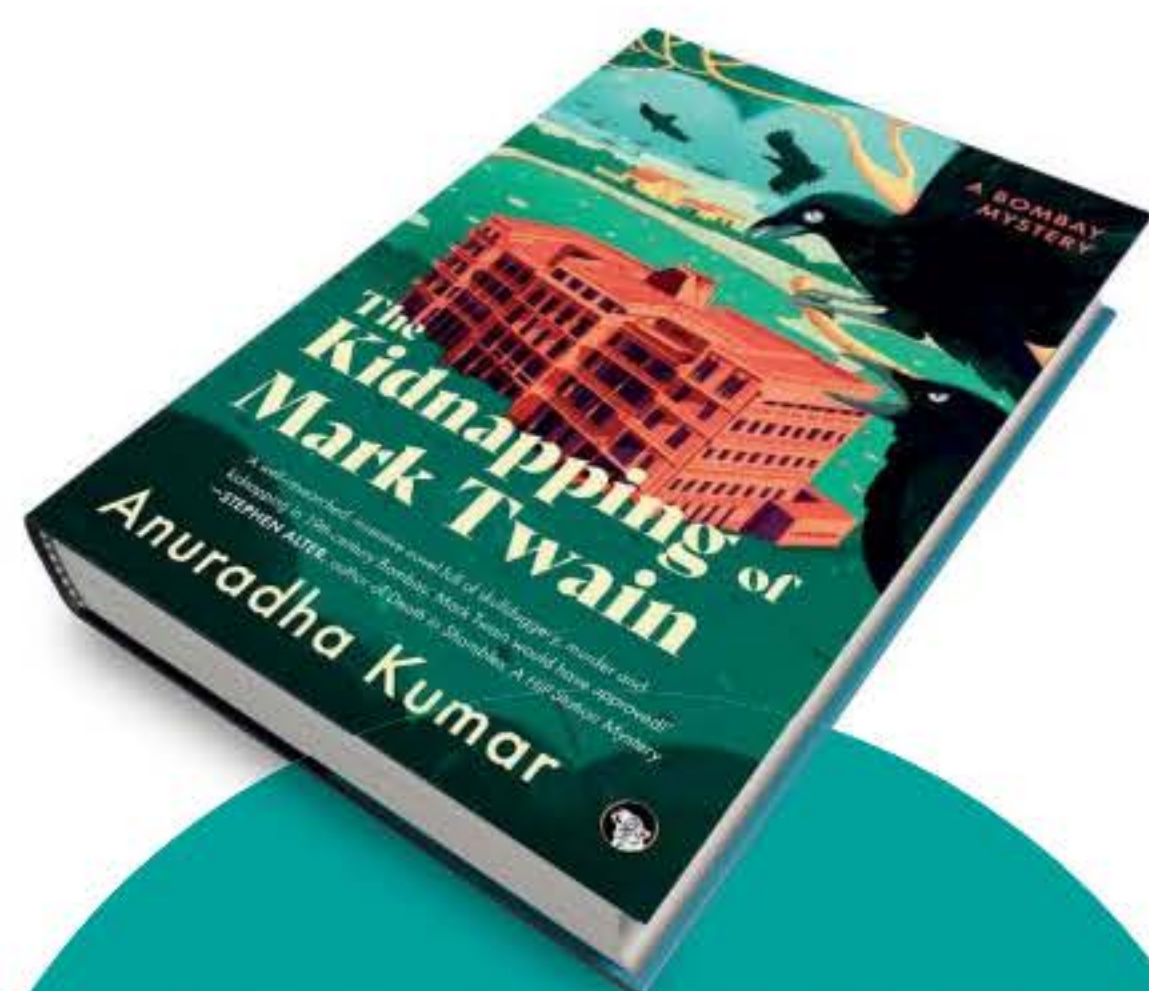
That some of the geography is off can be forgiven as creative licence. But

there's a lot of repetition that should have been edited out. The number of times that we're reminded of Twain's real name, for example, can be rather annoying. And while we're all for introspective protagonists, the depths that American Trade Consul Henry Baker plumbs seem a trifle unnecessary. His constant stream-of-consciousness sharing leads to an analysis paralysis, wherein not much action takes place for large swathes of the text.

Meanwhile, the Watson's Hotel (at Kala Ghoda in South Mumbai) in all its glory is at the crux of the story, forming a picturesque backdrop for conversations and investigations. Mentions of the erstwhile Byculla Club (although sadly, no mention of its famous soufflé!) and fabulous parties in palatial Malabar Hill residences are juxtaposed against the city's cotton mill ethos and the 'native' Indian reality.

In fact, 19th-century Mumbai, with its layered complexity, is the most fascinating character in the story. While the others flit in and out to our disinterest, the city is brought to life wonderfully well by Kumar. So, while the book may not quite work as a mystery, it merits a read for its intriguing portrayal of old Bombay. ■

—Priya Pathiyan



THE KIDNAPPING OF MARK TWAIN
A Bombay Mystery
by Anuradha Kumar
SPEAKING TIGER
₹499; 344 pages

Q. What inspired you to write this book?

I felt there is a big need for the youth to get guidance on how to live their life. We live in a world filled with distractions and entertainment, and it is very easy to lose focus. I felt another romance novel will be entertaining for sure but may not give what is truly needed for the younger generation of India. At the same time, I wanted to write a self-help book that is also fun and entertaining.

Q. Why do we need these rules?

We often live sub-optimal lives. Neither are we able to reach our potential in fitness, nor in our career. This happens because we don't have a directed way of living our life. These 11 rules, if followed, can give you a sense of purpose and direction in life. These rules worked for me, and now I hope they will work for my readers too.

Q. In the 'Introduction', you highlight the importance of reading. Why are we losing the reading habit?

We are losing the habit because it is far easier and pleasurable for the brain to watch video content instead of reading. Reading builds focus and imagination, and is the best way to get deep learning. Avoid it, and watch your brain turn to reel-watching mush. Like anything else that is good for you, you have to build a

practice around reading, just like going to the gym.

Q. What else are you working on right now?

I am thinking about a love story, with a lot of depth this time. After a self-help book, maybe my readers would like a return to a love story and that is what my heart wants to write as well. *11 Rules for Life* has also led to a lot of engagements as a motivational speaker.

—with Amit Dixit

Q+A

LIVING BY THE RULES

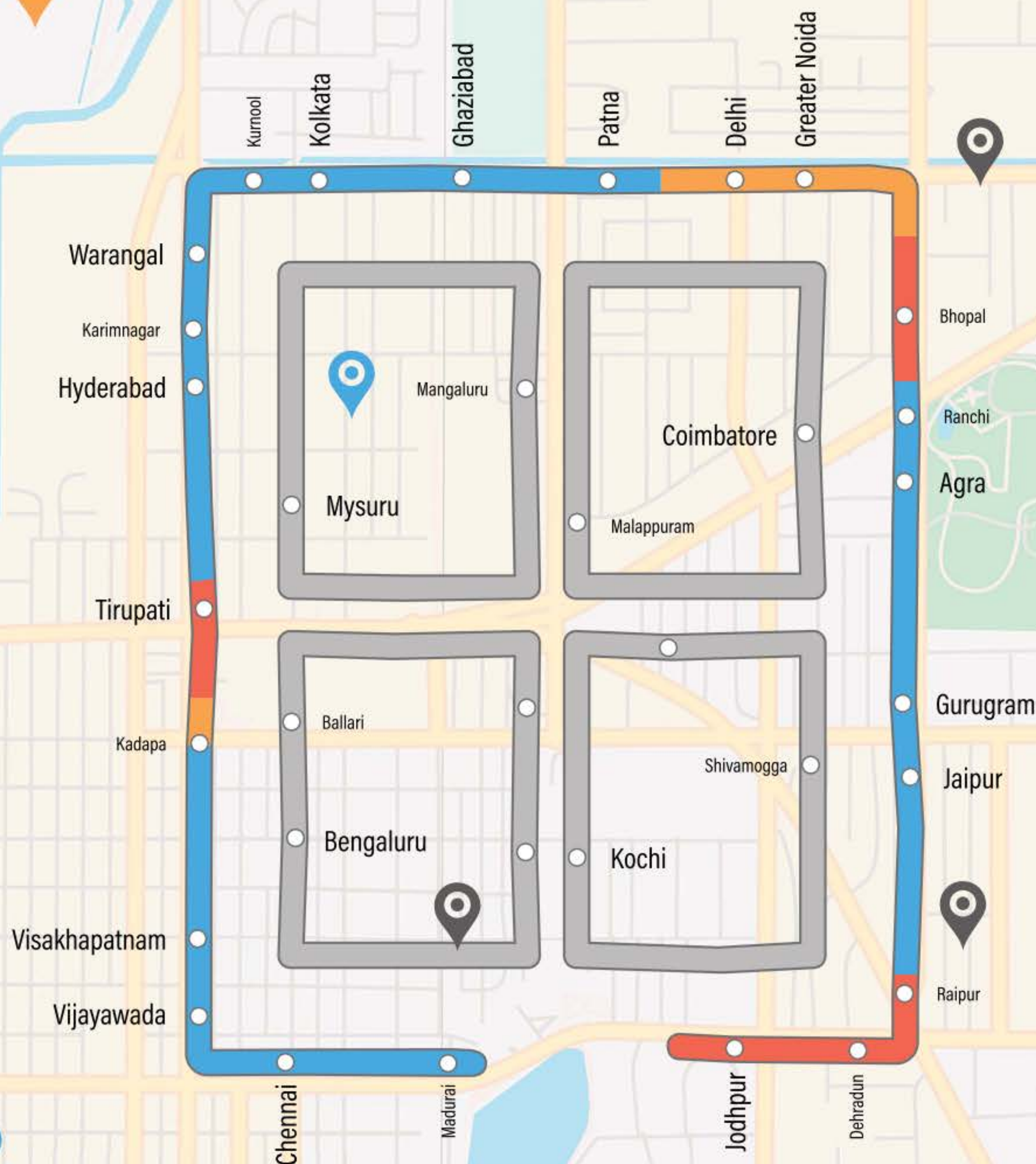
Chetan Bhagat returns to non-fiction with his new book—*11 Rules for Life*

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Volume 20 Number 4: April 2024

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Printed and published by Manoj Sharma on behalf of Living Media India Limited. Printed at Thomson Press India Limited, 18-35 Milestone, Delhi Mathura Road, Faridabad-121007, (Haryana).

Published at F-26, First Floor, Connaught Place, New Delhi-110001.

Editorial/Corporate Office: Living Media India Ltd., India Today Group Mediaplex, FC-8, Sector-16A, Film City, Noida - 201301.

Editor: Raj Chengappa

India Today does not take responsibility for returning unsolicited publication material.

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

IMAGINE A SCENARIO WHERE EVERY EVENING, YOU DON A special pair of glasses designed to block high-energy blue light emitted by your smartphone and laptop screens to enhance the quality and quantity of your sleep. Then proceed to sleep on a temperature-controlled mattress to keep your core cool to stimulate melatonin, ensuring a better night's rest. If you think this reads like the diary entries of a committed insomniac, it's time to wake up and smell the coffee. Better still, wake up to a 800W floodlight that suppresses melatonin production and signals to the body that it's time to awake. Ostensibly, this also improves the gut microbiome. This is Wellness 2.0—"a rationalist alternative" offered by wellbeing professionals who insist that their advice is founded "on research and data".

Dr David Sinclair is a professor of genetics at Harvard Medical School, who works in the field of longevity, and was also a guest speaker at the India Today Conclave last year. Dr Sinclair advocates Resveratrol, a natural supplement with antioxidant properties, which he believes has "reclaimed" his 20-year-old brain, despite his chronological age of 54. He is one among many such billionaire wellness gurus who are rewiring the rules of healthy living. This *Spice* issue explores the Wellness wellspring through the lens of these "science bros". Even though their narratives may vary, they all inhabit the same online ecosystem.

While podcasts, youtube videos, insta lives and books are a great way to keep abreast of health updates, *Spice* stopped by the Six Senses Vana, a relatively new entrant in the Indian wellness universe, to assess if ancient healing therapies such as Ayurveda, yoga, Tibetan and Chinese medicine find as many takers as modern interventions. This is the first dedicated Six Senses wellness retreat in the country, and it mindfully offers a mix of both ancient wisdom and modern biohacking options.

While the 21 acre wooded retreat in Dehradun is a welcome cocoon of healing and practiced calm, if you prefer to convert your own home into a personalised wellness space, we have a slew of architects and interior designers to help you curate these sanctuaries. With growing stress as the post-modern epidemic, thoughtful design can help to foster serenity and restore balance.

Balance and indulgence may not always be on the same page, but we believe, good food is a panacea for the soul. This is why *Spice* decided to sidestep guided nutrition in favour of gourmet food for our story on the finest culinary talent converging upon the Big Apple. From celebrity chef restaurants to glamorous hotspots, these eateries offer extraordinary meals and superlative choices from the newest and hippest in New York.

If food is one half of gratification, entertainment is the other. With the thrilling IPL in mid season and the scorching summer precluding choices outside cool environs, *Spice* collates the sonic Holy Grail of the most tech-forward projectors to transform any space into a cinema experience, offering big-screen visuals and fantastic sound.

It is this penchant for larger than life experiences that drives the Indian love for SUVs. The refreshed 2024, Mercedes-AMG GLE 53 Coupe is the perfect case in point. It offers a fine balance between the robustness of an SUV and the sleek elegance of a coupe.

It is this science-based reset that is springing the new revolution in tech as also in wellness. *Spice* marches in step.

(Aroon Purie)

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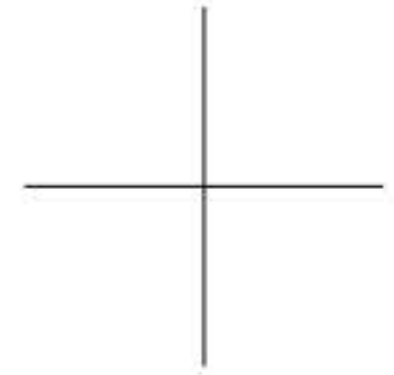
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Animal Instinct

Cartier is the magical puppeteer that makes time dance on the whimsy of its unique shapes and forms. As moths to a flame, art and craft mate seamlessly to mould silhouettes that transform matter into personal and precious objects of desire. Forever the alchemist, Cartier elevates each watch mechanism to an objet d'art, with its inimitable design that is the brand's imprimatur. The mystery of its watchmaking repertoire finds elegant reference in the precious, and equally fantastical, collection of jewellery watches. These transform Cartier's fauna into an enchanted connection between style and spirit. The emblematic animals of Cartier's menagerie have been the most eloquent expression of its watchmaking savoir faire since 1914, the year in which the panther's coat first appeared on a watch case. This year, a fascinating chimera, born from a convergence of the zebra and crocodile, inspires the collection. These new creations add to Cartier's range of animal timepieces and bring to life a union with nature, and the finesse of a watchmaker par excellence.

—By Chumki Bharadwaj

HOTSHEET

BEAUTY



Scarlet Fever

With a ruby red bottle, this luxurious perfume already grabs eyeballs; one spritz and the heady concentration of fragrance oils reveals the decadent scent. Part and parcel of Bath & Body Works newest fragrance collection "Luminous", it is a radiant sensory awakening that is even dermatologist-tested. Indulge!

Price ₹6,499 (100 ml);

Availability Brand Stores

Skin First

As clean beauty goes, SKIN1004 is the coolest Korean skincare brand to launch in India. The Madagascar Centella Ampoule is a soothing ampoule that calms and restores balance in the skin. Apart from its soothing and replenishing properties, the hydration it provides is another level. K Beauty scores another winner.

Price ₹2,299 (100 ml);

Availability www.tirabeauty.com



A Girl's Best Friend

Diamonds have always won hearts and fired passion, but this one is a skin friend. The Shahnaz Husain Diamond Plus Skin Rejuvenating Mask is a blend of the "Ash Of Diamond" and precious organic extracts of Masoorika, Orange oil, aloe vera juice, rose water, Vitamin-E and honey. Especially designed for anti-ageing benefits, it helps to revitalise the skin and restore its youthful qualities. It promotes cell renewal and skin rejuvenation for a glowing skin.

Price ₹4,368 (275 gm);

Availability Brand Stores

We Found Love

Rihanna's beloved beauty brand—Fenty Beauty—finally finds its way to Nykaa, and Indian shores.

Carefully curated, it offers a line-up of Fenty Beauty's best, including the iconic Pro Filt'r Soft Matte Longwear Foundation.

It doesn't get much better than this.

Price ₹4,000; Nykaa.com



FETISH



Subtle Statement

Restrained elegance bears witness to the wisdom that true style never shouts. The proof is in the pudding as they say, or in this case—Frederique Constant's flagship Classic Moonphase Date Manufacture. Staying true to its traditional DNA, its contemporary rendition is minimalist even as the collection expands to include three new 40-millimetre variations

endowed with the new Classic steel case, accompanied by a silver, blue or green dial. This is designed to elevate everyday dressing and for all those who truly admire and appreciate Geneva's watchmaking heritage. The timepiece's uncluttered sunburst dial sports delicate hands powered by a new FC-716 movement, which has been developed in-house. So confident is the brand of its product that

its performance is now guaranteed for five years. The watch also comes with new decorations, including a fan-shaped Cotes de Genève finish that replaces the previous circular motif. What's more, the finishings can be admired through the see-through caseback, which is water resistant up to 50 metres.

Price on request;

Availability Brand Stores

The Macallan M 2023 debuts in India

Standing as a pinnacle of exclusivity, The Macallan M 2023 graces the shores of India with limited 10 handpicked bottles for whisky aficionados

The Macallan announces the prestigious The Macallan M 2023 in India—a meticulously crafted age statement whisky that embodies the legacy of craftsmanship and distinctive brand character, reflecting The Macallan's unique and exceptional spirit. With just 10 handpicked bottles offered in India, The Macallan M 2023 stands as the most valuable spirit ever in India, adding an unparalleled touch of prestige to discerning whisky connoisseurs as a collectibles piece.

This launch represents The Macallan's steadfast dedication to excellence, celebrating each of the brand's Six Pillars—Natural Colour, Mastery, Curiously Small Spirit Stills, The Estate, Exceptional Oak Casks, and Sherry Seasoning.

Crafted from the finest, 100 per cent natural ingredients and nurtured in selectively handpicked casks, The Macallan M boasts an incomparable palate—sweet black cherry and demerara sugar harmonise with smooth crème anglaise, culminating in a decadent medley of flavours. Notes of chocolate orange, subtle wood spice, rich dried fruits, and a luscious dark chocolate finale orchestrate an exquisite journey to the epitome of perfection.

For further information visit www.themacallan.com and become a member of The Macallan Society to explore the stories behind the brand's incomparable single malt whiskies.



WELLNESS

~~~~~ TREND | MEN'S HEALTH ~~~~~




## IRON MAN

Dr Andrew Huberman, neuroscientist and professor at Stanford School of Medicine, allegedly leads the world's most popular health podcast, and has more than six million Insta followers and several million across other platforms.

# Give it up for the science bros

They've got brains, brawn and billions in the bank. A new breed of wellness guru is doing for men what Gwyneth Paltrow did for women.

By BEN MACHELL



**W**ade Warren works as a product manager for a financial technology company. He is 28 years old, bearded, bespectacled and lives in a small apartment in Brooklyn, New York. Every evening he puts on a special pair of goggles designed to block the short-wavelength, high-energy blue light that is emitted by his smartphone and laptop screens and, in so doing, he enhances his ability to fall asleep later. He sleeps on a £2,300 temperature-controlled mattress, which helps keep his core cool, which in turn stimulates melatonin and thus ensures a better night's rest. When he wakes, he will flick on the large 800W floodlight he keeps in a corner. By doing this, Warren suppresses his melatonin production and signals to his body that it is time to be awake. It also, he believes, improves his gut microbiome.

He waits until 11am before his first coffee. While caffeine blocks the adenosine receptors in the brain—adenosine being an inhibitory neurotransmitter that promotes sleep—it does not eliminate the adenosine itself. But by allowing enough time for the adenosine to clear itself naturally, it means that when Warren does drink caffeine, it will be more effective and prevent a mid-afternoon caffeine crash. He adheres to a diet that is high in protein, low in carbohydrates. He also does a lot of other specific things to improve his “efficiency and effectiveness”. But

you get the gist.

Warren had not thought to do any of this until one evening when he stumbled across a podcast hosted by Dr Andrew Huberman, a neuroscientist and professor at Stanford School of Medicine. He was drawn in by Huberman's ability first to present complex scientific or biochemical concepts in a way that made sense, and then to provide listeners with advice about how to use this information, whether to do with fitness, mental health or behavioural change.

It was, essentially, self-help with science, and this pleased Warren. He became a devotee of Huberman, whose appeal is only enhanced by his incongruous appearance. With his beard, broad chest, meaty hands and piercing dark eyes, the 48-year-old Californian appears more like an Iron Age warlord than a neuroscientist. Today, the Huberman Lab advertises itself as the world's most popular health podcast. He has more than six million Instagram followers, another five million on YouTube and several million across various other platforms. Recent allegations made by a number of former partners that he is guilty of serial infidelity and controlling behaviour, which he denies, are unlikely to dent these numbers much.

Huberman is one of a number of popular online male personalities who are offering us the chance to become healthier, more efficient, better optimised human beings.



# WELLNESS

~~~~~ TREND | MEN'S HEALTH ~~~~~

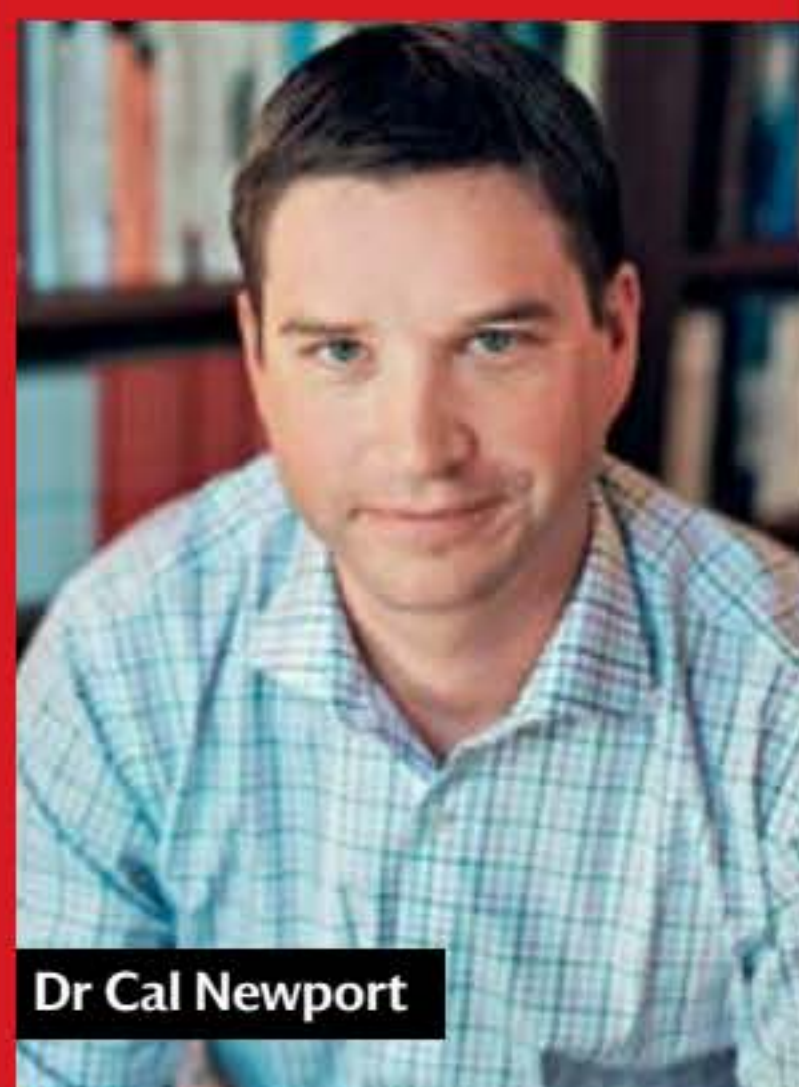


FEEL GOOD QUOTIENT

Bestselling author, Brad Stulberg, believes that the same psychological triggers that make wellness important for women applies to men too.

Wellness 2.0

If one of the dominant trends of the 2010s was “wellness”—think Gwyneth Paltrow, Goop, crystals, healing energies, vague spiritualism and an endless list of alternative health practices made commodifiable and Instagrammable—then what we are seeing now is the emergence of something quite different. It is, ostensibly, a rationalist alternative—a Wellness 2.0—in which “science bros” offer advice founded, they insist, on research and data. So there is Dr Cal Newport, a boyish 41-year-old computer science professor who writes popular books about focus and productivity and whose YouTube channel attracts millions of views via videos with titles such as *How to Reinvent Your Life in 4 Months* and *The Productivity System to Win at Anything*. There is Dr Mark Hyman, a 64-year-old silver fox who has developed “peganism” (a hybrid of the paleo and vegan diets), writes bestselling books called things like *Young Forever: The Secrets to Living Your Longest, Healthiest Life* and who has three million Instagram followers. Dr Peter Attia, 51, specialises in the medical science of longevity, counts Elon Musk as a fan and



Dr Cal Newport



Dr Peter Attia



Dr Mark Hyman

hosts his own podcast, which delves into questions such as the metabolic effects of fructose or the dangers of poor sleep. Dr David Sinclair, a professor of genetics at Harvard Medical School, also operates in the field of longevity. He advocates resveratrol, a natural supplement with antioxidant properties, and claims he has “reclaimed” his 20-year-old brain despite being 54.

These men, and others, all exist in the same online ecosystem. They crosspromote, appearing on each other’s podcasts and YouTube channels.



Dr David Sinclair



If Wellness 1.0 was fundamentally feminine in tone, then Wellness 2.0 is distinctly masculine. It co-opts the stern, didactic language of the gym or boardroom. Science bros regularly use the word “protocols” rather than “routines” or “exercises” when telling their audiences what to do.

Similarly, they will describe certain mindful practices as “tools” as if they were cordless drills or angle grinders. The name of a popular online radio show dedicated to fitness and wellbeing is, simply, Mind Pump.

Brad Stulberg writes bestselling books about performance and psychology and has a background in public health. He could pass for a science bro—he is trim, shaven-headed and bespectacled—but instead it was he who coined the term “broscience” five years ago, and he regards this world with a thoughtful curiosity as well as scepticism. “This is the more masculine version of the Gwyneth Paltrow self-care crystal stuff,” he says. And there’s no reason why the same psychological triggers that led wellness to become such an all-consuming thing for women can’t also apply to men. “We ultimately have the same human frailties and insecurities as women. Perhaps men were just an untapped market.”

The language of “efficiency” and “performance” permeates so much science bro rhetoric, and listening to these podcasts you’re often left with the sense that the main advantage of sleeping well and feeling energised etc is so that you can be a better employee. There is a reason you now see men regularly posting their impressive daily routines on LinkedIn—their gym sessions, their moments of mindfulness, and their healthy lunch recipes—and it’s because they believe it shows them to be better professionals.

Like Wade Warren, Michael Fields is another fan of Huberman. He is 27 and, having worked as a technical recruiter, he made the switch to become a fitness coach as well as an online trainer. Fields



says that the vast majority of his clients are young professional men and that this simply reflects the kind of people who are most drawn to Wellness 2.0.

"I definitely feel like it's way more targeted towards young men," he says. "I think it's because of that constant striving for status and purpose in life."

And it is young men stuck in sedentary office jobs, Fields continues, who most often need the tools that science bros are selling. Looking at a screen for hours will make sleeping hard. Sitting down for hours will drain your vitality. What makes it worse is that the very fact of having a career that demands all this of you makes it all the more difficult to do something about it. "They have a hard time figuring out how to incorporate habits into their daily lives while working in a corporate job." Fields says that his male, corporate clients often insist on knowing precisely why they should, say, take cold showers in the morning. So being able to tell them what someone like Huberman has said on the subject—stuff about dopamine and boosted alertness levels etc—is helpful. "He provides the scientific backing."

Many of the men within this world trade on their scientific or medical qualifications. Others have achieved their profile via a willingness to go to extremes. Dave Asprey is a

multimillionaire who made his money in Silicon Valley and as founder of the Bulletproof coffee and nutrition brand. He is 50 but has regularly made the claim that he will live to 180.

Today, he says he wishes to revise that claim. "I think I've been shockingly conservative," he says, frowning, before breaking into a bright white smile. "I think 180 is a boring, easily achievable goal."

Asprey has built his platform as a podcaster and self-help author around claims like these. He believes that with the proper application of cutting-edge science it should be possible for all of us to live much, much longer. I'm 42, I tell him, and in decent health. How long does he think I can expect to live? "There is no reason you shouldn't be able to live to at least 120 and be healthy the entire time," he assures me.

Hang on, I say. How come you get to live to at least 180 but I only get 120? He smiles again and says that it's only because he's been "actively managing" his age for the past 25 years.

Asprey identifies as a "biohacker". Having spent much of his twenties overweight, arthritic and struggling with "brain fog", he has turned his life around via a slew of different treatments and protocols, from intermittent fasting to cryotherapy and various medical interventions. He has had more stem

cell injections, he believes, "than anyone out there at this point". He recently travelled to Mexico to undergo a form of gene therapy not permitted in the United States and which "takes nine years off your measured age". He takes 84 supplements a day and says he has had his "immune system taken out, amplified by thousands of times, and then reinjected to give myself a younger immune system". He has, he continues, done a lot of neurofeedback therapy, which, in conjunction with taking a smart drug called modafinil, has provided him with X what he describes as an "upgraded brain".

Bryan Johnson is another tech millionaire. The 46-year-old is attempting to drive down his biological age through "Project Blueprint", which, among many other things not dissimilar to what Asprey does, involves receiving blood transfusions from his teenage son. Johnson sleeps attached to a machine that measures the number of nocturnal erections and, last year, he explained that he undergoes "penis rejuvenation therapy", which involves having shockwaves applied to his penis in the hope of giving him the erections of a teenager. Which sounds more like a curse than a blessing, to be honest. But it's his body. "Biohacking is about control," Asprey says. "You want your body to be full of energy and vibrancy. If you're always saying, 'Why won't my body do what I want it to do?' then biohacking is about, well, let's find the instruction manual." Asprey approaches the question of longevity with a Silicon Valley mindset. "I take control of systems for a living," he explains in a recent appearance on the Finding Mastery podcast. And human beings are, he continues brightly, simply "meat operating systems".

There are, however, people within medicine who find this approach more than troubling. Last year, the British cardiologist and video blogger Rohin Francis wrote in the British Medical Journal about "the problem with

WELLNESS

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Silicon Valley medicine". He points out that the "move fast and break things" mindset that underpins so much of the tech world has the potential to cause much more harm than good. The human body, he writes, cannot be compared to a machine, while the demand for profitability sees claims become ever more spurious. "Waiting for evidence gained from clinical trials is often deemed too slow a process for venture capitalists hoping to see a quick return on their investments, so therapies are endorsed and sold based on theoretical or mechanistic evidence," Francis writes. "These 'breakthroughs' are enthusiastically promoted at events more similar to the launch of a new Apple product than a medical innovation."

Although not everybody wants or can afford to go as far as Asprey or Johnson, the desire for control drives so much of the science bros' present success. "I think the story of wanting to live for ever, wanting to control the controllables and wanting to 'science' our way out of mortality is as old as time," Brad Stulberg says. And many of the podcasts out there today are "preying on people's desire for control and certainty in an inherently uncontrollable and uncertain world".

What he means is, when you find yourself listening to a podcast that delves into the minutiae of exposing your body to cold water, avoiding particular types of cooking oils or the critical importance of tracking your sleep patterns, it can become easy to convince yourself that these things are all really important. In fact, you want them to be important because these are all things you can do and thus take control of. Thanks to health-tracking smartwatches and continuous glucose monitors, it is now possible to collate and crunch huge amounts of data about our bodies. "But just because

something is measurable doesn't mean it's important," Stulberg says. "Like, how did we get from 'move your body for 30 minutes a day' to 'measure your erections for longevity'?"

He's not saying that all science bros are manipulative or providing misinformation. But the truth is, we already have a pretty good sense of what people need to do to lead healthy, happy lives. "We have decades of good



Dr Dave Asprey



Bryan Johnson

epidemiological data," he says, and it shows that it's important to avoid tobacco products, not to drink much alcohol, to exercise regularly, avoid becoming obese, maintain healthy social connections and, ideally, find meaningful work. "And outside that, there's not much evidence that anything

else matters." The problem is that you can't create an endless stream of content by saying that leading healthy, happy lives is straightforward. So there is an inbuilt tendency to make health and happiness appear complex, to be constant trees with no sight of the wood. "Even sleep has become fetishised," Stulberg says. But you can sleep badly and it does not really matter. If it did, people who have raised children would die sooner than those who have not. But the evidence doesn't show that they do.

Of course, just like the Goop variety of wellness, there is money to be made in Wellness 2.0. Stulberg points out that a lot of these podcasts are sponsored by supplement companies, and one YouTube video I watched, which featured Asprey comparing his deep-breathing techniques with the host's, featured ads for dietary supplements as well as for a "personal analysis and data-driven wellness guide". Also, people will always want to see content they perceive as comforting. If there is somebody telling you that if you buy the right medical treatments you can live to 120, then there's a good chance a lot of us are going to click on it. "I don't necessarily think there's always malintent," Stulberg says. "Motivated reasoning is a very powerful drug, and we can convince ourselves of anything. If you can make a lot of money from a comforting belief and create a whole business model from it, then you can start to believe it yourself."

"We have the same human frailties and insecurities as women. Perhaps men were just an untapped market for wellness' I am told I should be able to live to 'at least 120 and be healthy the entire time' 'The story of wanting to "science" our way out of mortality is as old as time'

Courtesy: The Sunday Times London (UK)

WELLNESS

DESIGN | HOME

PRIVATE PARADISE

Your home may well be your haven, but here are easy ways to make it your very own spa-dom.

By **PALLAVI MEHRA**

Carving out a personal wellness space begins with acknowledging our homes as more than just physical structures; they are sanctuaries where we recharge, rejuvenate and ready ourselves to plunge back into life's every day grind. This is why dedicated wellness spaces such as meditation rooms, home gyms, and spa-like bathrooms are becoming increasingly popular in contemporary homes. With growing stress as everyone's constant companion, thoughtful design can play an important role in fostering serenity and restoring balance. We reached out to some of India's best interior designers and architects to explore easy ways to incorporate wellbeing into your space.

"Wellness design emphasises relaxation and well-being in





GREEN REVOLUTION

Clockwise from above: Use of natural materials for the bedroom from Earthitects; Spa-like bathrooms by Eshita Marwah; Azure Interiors advises prioritising natural light; reD Architects advises crafting a dedicated space for massage tables

home spaces, integrating features such as meditation rooms, home gyms, and spa- bathrooms for a tranquil atmosphere,” says Jasem Pirani and Huzefa Rangwala, interior designers and co-founders of MuseLAB. “Utilise natural materials, calming colours, and ample natural light to create a serene environment conducive to physical and mental rejuvenation, transforming your home into a sanctuary of wellness.”

HARNESS YOUR INNER MARIE KONDO

Much like as the Japanese tidying consultant, the art of transforming your home into a wellness sanctuary could begin by simply decluttering. “Wellness comes from being in a mental state of calm. To achieve that in your own home, the first thing is to declutter the space; this therapeutically leads to decluttering of the mind,” advises Mumbai-based interior designer and partner at reD Architects, Ekta Parekh. “If the mind is restful, it will make space for positive thoughts and focus on what one needs to reclaim a sense of balance. Your space can be used for placing things that infuse joy—be it art, books, a musical instrument, or even an exercise corner—anything that lends a sense of wellbeing!”

BIOPHILIC DESIGN

Research shows that bringing in nature’s bounty makes compact spaces appear larger than they are and promotes physical and emotional well-being. And incorporating biophilic design is an easy way: “A



WELLNESS

DESIGN | HOME



AN OASIS OF CALM

Dedicated gyms like this one by Fab Studio are easy ways to embrace wellness design (Above); Biophilic design, featuring natural materials as seen in these spaces by Minnie Bhatt Design (left) and right (opposite page), and spa-like bathrooms like the ones by Eshita Marwah (Below left and right)



home has to be a haven, a sanctuary, a place one can rest and relax at the end of the day, in the middle of the day, during the week, or on weekends, and all year around. In addition to functioning as natural air purifiers, indoor plants add a sense of wellness to the space,” adds interior designer Eshita Marwah, founder of /e, V-Create Architects. “Not only do they add to the aesthetic appeal, but they are also natural sound-absorbers, aid better respiratory health, and reduce stress levels, promoting relaxation.”

In addition, opt for furnishings made of natural materials, which summon calming energy and grounding elements of nature indoors, fostering a feeling of peace. “Natural materials such as wood and stone enhance the aesthetics of a space while contributing to a sense of well-being,” explains George E. Ramapuram, principal architect of Earthitects. “Each plank of wood, with its unique grain and texture, includes an imprint of nature, promoting tranquillity and harmony. Similarly, natural stone adds a luxurious feel with its distinct characteristics and textures, creating a sense of grounding and connection to the earth.”

OPEN TO THE ELEMENTS

Allowing natural light to suffuse our living spaces achieves more than mere illumination. It has the power to enhance our overall sense of wellness. According to Rashi Bothra and Ruchi Gehani, interior designers at Azure Interiors, “consider opting for larger windows or cleverly positioning them to welcome sunlight through the day, forging a harmonious link with the outdoors. Choose window coverings crafted from light-filtering materials to gently diffuse sunlight as well as maintain privacy. Integrate mirrors strategically to amplify natural light and impart a feeling of expansiveness to rooms. Opting for light hues in your decor, from walls to floors and furnishings, further enhances the reflection of natural light, creating an atmosphere that feels spacious, airy, and inherently uplifting,” they add.

Integrating wellness into interior design includes prioritising healthy air as well. Vikrant Sharma, principal architect of Studio Hive, advises investing in high-quality materials and efficient devices for light control and air quality maintenance to ensure a healthier and more sustainable living environment. “Conscientious landscaping selections and the application of premium paints amplify the overall wellness of our living spaces, nurturing a serene ambiance and promoting vitality in our daily experiences,” says Sharma.

COMFORT AND ERGONOMICS

Focussing on comfort and ergonomics is not just a popular trend, it has a proven track record for positively impacting well-being. “Chairs equipped with adjustable height and lumbar support maintain spinal alignment during long meetings or work-from-home sessions. Desks featuring

adjustable heights provide flexibility, enabling shifts between sitting and standing positions to mitigate the hazards of prolonged sitting,” claim interior designers Rishabh Kapoor and Monica Chadha, founders of Design Deconstruct.

“Investing in ergonomic pillows and mattresses ensures proper spinal alignment and enhances sleep quality, which is crucial for overall physical well-being, fostering a healthier lifestyle.”

CALMING HUES

Painting your walls in neutral colour schemes such as cream, taupe, and fawn helps craft a serene environment that promote tranquillity. “Integrating natural and earthy colours enhances overall well-being,” says Mumbai-based interior designer Saniya Kantawala. “Shades of red, orange, and yellow





YOUR SPECIAL SPACE

Calming hues and dedicated mindfulness spaces as seen in the living room (Bottom); Creating a spa in your space like this one by Design Deconstruct (Below)



WELLNESS

~~~~~ DESIGN | HOME ~~~~~

are on the warmer side of the colour wheel and can evoke cosiness and comfort. Pastel blues, pinks, and greens evoke feelings of calm, while white is known for clarity and freshness. These colourways can transform homes into sanctuaries where residents can unwind and rejuvenate, counterbalancing the stresses of modern life.”

### MOVEMENT AND MINDFULNESS

Experts advise creating separate relaxation and exercise areas in your home. “The key is to craft dedicated spaces for relaxation and meditation,” advises Minnie Bhatt, interior designer and founder of Minnie Bhatt Design. “I always emphasise the importance of separating work and leisure. Instead, create a designated space, whether it’s a cosy corner or an entire room, dedicated solely to moments of peace and mindfulness. With this approach, one can create a comfortable cocoon of relaxation and rejuvenation within the confines of your home.”

Additionally, your exercise or movement area could be a room or a designated corner in your home, housing equipment such as yoga mats, free weights, or resistance bands. “Crafting a wellness oasis within homes involves designing spaces that emulate the serene and rejuvenating atmosphere of meditation rooms or gyms,” says Jaskaran Singh, principal architect at Fab Studio. “This approach provides a holistic experience, which emphasises self-care and overall well-being.”

### SPA-LIKE BATHROOMS

Bathrooms can easily morph from their utilitarian roots and transform daily routines into mini wellness retreats through serene aesthetics and sumptuous elements. Space permitting, you can also add massage treatment tables and a manicure-pedicure station for the ultimate spa-like ambiance. According to Zafar Masud Chaudhary, principal architect of Habitat Architects, “adding a bathtub can convert your existing bathroom into a spa-like space. If you want to avoid architectural changes, then aromatic candles, a few planters and touches of understated luxury can help achieve the desired objective.”

From bringing nature indoors to crafting designated relaxation spaces, wellness design is a journey and not a destination. Begin by incorporating small changes and experimenting with different elements to figure what works for you and your lifestyle; no one size fits all—just play along.

# The Enchanted Forest

A perfect refuge for city-weary folk, Six Senses Vana, the global brand's first dedicated wellness retreat in India, is where you go to retrieve yourself: Rest, reset and rejuvenate, the blockbuster RRR of the wellness universe.

By CHUMKI BHARADWAJ



# WELLNESS

RETREAT | DESTINATION



## LETTING GO

Watsu, a form of water therapy, comes from “water” and “shiatsu” (traditional Japanese massage). The entire flotation exercise is carried out in a warm water tank, where the therapist uses the resistance of water to soothe physical tension. The subliminal idea is to recreate a womb-like experience where submission is the ultimate release. The result: Emotional catharsis, especially for those who can’t let go easily; it is almost quasi spiritual in its treatment and effect.



**T**he graceful ballet of the mustard Sal leaves slowly floating earthwards is mesmerising. Inspired by the Sal shedding skin, I’m hoping I can do a ‘Sal’ at the Six Senses Vana, and shed at least some of the physical, neurological and emotional pounding that daily life has exacted thus far. Lounging lazily in the gentle sun filtering through the wood and glass forest suite I’m ensconced in, it almost seems like an easy ask. After all, the 21-acre retreat, named after the Sal forest, offers the perfect blend of diagnostics, detox diet, energy rebalancing and de-stressing based on Ayurveda, Yoga, Tibetan and Chinese Medicine, and Natural Healing Therapies, combined with cutting-edge biohacking, which makes it all believable, and possibly achievable.

Simply arriving at this wooded retreat is panacea in itself. From my



gorgeous suite at the end of a glass-walled corridor, the shifting palette of light from the surrounding green is instantly soothing. The pared-down suite too—subtly clad in earthy colours like ecru, ivory and minty shades of green—serves as a constant reminder that contemplative reflection is an inward journey. These lovely rooms and suites have been designed in a way to slough off any noises unhelpful to a peaceful retreat; the calm, contained feel is only punctuated by intermittent birdcalls.

The healing journey at Vana begins with a wellness consultation and screening by the resident doctors, where they ascertain everything from body mass, blood pressure, BMR and fat deposits to stress levels, dovetailing into a detailed quiz about sleep patterns, diet, exercise, posture, resident aches and pains, injuries and any medical issues you may have or fear you do. Although my system was deemed passably healthy with an overall score of 75 per cent, it wasn't ideal, which is a grade over 80.



## THAT HEALING FEELING

Intention-based programmes require a minimum duration of stay. These include Sleep, Detox, Yoga, and Tibetan Medicine for five nights, Weight Management and Ayurveda for 14 nights, and Ayurveda Panchakarma for 21 nights. You can privately add on Ayurvedic or Sowa Rigpa therapies, acupuncture, reflexology, realignment, or Subtle Energies treatments. **Cost** Garden Room (Base category) ₹52,000 (single occupancy) and ₹80,000 (double occupancy) per person, per day, plus taxes.

# WELLNESS

RETREAT | DESTINATION

Clearly, there's always room for improvement and at Vana, it's the biggest room in the house.

## Holistic Wellness

Everything at this charming retreat is angled to give the body time, resources and a persuasive nudge to heal and recover. Once the screening is over, the doctor, in consultation, with various therapists curates a daily activity schedule to achieve your wellness goals. You can also choose a programme based on a specific wellness intention, with guidance from the experts. Every stay includes full-board accommodation, personalised nutrition, daily retreat activities, along with wellness consultation and screening, and even an all-white attire to wear during the stay. The push to dress uniformly is "merely to mitigate any time and effort wasted in picking out outfits. The idea is to dedicate all your time, energy and effort to the healing journey," explains Saranpreet Singh Suri, Retreat Manager. Apart



### VERSATILE GLORY

Ancient healing therapies such as Acupuncture (Above left) and Sowa Rigpa (Left) are wonderful additions to balance energy for holistic wellness; Food is therapy at Vana (Above and Left); Outdoor pool for exercise or cooling down (Far left)

from the diet detox, the retreat has a strict no-phones-in-public-spaces policy. The enforced digital detox is a blessing once you purge the need to arm yourself with news and views every second of every day. The solitude of temporary detachment is sheer ecstasy in itself. The way to do is to go with the flow. Vana makes it easy with an early Tibetan treatment (Sowa Rigpa) within the first hour of arrival. Incidentally, Six Senses Vana is one of the few places in the world where Sowa Rigpa is formally offered in its complete avatar.

The ritual begins with the singing bell, after which the therapist asks you to jot down on a piece of paper, any-



## SIGNATURE PROGRAMMES

**Sleep Tracking** sleep patterns to reset through therapies such as yoga Nidra, holistic massages, night-time soporific drinks etc.

### Natural healing therapies

Remove energy blocks, improve body alignment, and achieve emotional release through reflexology, acupuncture, Raag therapy and more.

### Women's Wellness

**Programmes** Vana has launched one of the most comprehensive wellness programmes curated especially for women. **Menowell**, a menopausal wellness programme—a first of its kind in India—is tailored to women above the age of 35 and focusses on hormone balance, fostering physical and emotional well-being, and lifestyle education, promoting holistic wellness.

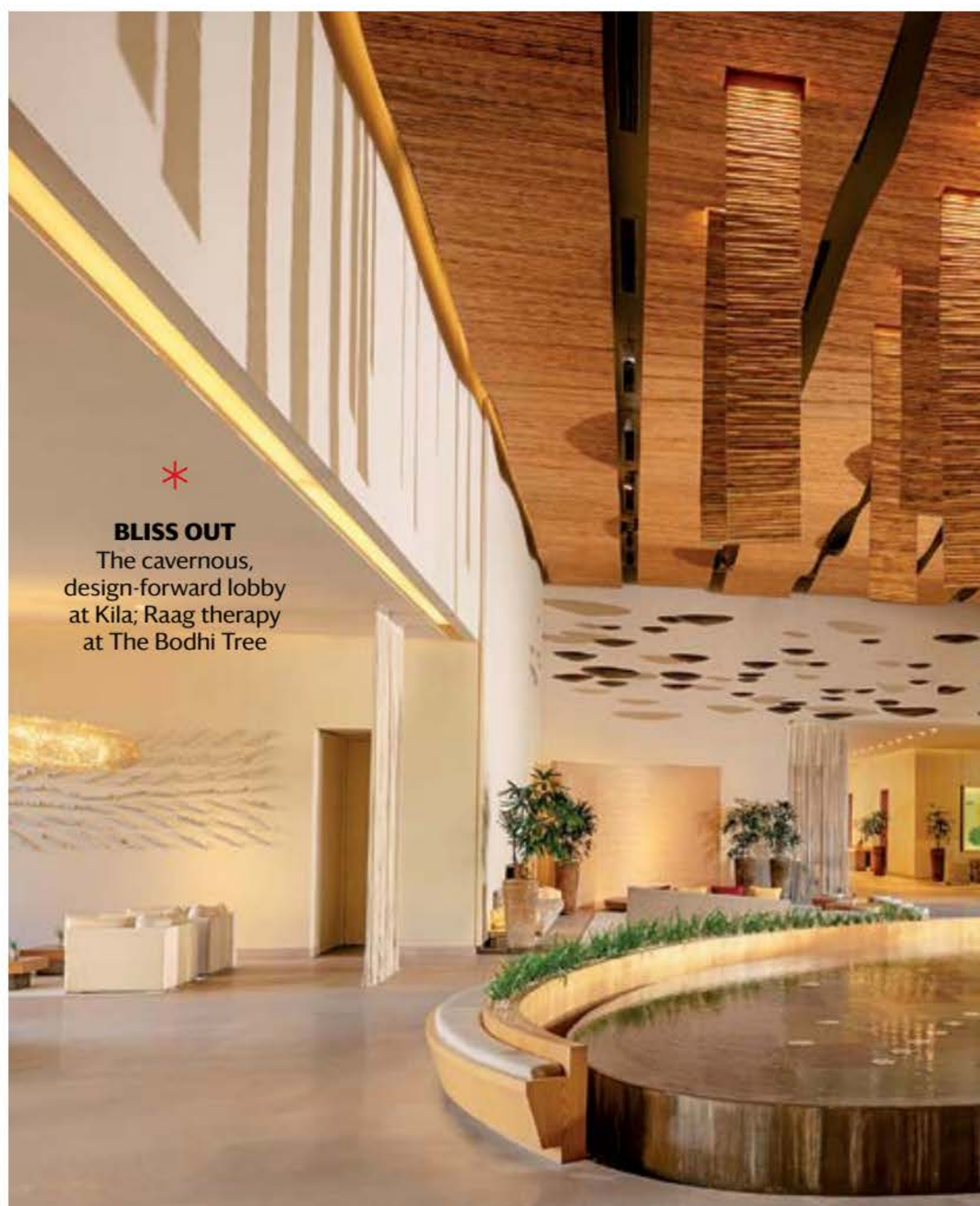
**Ayurvedic Post Natal Care** is created specifically for women 12 months postpartum, addressing stress reduction to improved digestive health and overall well-being.

**Yogic Detox** is devised exclusively for women over 35 to foster self-awareness, inner harmony, and mental clarity through rejuvenating detoxification practices that cleanse and revitalise both the mind and body.

### Stress Relief Hiking

A retreat personalised exclusively for women to immerse in the tranquility of soulful mornings, featuring expert-led wellness and yoga sessions, morning hikes, fostering improved fitness, stress reduction, and an enhanced mind-body connection.

thing physical, or emotional that you wish to jettison or that which is holding you back. Once you put thoughts to paper, the Sowa Rigpa practitioner burns the paper in a flurry of prayer and intention. The metaphorical flaming of your perceived vulnerabilities signifies the start of your transformation at Vana. The one-hour treatment itself begins with the singing bell, followed by swirling fragrant incense, mellow chanting, warm oil, hot stones and supple hands kneading the body into willing submission. When the hour is up, the therapist wakes you with another round of the singing bell to signal the completion of the ritual. By the time the treatment is done, embracing change becomes almost aspirational. This is how you shed skin.



### BLISS OUT

The cavernous, design-forward lobby at Kila; Raag therapy at The Bodhi Tree



# WELLNESS

RETREAT | DESTINATION

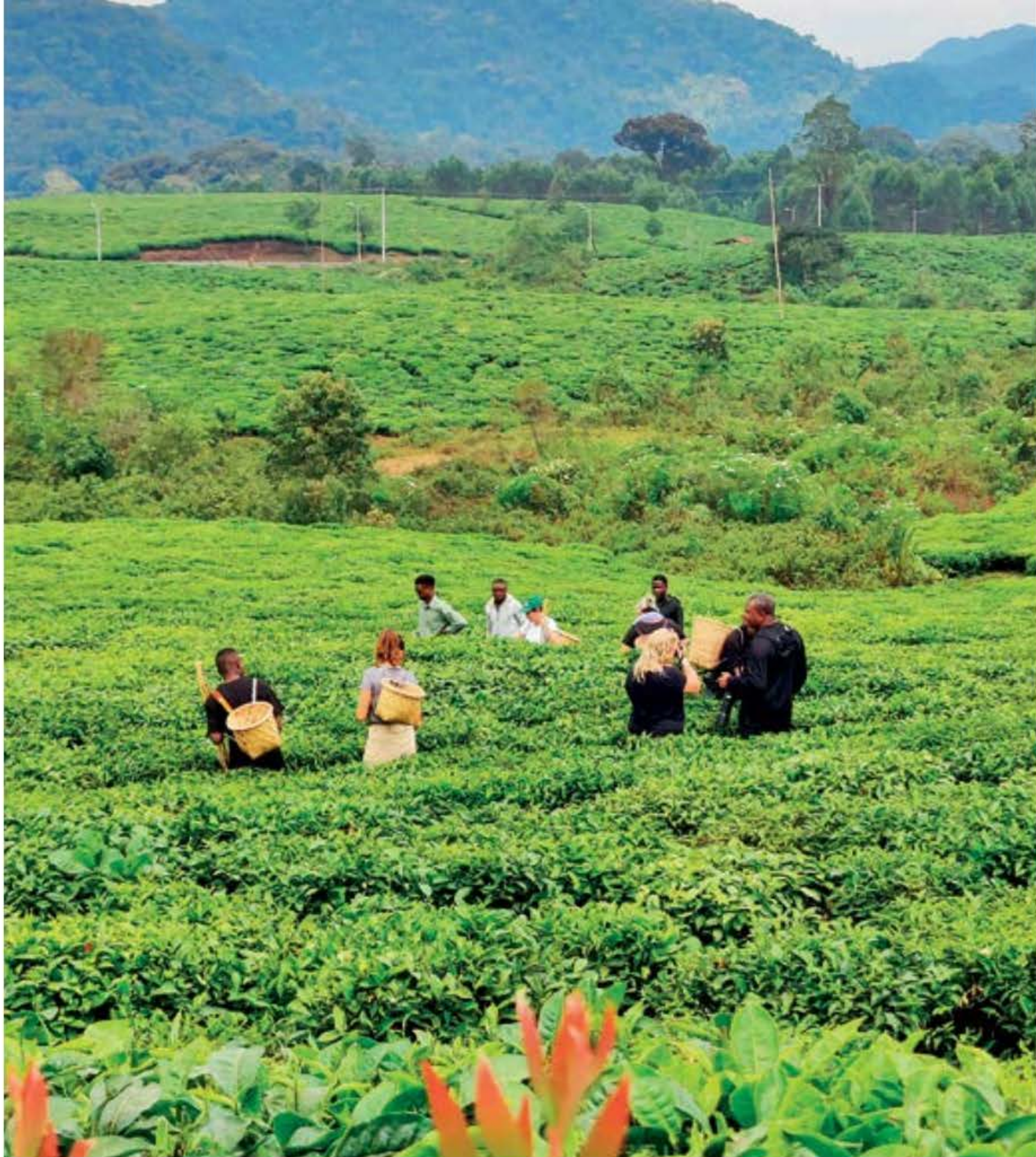
Post treatment, it's time for the diet detox part. Lunch is at Salana, the more indulgent of the two restaurants that serves food which is delightfully colourful and healthy and boasts a lunch and breakfast buffet, bolstered by an a la carte option too. Anayu on the other hand, offers meals according to your doshas and is a little under-seasoned for a palate used to regular indulgence. Even within their strict mandate though, every night, Anayu offers a course meal from different states. The variety is welcome but a little generosity with spices may be even more welcome. Strangely, the body begins to welcome the '*satvik*' food more easily once the treatments are underway, and familiar routines of excess and indulgence begin to fall by the wayside.

Evenings are spotlighted by a voluntary regrouping in the Kila, an aesthetically pleasing, curated space where residents congregate in the evenings for High Tea—a delightful spread of sweet and savoury healthy bites and a bevy of hot beverages. The soulful evenings make way for various retreat activities that include talks on ancient healing techniques, Raag meditation therapy, Yoga Nidra, and breathing techniques for better sleep. The retreat also welcomes many visiting musicians who play or sing in the evenings, and contribute towards creating an atmosphere that is both languid and fluid. For those who prefer to spend the evening in the company of inspired spirits, the mixology lab at The Library makes innovative use of shrubs, herbs, tinctures and juices to craft delicious and healthy non-alcoholic beverages from ingredients grown in Vana's own organic gardens and orchards.

As the sun sets to a mellow glow, and the trill of forest sounds take over, it's time to retire to the refuge of your makeshift cocoon. Tomorrow is another day...

*Six Senses Vana also offers the brand's signature experiences such as the Alchemy Bar, where guests learn to make their own spa products in accordance with their doshas. The Earth Lab is the poster child for their sustainable efforts; sustainability is a way of life at the retreat and guests are invited to become collaborators.*







TRAVEL

DESTINATION | ITINERARY

# RE-ROUTING RWANDA

***Popularly referred to as the land of a thousand hills, Rwanda can now lay claim to being Africa's newest luxury destination.***

By **KALPANA SUNDER**

\* **COURTING  
ADVENTURE**

Clockwise from above left: Tea picking; Mountain Gorilla trekking; Cleo Lake Kivu is perched on a hill overlooking the lake and coffee farms; Suite at One and Only Nyungwe House set in a tea plantation.



Coffee covered hillsides shimmer in the sunlight with white blossoms, framed by a panoramic sweep of the blue green waters of Lake Kivu, the largest lake in the country, helmed by mountains. Rwanda, the tiny land locked country in East Africa, is most famous for its population of mountain gorillas. But Rwanda also stuns you with its beautiful landscapes, rugged beauty and fertile volcanic land studded with lush banana plants, that's also great for growing coffee and tea.

Though most people associate the country with the tragic genocide of 1994, Rwanda is today one of Africa's fastest growing economies, known for its cleanliness, safety and most famously for its mountain gorillas. Travel through this country with winding roads, endless green hills, limpid lakes, grasslands and rainforests, staying at luxurious safari lodges and indulgent lakeside hotels is just a treat on the side. Enjoy a tryst with nature at Rwanda's four national parks—Volcanoes National Park, Akagera National Park, Nyungwe National Park and Gishwati-Mukura National Park. Each of these parks has a distinct ecosystem and ter-

rain and unique flora and fauna.

While we do recommend a walk on the wild side, when in Rwanda, begin by checking in to the five star Kigali Serena Hotel, just a five minute walk from the CBD, with plush rooms and suites decorated in bright colour palettes that reflect a Pan-African heritage with sophisticated furnishings, a swimming pool, spa and restaurants. (Room rates start at around ₹27,000 per night; <http://www.serenahotels.com/kigali>)

Spend a couple of days in the capital city of Kigali to delve into its history and culture. A visit to the Kigali Genocide Memorial is a painful, but important reference to the country's tragic past. The past may be grim, but Kigali's green spaces are a helpful pick-me-up. Idle through the Nyamdungu Eco Park, sprawling across 120 hectares with a medicinal garden, ponds and walkways, that is a restored urban wetland with a prolific bird life and biking trails. Follow it up with a visit to Umusambi Village on the outskirts, where rescued grey headed cranes find a unique sanctuary.

For an immersive art and craft experience, head to the gargantuan Ki-

# TRAVEL

## DESTINATION | ITINERARY

mironko market, that sells everything from fruits and vegetables to vibrant fabric and household goods. Make a dress from local kitenge fabric on express orders, buy colourful baskets and Imigongo art panels in geometric designs moulded out of cow dung and ash before being painted. Of course, nothing beats the glorious sunsets from the top of Mt Kigali for a magnificent bird's eye view of the city. For sating the soul further, relish the fine-dining offering at award winning Chef Dieuveil Malonga's Afro-fusion restaurant Meza Malonga. He visited 48 African countries to curate this special menu (<https://mezamalonga.com>).

### In Search of the Reclusive Mountain Gorilla...

Drive to Kinigi (105 km from Kigali) to visit the Volcanoes National Park and check in to the luxurious Virunga Inn Resort and Spa, with a prolific bird life in the garden, delicious food, and large doubles with king sized beds, butler service, African art and balconies that look out into the impressive, all-encompassing wilderness. (Rooms cost around ₹80,000 per night inclusive of meals excluding safaris).

Another great option is the ultra-luxe Sabyinyo Silverback lodge, a top-rated classic safari lodge located at the foothills of Volcanoes National park with exceptional views of the Karisimbi volcanos. With six charming stone cottages, two luxurious suites with king-size four-poster beds and one spacious family unit with two separate bedrooms, lodging choices are aplenty. Meals at Sabyinyo are designed with sustainability in mind, using healthy, recipes using produce from their organic



#### A TANGO OF TASTE

Ripe coffee beans, tree tomatoes and processed coffee beans; Canopy walkway at Nyungwe National park (Opposite page)

gardens. (Room rates start at around \$1,500 (₹1.25 lakh per person per night, all-inclusive except gorilla permits.)

The Park, named after the dormant volcanoes, is cosseted in lush rainforests that make up the Virunga Massif. This is Rwanda's most famous national Park, and also the most heavily patrolled park in the world, apart from being the oldest on the continent. Also, along with Congo and Uganda, it serves as the world's only habitat of the endangered mountain gorillas.

Gorilla trekking is a once-in-a-lifetime experience (\$1500 (₹1.25 lakh per person), where the proceeds go towards conservation and protection of the endangered gorillas. There are 12 habituated gorilla families that one is allowed to visit, with just 96 gorilla-trekking permits for groups of 8 each, issued every day for an hour, to minimise the impact on the gorillas. Trekking through knotted vines, dense undergrowth of the African red wood trees, to meet with the Kwitonda family of gorillas, and spending almost an hour with them in the wild, definitely counts among the top most life-changing experiences of my life. Besides gorillas, the park is also home to endangered golden monkeys and ancient caves.

**NOTE TO THE WISE** Proper attire with garters, waterproof coats, boots and other gear is essential for this trek.

### The Culture Vulture

If the gorilla trek is an essential part of the Rwanda experience, so is a





visit to the Gorilla Guardian's Village (a cultural village that rehabilitates reformed poachers of the national park) to try your hand at archery, tasting the local brew, banana beer, and watching a performance of Intore dancers (the energetic local folk dance that involves jumping high and twirling mid air; Entrance cost \$35 (₹2,917).

### **Tranquil Time, Lake Kivu**

After the hectic gorilla tracking, it's time to cool your heels in the resort town of Karongi. The luxurious Hotel Cleo Lake Kivu, set on a hill overlooking the lake, is a decadent but delightful choice. With luxurious doubles decorated with bright African fabrics and art, as well as a balcony and a bathtub with views of the lake, and gourmet meals to boot, you'll soon realise that the charms of Rwanda stretch much beyond the lure of its dense green. (Cost are upward of ₹35,000 per night for a double; <http://cleohotel>)

This gargantuan lake, shared by both Rwanda and the Democratic republic of Congo, stretches for 89 km, and is Rwanda's largest lake. Enjoy a leisurely boat ride to enjoy the cool breeze, and the water that's a deep shade of green, with small volcanic islands, surrounded by terraced hill slopes with macadamia, coffee and banana plantations. Resort towns with beaches and a laid back vibe, line the shores of the lake and are a popular getaway destination for the locals of this landlocked country.

### **On a Coffee High**

Rwanda produces some of the best Arabica Bourbon coffee in the world with a silky creamy body and hints of lemon and orange blossom, and caramel. Take a bean-to cup tour at Boneza Coffee at Kinunu, on the shores of Lake Kivu, 165 km from Rwanda's capital Kigali, where coffee is grown at high altitudes of 4,000 to 6,000 feet. Get in on some behind the scenes action of your cuppa Joe—from picking the beans to soaking, washing, drying, segregating, to finally roasting and powdering the beans. The coffee-tasting session at the end—where the guide shows you how to roast beans the traditional way, in a clay pot on hot coals—is the cherry on the cake. The coffee, as expected, is divine.

**COST** The Coffee tour lasts for about an hour and a half and costs around ₹2,000.

### **The canopy at Nyungwe**

Drive to Nyungwe National Park, Rwanda's newest UNESCO site with ancient rainforests—200 km from Kigali—and check in to the luxurious One and Only Nyungwe House that is cosily ensconced inside verdant tea plantations of Gisakura, on the edge of the Nyungwe National Park. Kick back in large luxury villas with an open fireplace, a terrace and large soaking tub in five striking wooden villa clusters, secluded in wonderfully untamed surroundings on a working tea estate. Listen to bird song or enjoy farm-to-table dining that manages your

# TRAVEL

DESTINATION | ITINERARY



## GOOD FOOD GUIDE

Delicious recipes showcasing harvests from the organic kitchen gardens served at the One & Only Nyungwe House.

## BEST TIME TO VISIT

The best time to visit Rwanda is in the dry season from mid-December to February or over the long dry season—June to September. It is easy and straightforward to get around the small country, with most places of interest located within a few hours' drive from the capital Kigali.

daily desires and dietary preferences. Unwind with regionally-inspired beauty treatments like African potato and Marula oil wraps at their luxury spa. (Costs are upward of ₹1.80 lakh per night for a double;

<http://www.oneandonlyresorts.com/nyungwe-house>)

**MUST-DO** A trek on the Igishigishigi trail from the Visitor Centre, crisscrossing giant teak and mahogany trees, tree ferns and orchids, to the Canopy Walkway, which is a steel suspension bridge, linked by platforms, over the tops of trees, draped in

clouds, offering an ideal vantage point to spot golden monkeys or birds such as the blue turaco, babblers and sunbirds. Only, watch out for sudden showers and carry an umbrella or raincoat, just in case.

## Join the Tea Party

Nyungwe is also flanked by verdant tea estates that act as a buffer zone. Trek through the emerald green tea estates to the edge of the forest, to see a colony of black and white colobus monkeys. Or take a tea tour with IVOMO, a community tourism social enterprise that empowers tea pickers and their families. The misty tea estates at Gisakura, with its immaculate rows of tea plants, are the perfect learning ground to hone your leaf picking skills; pick the tender ones, collecting them in baskets strapped to your backs, while interacting with local women. Don't forget to taste Dawa, which means medicine in Swahili, and is a ginger tea made with black tea blended with ginger, honey and lime. It's a soothing pick me up.

**COST** The IVOMO Tea tour costs USD \$ 30 (approx. ₹2,500) per person.

# FOOD & DRINK

DESTINATION | DINING



## SOUL FOOD

The Jazz Club at the Aman New York harks back to the heady days of the Jazz Age



New York is dizzyingly vertiginous, but it's not the skyscrapers I'm thinking of. It's the standards. The air of competition is so thick here, you could cut it with a knife. The food scene is no exception. The culinary talent of the world converges upon the Big Apple, and New Yorkers are spoiled for choice, with celebrity chefs thronging the scene, eager to please a demanding and discerning clientele. Therefore, to stand apart from the crowd, restaurants have to be excellent at their job—and a touch of genius helps. On a recent trip to New York, I had three extraordinary meals, each more spectacular than the other.

# Eating the Big Apple

When it comes to fine dining, New York is still at the top of the food chain.

By AMIT DIXIT





# FOOD & DRINK

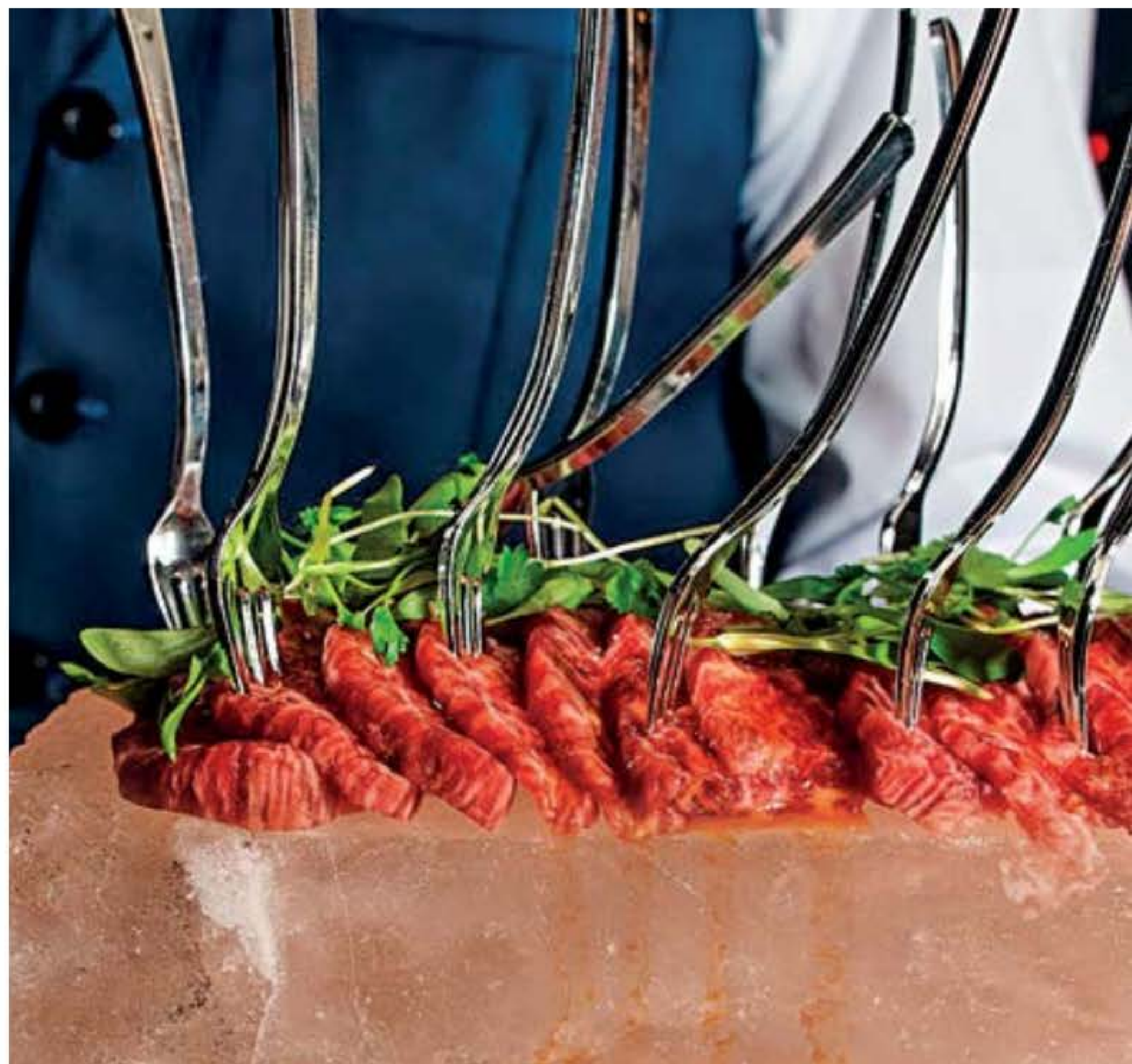
## DESTINATION DINING

### Park Ave Kitchen by David Burke

Brooklyn-born David Burke gained celebrity status after appearances on *Top Chef Masters* and *Iron Chef America*. He's a TV chef, but thankfully he's not only a TV chef. A purveyor of Modern American cuisine, Park Ave Kitchen is his newest baby, one half of it styled as a plush brasserie, the other as a Euro-style market café with brick pizza oven and grab-and-go options. I was surprised to find the affable Burke in the house, because he runs a veritable restaurant empire, comprising nearly 20 establishments.

At lunchtime, the brasserie was a welcoming space, filled with natural light. I had come armed with an appetite, and a friend. Burke has a whimsical approach to food, apparent in the very first dish we ordered, Clothesline Bacon. It's exactly what it sounds like, two black pepper-maple glaze slabs of bacon on a clothesline, secured with clothes pegs (and a scissor to snip them with). They tasted as good as they looked. The juicy lobster dumplings were a welcome diversion while we waited for the mains to arrive.

Burke is known for his steaks, which he dry ages using a patented pink Himalayan salt process—the





### QUIRKY & COOL

Celebrity chef David Burke knows how to have fun with food

striking pink Himalayan salt walls at Park Ave Kitchen are a nod to that—and the showstopper dish here is the Dry Aged Prime ‘Swinging’ Tomahawk For Two. But I was curious about the Bison Short Ribs, which came slathered in coffee bbq essence and were accompanied by jack cheese polenta and crispy squash rings. We shortly made short work of them (sorry, couldn’t resist!). As promised, the meat was so tender it fell off the bone effortlessly. The other main, which the restaurant had recommended, was the Roasted Branzino & Artichokes, a dish to soothe the soul of the fussiest pescetarian.

Restaurants sometimes flag by the time they get to dessert. No chance of that with David Burke. The perfectly balanced Not So Humble ‘Key Lime’ Pie and the moreish Classic Vanilla Crème Brûlée were the perfect ending to a meal I will remember for a long, long time. If this is what modern American food is all about, I’m getting in line for a green card.

And then I was back on the streets of Manhattan. Spring was in the air. What a day to be alive and in New York.

**Park Ave Kitchen** by David Burke

**Where** 514 Lexington Avenue@ the corner of 48th Street, New York, NY 10017; 646-847-4166; [parkavekitchenbydb.com](http://parkavekitchenbydb.com)

**Cost** \$175 (₹14,650) Meal for two



### Metropolis

If David Burke is quirky, Ethiopian-born Swedish-American chef Marcus Samuelsson takes it up several notches at Metropolis. This contemporary American restaurant draws inspiration from “the neighbourhoods and treasured culinary traditions throughout New York City’s boroughs”. Quite apt since it’s set in the \$500 million Perelman Performing Arts Center (PAC NYC) which opened last fall and sits on the northeast corner of the World Trade Center complex next to the 9/11 Memorial. *The New York Times* described it as a “spectacular marble cube” and the hope is that it will revitalise the area. Samuelsson was one of the chefs who served workers on the 9/11 site when it was being rebuilt two decades ago, so it’s a homecoming of sorts for him. The youngest person to ever receive a three-star review from *The New York Times*, Samuelsson has won eight James Beard Foundation Awards. And, yes, he’s on TV too.

A flight of stairs takes you from the street to the PAC NYC’s lobby, and Metropolis is right there. Stunningly designed by David Rockwell and Rockwell Group, the restaurant’s most striking feature is the undulating sapele wood ribbons across the ceiling. Vintage area rugs add warmth and softness to the space, and the custom furniture with pops of burgundy echoes the

Farmer's  
Market  
Platter at  
Metropolis



#### HIGH NOTES

Nama at the Aman  
New York offers  
an elevated dining  
experience



# FOOD & DRINK

~~~~~ DESTINATION | DINING ~~~~~

performance hall seating.

Once we settled in, the restaurant offered to bring out their best dishes for our delectation. "Can we have tasting portions please?" I pleaded, but my dinner companion—a friend from hungry college days—was having none of it. He's a wise one, and we managed to polish off most of it. It would have been criminal to waste such good food.

The Flushing Style Oysters, served with lime and XO sauce were divine as were the Smoked Hamachi Tacos, which we enjoyed assembling ourselves. The restaurant's executive chef is Ed Tinoco, and his Mexican roots are referenced in many of the dishes. The Parsnip Agnolotti came slathered in parmesan foam and garnished with hazelnuts. It was

difficult to pick a favourite. That's until the Aged Crescent Island Duck waddled in. Rubbed with a four-year mole, and accompanied by braised sweet potato and winter plum, it took our breath away and we chomped in silence. The tantalising martinis, which the cocktail programme focusses on, kept us in high spirits. The Doughnuts and Serious Chocolate Soufflé brought this heady meal to a sweet finish.

Metropolis by Marcus Samuelsson

Where 251 Fulton Street (at Greenwich Street), New York, NY 10007; 212-266-3018; metropolisbymarcus.com

Cost \$200 (₹16,750)

Meal for two



Marcus Samuelsson

Nama

When the Aman New York opened in August 2022, nobody quite knew what this urban oasis with Asian standards of hospitality (and sense of space) was doing in Manhattan. More than a year later, Aman has settled in nicely, part and parcel of the city's fabric. A meal at The Aman New York's Japanese restaurant, Nama—which, of course, is Aman spelt backwards—seemed the apt crescendo to a culinary sojourn, which had struck ever higher notes.

The dining experience at Nama is elevated in every sense. The restaurant is perched on the 14th floor and features its own terrace; the interiors are calming, and the staff friendly. The cuisine celebrates washoku, the traditional food of Japan, and features elegant and uncomplicated dishes where the quality of the produce shines through. Chef Takuma Yonemaru knows his stuff—for a restaurant that's not cheap, it's pretty busy.

There's everything from intimate omakase to savoury lunch sets on offer, but

I wanted a meal to remember and opted for the chef's tasting menu, a family style meal showcasing Nama staples as well as seasonal specials using produce flown in fresh from Tokyo's Toyosu Market. There's a hierarchy in the tasting menus too, and we picked Hana (Flower), the most comprehensive and sophisticated of the lot.

The A5 Wagyu Tataki, featuring the most premium grade of meat, was simple, yet startling. Sometimes, restraint is the greatest skill a chef can exercise and fine ingredients don't need much more than a nudge. The Sazae Tsuboyaki featuring a mellow broth in turban shells was certainly a novel experience for me, while the lobster came laced with uni (sea urchin) miso. There was a lot of uni on the menu that night, as evidenced in Uni Soba, the next dish. The one that reduced us to paroxysms of pleasure was the Unagi Gohan (charcoal grilled eel). The Aman New York Roll (which had uni!) was a must-try as was the assortment of fine nigiri. And then it was back to A5 Wagyu, this time as a medium-rare steak. Dessert was a matcha 'tea-ramisu'. This was, quite possibly, the most

expensive meal I've had in recent memory, but you can't put a price to the experience—the warmth of the staff, and the precision that only a Japanese chef can achieve...

But we weren't done. We had a rendezvous with The Jazz Club, Aman's nod to New York's vibrant music scene. Jazz, after all, is food for the soul. For that we had to descend into the bowels of the building and go in via a discreet speakeasy entrance. The music was already playing, and the legendary Vivian Sessoms—who has performed with the likes of Ryuichi Sakamoto, Michael Jackson and Donna Summer—had the stage. As she belted out some memorable covers, I sipped a cocktail inspired by one of the Aman Resorts. Just another evening in the city that never sleeps.

Nama

Where Aman New York, 730 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10019; 212-970-2626; reservations@namanyc.com; namabyaman.com

Cost \$388 (₹32,500) per person (Hana Chef's Tasting Menu)



The Big Picture

Now you can truly come home to the movies with projectors that transform any space into a cinema experience.

By **SULABH PURI**

It's the middle of a thrilling IPL (Indian Premier League) match; you can almost see the beads of sweat glistening on the brows of the bowlers, feel the excitement when a ball is caught and sense the exhilaration rolling off the batsman as he hits a six, all from the comfort of your living room. Or better yet, play your favourite film on a cinema-like screen with movie theatre quality sound, from the cosy confines of your bedroom. They say, go big or go home, but if you get a hold of a projector, both are possible. Perhaps this is the reason why projectors seem to be the first choice of cinephiles and the well-heeled. Here are our top recommendations.

Samsung The Premiere LSP7T

Samsung The Premiere LSP7T projector is a superb choice for cricket enthusiasts looking to elevate their IPL viewing experience this season. Engineered with cutting-edge laser technology, it delivers ultra-high-resolution visuals and unmatched colour accuracy on an expansive 3.04-m screen, ensuring every match boasts crystal-clear precision. The projector's 2,200 ANSI lumens offer brilliant clarity even in well-lit environments, allowing for daytime viewing without the need for blackout curtains.

Its ultra-short throw capability enables flexible placement, effortlessly fitting into any living space. Additionally, the integrated 30-watt audio system provides rich, cinema-quality sound, perfectly complementing the vivid visuals. With smart TV features and a sleek, compact design, the Premiere LSP7T not only enhances your viewing pleasure but also adds a touch of elegance to your home décor.

Price: ₹3.10 lakh

BenQ X500i

If you like sports and video games, then you are in for a treat. You can transform the viewing of any sporting event this season with the BenQ X500i projector, a powerhouse of visual and auditory excellence. Dive into the action with HDR tone mapping and SSI Dynamic Black technology, which enrich each frame with deep contrasts and fine details that leap out from the shadows. Thanks to BenQ's CinematicColor technology, colours are vivid and lifelike, covering 84 per cent of the DCI-P3 colour space, ensuring every cricket match bursts with vibrant hues. The cutting-edge CinematicSound technology, featuring MAXXAUDIO DPS, surrounds you with dynamic, 3D audio, placing you right in the stadium's roar. Effortlessly adaptable, the projector's short throw ratio and digital zoom allow for a commanding 95-inch image from just 1.44m away, fitting any room size without a complex setup.

Price ₹1.89 lakh



Optoma UHZ50+

This is a great projector for sports, "family drama" entertainment and children's cartoons. Users can experience the adrenaline thrill of an action flick like never before with the Optoma UHZ50+ projector. This state-of-the-art Smart 4K UHD laser home cinema projector brings every punch to life with its true 4K UHD resolution and advanced DuraCore Laser technology, guaranteeing exceptionally sharp and vibrant visuals for up to 30,000 hours. It offers superior HDR10 and HLG compatibility, ensuring that every hit and field play bursts with rich colours and stark contrasts. Gamers will delight in the ultra-smooth 240Hz refresh rate and minimal 4ms input lag, providing an edge in high-speed gaming. Enhanced with smart home features and easy streaming via the included HAKO mini Smart TV Dongle, the Optoma UHZ50+ projector transforms any room into a dynamic viewing arena for sports, gaming, and blockbuster movie nights.

Price ₹4.25 lakh



Indian, by Design

"It took me five months to create this menu," says J.P. Singh, executive chef of Sheraton Grand Bengaluru, where Zarf, a new fine dining Indian restaurant has just opened.

By **SHOBA NARAYAN**

In a city overrun with new restaurant openings, Zarf differentiates itself by paying homage to undivided India but with playful twists. First come the papads with many chutneys, including one made from hemp. New ingredients like asparagus and edamame make their way into the kebabs but are used with restraint so that even corporate diners who want no-fuss Indian food will be satisfied. Chef de Cuisine Hardeep Singh exudes quiet confidence as he describes how he makes his fresh garam masala that elevates many dishes. The female wait staff too strike the perfect balance between Indian-style hospitality and Western-style knowledge about ingredients and soft recommendations.

The dishes have familiar tastes allowing you to either appreciate or forget the new ingredients used. For example, Zarf's murgh malai tikka is marinated in saffron cream but has an added dose of parmesan cheese for an elegant



twist. The dals and soups are outstanding. The paya soup, slow-cooked for 24 hours, was a nod to the season, while the vegetarian version had healthy, yet delicious moringa. Its yellow dal is served at the table with a bit of fanfare: Much like how waiters at a Mexican restaurant mix guacamole at the table, the excellent service staff at Zarf do the dal-tadka or tempering at the table. Its kali dal could give Bukhara a run for its money.

Part of the promise of a five-star is that they have the clout and ability to source excellent ingredients. Hence, New Zealand lamb makes its way into the melt-in-the-mouth kakori kebabs. Bannur lamb goes into the Gowda recipe that bears its name. The tandoori chicken dishes are melt-in-the-mouth without



GOURMET PARADISE

Clockwise from top: Cheerful interiors; Peshawari Namak Mandi Lamb Chops; Lamb Nehari; Chagha Chicken; Kakori Kebabs (Left); Coconut and jaggery gujiya (Above left)





being dry or losing their shape. Seafood lovers will not be disappointed. The Kerala fish molly gets a new avatar with lobster being the star ingredient prompting repeat visits. One gentleman from the UK came four days in a row just to eat this lobster before taking off. Calcutta fish and chips carries the flavour of Gondhoraj lime and is expertly filleted. Standout vegetarian items include a shami kebab flavoured with soft goat cheese, a kathal (jackfruit) ka kofta, and a melange of greens including mustard, amaranth, fenugreek, and spinach, all combined with a masterful hand. The Multani paneer tikka has textures of mango—familiar to Indians, yet refreshing. The breads are varied with jowar, jalebiya naan, low-glycemic-index and are therefore diabetic-friendly. Desserts balance South and North with the famous Mangalorean gadbad icecream served alongside kulfi. But by the time diners get to dessert, the heart and stomach will be full. In short, Zarf is a celebration of Indian cuisine.

WHERE Sheraton Grand Bengaluru, Whitefield, Bangalore.

CONTACT +91 8071-008100

COST FOR TWO ₹ 3,000 (without alcohol)

Time to Veg-itate

Dubai's one Michelin star vegetarian restaurant Avatara debuts in Mumbai with a 14-course tasting menu, but minus the usual suspects, paneer or mushrooms.

By **NIVEDITA JAYARAM PAWAR**

No chef in the city plays better jokes on diners than chef Rakesh Rana, whose vegetarian menu turns sambar into a gelato and couches bitter gourd in a delish ghee roast jacket. No matter how much you think you know your vegetables, you're bound to learn something new at Avatara where Rana turns classics on their head. Avatara Mumbai is the Indian counterpart of the one Michelin-starred vegetarian restaurant in Dubai.

The meal starts with a not-so-impressive bonbon filled with panchamrita (made as an offering during pooja) but quickly gathers momentum with a snack of Maharashtrian aloo wadi turned into a taco and dehydrated okra stuffed with thecha, served with a delectable sol kadhi on the side. There is salt and spice and acidity in every sip. A plate of grilled baby corn on a bed of savoury ghewar is perhaps the best example of the kitchen's sure footing: smoky, salty, creamy, and spicy all at once. There's also a compelling flaky katlam (Kashmiri bread) to be eaten with pureed rajma and apple chutney. What's not to like, right? The food arrives on dishes that threaten to upstage what they're meant to support—ornate plates, wooden boats, logs and even figurines. Service rivals food in its sumptuousness. The moment you're seated, someone in a tailor-made suit snaps a crisp linen napkin and drapes it across your lap while gloved waiters set out the cutlery.

Thankfully the 14-course tasting menu is not all about pretentious portion sizes or ridiculously rare ingredients. Rana manages to coax flavours even from the humble turnip and much disliked bitter gourd. The latter is cooked with ghee roast spices and accompanied with a sambar-turned-gelato and a dosai carved like a bright flower. The hot, cold symphony whirls every hotspot of your tongue. Most extraordinary



LABOUR OF LOVE
Hand painted murals at Avatara (Top); Makhan malai with panchamrita (Above); Passion fruit chaat (right); Jackfruit momo with sea buckthorn thukpa (Far right)





SMALL BITES

Bitter Gourd ghee roast with sambhar gelato; Sattu kachori stuffed with drumstick chokha also, last para, just chk spacing, one line of space is showing.



of all is a bowl of sea buckthorn thukpa with a jackfruit momo swimming in it. Rana takes great care to ensure the jenga tower of salt, acid and spice remains balanced throughout each dish. Spherifications of various kinds, bursting, popping, deflating, turn up on dishes frequently along with a little glitter and warq here and there.

However, after the seventh course a quiet calm, that comes from knowing you are in safe hands settles over, along with the dread of ploughing through seven more courses! Fourteen courses is a lot of food even if it's tasting portions. And the kitchen is not infallible. A dish of rice spiked with Kolhapur's famed tambdarassa pops up with a brutally acidic parsnip gravy, which reads better than it tastes. Even the

chaat course with guava water feels odd, as if a dessert had mistakenly wandered onto an entree. Time is another issue—my meal lingered for two and half hours. Will Mumbaiites with their buzzing cell phones, power lunches and pressing work engagements graze for several hours simply because the food is so exalted?

But what's reassuring about it is that all this clever, delicious and often brilliant cooking comes at a price (₹4,500 per person) that won't leave you feeling like you've been a willing accomplice in your own mugging.

WHERE Krishna Curve Building, opp. Juhu Garden, Santacruz West.

CONTACT +91 9152600123

COST ₹4,500 plus taxes for the tasting menu.

HOT
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AUTO | REVIEW



The dual personalities of the 2024 Mercedes-AMG GLE 53 Coupe make it even more desirable

Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde Reimagined

By DHIRAM SHAH



ENGINE 2999cc, inline-six turbo-petrol

POWER 320 kW

TORQUE 560 Nm

TRANSMISSION 9 speed automatic

0-100kmph 5 seconds

TOP SPEED 250 kmph

PRICE ₹ 1.71 crore (ex-showroom)



With more than 20,000 units sold in the country, the GLE constitutes around 15 per cent of the sales for Mercedes-Benz India. After all, we Indians have a special soft spot for SUVs, and the GLE delivers it all: luxury, style, and above all, practicality. Adding the element of performance to it is the AMG tuned GLE 53 Coupe, a powerful and attractive offering that packs some serious driving power.

Refreshed for 2024, the Mercedes-AMG GLE 53 Coupe strikes a remarkable balance between the robustness of an SUV and the sleek elegance of a coupe. The iconic Pan-Americana grille commands attention at the forefront, bordered by sharp LED headlights and well-crafted air intakes that subtly suggest there's more to this vehicle than meets the eye. The car's flowing lines and broad haunches reinforce its dynamic stance, highlighting its sporty character. But what really catches the eye is the sloping rear roof and the subtly uplifted tail that lends it a sporty and aerodynamic edge.

Over the years, Mercedes-Benz designers have perfected the art of crafting gorgeous interior spaces, and the GLE 53 is testament to that. Step inside, and it's all opulence and high-end technology designed to pamper all your senses. The cabin comfortably seats up to five passengers, providing ample legroom in both rows. The space is further enhanced by a panoramic sunroof, which floods the cabin with natural light. The AMG seats, upholstered in hand-stitched Nappa leather, and micro suede offer exceptional support, especially during spirited driving. These seats are heated and ventilated, ensuring comfort in extreme weather. For added comfort, the car features four-zone air conditioning that circulates ionized air through a complex filter system, ensuring you breathe clean air regardless of the ambient AQI. Further, Mercedes has created a special fragrance, 'AMG #63', with a high oil content. This scent is diffused into the cabin via a generator, creating an ambient vibe that enhances the driving experience.

The cockpit is dominated by a 12.3-inch digital instrument cluster and a matching infotainment



display that integrates everything from navigation to the 13-speaker Burmester surround sound system for a fully immersive experience.

Behind the wheel of the Mercedes-AMG GLE 53 Coupe, you are in command of an exquisitely crafted beast. Push the start button and the potent 3.0-litre inline-six turbo-petrol engine roars to life. It churns out 435 bhp and 57.10 kgm of torque that is delivered to all the four wheels via a 9 speed automatic gearbox. Sweetening things even more is the smart use of mild-hybrid technology which delivers an additional 15 kW power & 200 Nm torque. Despite its size and commanding road presence, the GLE 53 Coupe handles with the agility of a nimble sedan, thanks to AMG performance tuning. The steering is exceptionally responsive and precise, providing a genuine sense of connection to the road.

In Comfort mode, the GLE 53 Coupe smoothly navigates over our bumpy city roads, providing the plush ride you would expect from a luxury SUV. However, switch to Sport or Sport+ mode, and the transformation is palpable: the adaptive suspension tightens, throttle response becomes crisper, and the exhaust note grows richer. This shift turns the silent SUV into an angry high-performance vehicle with an exhilarating driving experience. The 2024 AMG GLE 53 Coupe epitomises the fusion of opulence and performance. This vehicle is a testament to AMG's racing heritage meshed with the luxury for which Mercedes-Benz is renowned.



TRUE LUXURY

Crafted from genuine leather, wood, and metal, the interiors of the GLE exude luxury, complemented by a high-tech dashboard dominated by two crisp displays.

Deep Dive into Luxury

With a ceramic bezel, a blue lacquer dial bearing the name 'Deepsea' in powdered yellow and a luminescent display, this legendary diver's watch is a standout in both form and function. The Oyster Perpetual Rolex Deepsea comes in 18 carat yellow gold and pretty much defines the gold standard with this watch. The 60-minute graduated, unidirectional rotatable bezel of the Rolex Deepsea enables divers to precisely and safely monitor their dive and decompression time. What's more, the triangular 'zero' marker of the graduation is visible in the dark thanks to an embedded capsule containing a luminescent material emitting a long-lasting blue glow. The graduation on the bezel is coated via PVD (Physical Vapour Deposition) with a thin layer of yellow gold. The blues found in the compression ring, dial and the Cerachrom bezel insert combine to create a canvas of subtle oceanic palette that is accented by the 18 carat yellow gold case and the Oyster bracelet. The Oyster bracelet is equipped with an Oysterlock clasp, which prevents accidental opening, as well as an ingenious Glidelock, which allows for fine adjustments of the bracelet without the use of any tools. What's more, it makes it easy to don comfortably even over a diving suit. Who says style must take a plunge just because you're plumbing the depths of the ocean?

Price on request

Availability Brand stores

—By Chumki Bharadwaj



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