

SCIENCE

30-year study links ultra-processed food to risk of early death

The Hindu Bureau

Higher consumption of most ultra-processed foods is linked to a slightly higher risk of death, with ready-to-eat meat, poultry, and seafood based products, sugary drinks, dairy based desserts, and highly processed breakfast foods showing the strongest associations, finds a 30-year U.S. observational study. The results were published in the journal *The BMJ*. The researchers say not all ultra-processed food products should be universally restricted, but that

their findings “provide support for limiting consumption of certain types of ultra-processed food for long term health”. Mounting evidence links ultra-processed foods to higher risks of obesity, heart disease, diabetes and bowel cancer, but few long term studies have examined links to all causes and cause specific deaths, especially due to cancer. To address this knowledge gap, researchers tracked the long-term health of 74,563 female registered nurses from 11 States in the Nurses’

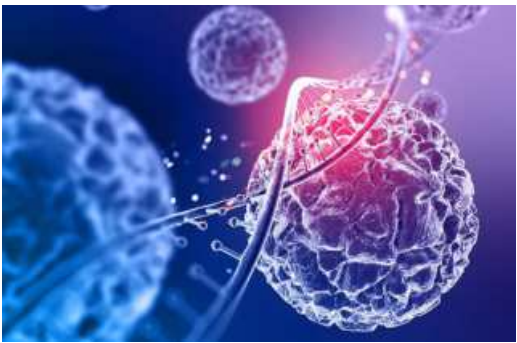
Health Study (1984-2018) and 39,501 male health professionals from all 50 U.S. states in the Health Professionals Follow-up Study (1986-2018) with no history of cancer, cardiovascular diseases, or diabetes at study enrolment. Every two years participants provided information on their health and lifestyle habits, and every four years they completed a detailed food questionnaire. Overall dietary quality was also assessed using the Alternative Healthy Eating Index-2010 (AHEI) score. During an average

34-year follow-up period, the researchers identified 48,193 deaths, including 13,557 deaths due to cancer, 11,416 deaths due to cardiovascular diseases, 3,926 deaths due to respiratory diseases, and 6,343 deaths due to neurodegenerative diseases. Compared with participants in the lowest quarter of ultra-processed food intake (average three servings per day), those in the highest quarter (average seven servings per day) had a 4% higher risk of total deaths and a 9% higher risk of other deaths, in-

cluding an 8% higher risk of neurodegenerative deaths. No associations were found for deaths due to cardiovascular diseases, cancer, or respiratory diseases. In absolute numbers, the rate of death from any cause among participants in the lowest and highest quarter of ultra-processed food intake was 1,472 and 1,536 per 100,000 person years, respectively. The association between ultra-processed food intake and death varied across specific food

groups, with meat, poultry, and seafood based ready-to-eat products showing the strongest and most consistent associations, followed by sugar sweetened and artificially sweetened beverages, dairy based desserts, and ultra-processed breakfast food. The association was less pronounced after overall dietary quality was taken into account, suggesting that dietary quality has a stronger influence on long term health than ultra-processed food consumption, note the authors.

SNAPSHOTS



Early clinical trial sheds light on regulatory T cell therapies

Results from a new clinical trial shed light on the performance of infusions of immune-calming regulatory T cells for children with type 1 diabetes. The trial shows that a single dose of the cells can transfer over efficiently in children but does not show signs of preserving insulin-releasing cells in the pancreas, highlighting the need for further research. Researchers have theorized that supporting regulatory T cell activity - or even infusing these cells - could treat autoimmune disorders.



Areas at risk for malaria in Africa may decline: study

Areas at risk for malaria transmission in Africa may decline more than previously expected because of climate change in the 21st century, suggests an ensemble of environmental and hydrologic models. The combined models predicted that the total area of suitable malaria transmission will start to decline in Africa after 2025 through 2100, including in West Africa and as far east as South Sudan. The new study’s approach captures hydrologic features that are missed with predictive models of transmission.



Fragment of human cerebral cortex reconstructed

Using more than 1.4 petabytes of electron microscopy imaging data, researchers have generated a nanoscale-resolution reconstruction of a millimeter-scale fragment of the human cerebral cortex, providing an unprecedented view into the structural organisation of brain tissue. The data reveal underappreciated aspects of the human temporal cortex, including the disproportionate number of glia over neurons and existence of powerful axonal inputs.



Question Corner

Strange trigger

Can heavy snowfall and rain contribute to some earthquakes?

A recent study has found that episodes of heavy snowfall and rain likely contributed to a swarm of earthquakes over the past several years in northern Japan. This is the first time that climate conditions have been found to initiate some quakes. The seismic activity in the region was surprisingly found to synchronise with certain changes in underground pressure, and those changes were influenced by seasonal patterns of snowfall and precipitation. Scientists suspect that this new connection between quakes and climate may

not be unique to Japan. Since late 2020, hundreds of small earthquakes – earthquake swarms – have shaken up Japan’s Noto Peninsula, in 2020 changes in seismic velocity appeared to be synchronised with the seasons. When it rains or snows, that adds weight, which increases pore pressure, which allows seismic waves to travel through slower. When the seismic velocity observations and the model of excess pore pressure were overlapped, they fit extremely well.

Readers may send their questions / answers to questioncorner@thehindu.co.in


Will cattle be the next lab for flu host-switching?

The co-expression of both human and avian receptors in the mammary glands of cows indicate susceptibility to viruses of both swine/human and avian origin

R. Prasad

Cattle have so far not been associated with being infected on large-scale, and as a result, cattle have not been well studied as domestic hosts for influenza A virus species. In contrast to the notion that cattle are considered to be almost resistant to infection with influenza A virus, H5N1 virus, which was first detected in dairy cattle in Texas in late March, has rapidly spread to 37 herds in nine States in the U.S. as of May 7.

On April 24, the U.S. FDA said that in a nationally representative commercial milk sampling study of pasteurised milk, about one in five of the retail samples tested positive for bird flu viral fragments. A greater proportion of positive results were in milk from areas with infected herds. An NIH-funded study had found an absence of infectious virus in milk samples. The April 23 report of the FAO noted that the H5N1 virus was detected in “high concentrations in milk from infected dairy cattle and at levels greater than that seen in respiratory samples”. That the concentration was less in the respiratory samples of the infected cows compared with the milk samples strongly suggests that the pathogenesis of the H5N1 virus in cattle differs from other mammals, says a study posted as a preprint; preprints are yet to be peer-reviewed.



Crucibles for reassortment of influenza virus genes

Reassortment is the process by which influenza viruses swap gene segments when two differing influenza viruses co-infect a cell

RAPID SPREAD: As of May 7, H5N1 virus has spread to 37 herds in nine States in the U.S.

- H5N1 virus has been detected in high concentrations in milk from infected dairy cattle and at levels greater than that seen in respiratory samples
- Higher concentration of virus in milk samples compared with respiratory samples strongly suggest that H5N1 pathogenesis in cattle differs from other mammals
- Influenza virus has greater propensity to infect the mammary glands of cows
- Both human and duck receptors are highly expressed in the mammary glands of cows
- The presence of human and duck receptors in the mammary glands provides an opportunity for the evolution of H5N1 viruses to easily spread animals to humans
- Pigs are called the 'evolutionary lab for flu host switching' due to the presence of human-flu and avian-flu host cell receptors in the respiratory tract
- Reassortment might help the avian flu virus to become better adapted to bind to human receptors and spread from birds to humans more easily

One reason for dairy cattle milk containing high concentrations of H5N1 virus fragments could be the propensity of the virus to infect the mammary glands of cows as a previous study had found. On evaluating the expression of H5N1 receptors in the mammary gland, respiratory tract and cerebrum of cattle, the authors found both the human and the duck receptors to be highly expressed in the mammary glands. In the mammary gland, the human receptors and the duck receptors were found to be widely distributed in the alveoli but not in the ducts. Chicken-type influenza receptors were common in the cow respiratory

tract. The high concentration of H5N1 virus fragments in milk from H5N1-infected cows could be due to local viral replication in the mammary glands of cows as H5N1 has a high affinity for the receptor, the authors say. The study found that the chicken receptor was expressed on the surface of the respiratory epithelium in the upper respiratory tract and upper part of the lower respiratory tract, while human and duck receptors were either lacking or very limited in expression. However, in the lung alveolar cells, the researchers found all the receptors of humans, chickens and ducks being abundantly expressed.

The abundance of human and duck receptors in the mammary glands and the large presence of human, chicken and duck receptors in the lung alveolar cells of cows provides a perfect environment for the evolution of H5N1 viruses that can easily spread from animals to humans. The reason why pigs are called the “evolutionary lab for flu host switching” is precisely due to the presence of both the human-flu and avian-flu host cell receptors in their upper-respiratory tract, says Dr. Sam Scarpino from Northeastern University in a tweet. The latest study has found that cow mammary glands contain the same kind of mixed flu re-

The magpies of the Himalayas



SPEAKING OF SCIENCE

D. Balasubramanian

Magpies belong to the Corvidae family of birds that includes crows, jays and ravens. Birds of this family are generally considered to be noisy, inquisitive birds that in folklore from around the world have often been associated with omens, good or bad. In some European cultures, they accompany witches. An English rhyme, “One for sorrow, two for joy; three for a girl, four for a boy; Five for silver, six for gold; Seven for a secret never to be told,” suggests that spotting a lone magpie brings bad news. But no one will deny that the magpies are striking in appea-

rance, or that some of the most flamboyant species are found in the Himalayas. From Kashmir to Myanmar, a few closely related blue magpie species are a common sight. The gold-billed magpie, *Urocissa flavirostris*, also called the yellow-billed blue magpie, has mischief in its eyes and occupies the high altitude zone between 2000 and 3000 meters above sea level. At slightly lower heights we find the red-billed magpie, and the blue magpie is found at lower altitudes where humans live in larger numbers. **Trekking corridors** Best sightings of the yellow and red-billed varieties are in the trekking corridor in Western Sikkim that leads from the town of Yoksom, at 1,780 metres above sea level, to fabulous sights of



High above: Gold-billed magpies occupy the high altitude zone between 2,000 and 3,000 meters above sea level. GETTY IMAGES

the Kanchenjunga from near the Goche La pass at about 4,700 metres above sea level. The journey takes you from tropical moist broad-leaf forests at the lower altitudes through high sub-Alpine forests to a treeless Alpine landscape of juniper bushes. Somewhere in the middle are

forests whose canopies close in over you, and an astonishing diversity and density of birds. Field studies by zoologists at the Sikkim Government College have documented that over 250 species of birds are found in this zone, and at around 2,500 metres above sea le-

vel, you can see or hear nearly 60 individual birds in a five-minute time interval. The yellow-billed blue magpie is very often a part of this chorus. The body of the bird is about the size of a pigeon, but with a 45-centimeter-long tail, adding up to an overall size of 66 cm. While foraging for worms on the ground, the tail is pointed upward; while picking berries in trees, the tail swoops downward. The flight is characteristic too: a few quick wing beats, followed by long gliding movements. The yellow-billed blue magpie builds its nests at the forks of branches in rhododendron trees. The nest itself appears to be a hurried job of twigs, with a soft lining of grass in which three-six eggs are laid in May or June. Both parents take part in raising the

young. As the nursery rhyme says, two for joy. The blue magpie and the red-billed magpie are very similar in appearance too, though a little smaller. The blue magpie is less of a forest bird, and more often seen around villages. All the species can be spotted as solitary birds, in pairs, or noisy flocks of 8-10 birds. As human presence in forests increases, there are worries about how well the birds can cope. The colorful flowers of rhododendrons attract tourists. To support tourists, villagers often resort to forest resources such as firewood. It is hoped that just like agriculture, tourism will also learn to be a sustainable trade. (The article was written in collaboration with Sushil Chandani, who works in molecular modelling)

PROFILES

Opening the gates of hell

Rafah

Despite international warnings and pleas, Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli Prime Minister, seems determined to invade the southern Gaza city where 1.5 million Palestinians, most of them refugees, are living in filthy overcrowded shelters, streets and beaches

Stanly Johny

The pre-war population of Rafah, the southernmost city of the Gaza strip sharing a border with Egypt's Sinai Peninsula, was 1,70,000. Today, seven months after Israel launched its war on Gaza, following Hamas's October 7, 2023 crossborder attack in which at least 1,200 people were killed, as many as 1.5 million people are living in Rafah. Many of them are camping on the streets and beaches, while others are packed into filthy, overcrowded makeshift shelters. Rafah is now a "gigantic refugee camp", Jan Egeland, Secretary-General of the Norwegian Refugee Council, said in February. According to a doctor who served in Rafah, the city is a "closed jail" with faecal matter running through streets so crowded that there is barely space for medics' vehicles to pass, Reuters reported. Medics are struggling to supply even basic aid and prevent the outbreak and spread of diseases. According to Action Aid, every single person in Gaza, a majority of whose population is now jammed in Rafah, "is hungry and people have just 1.5 to 2 litres of unsafe water per day to meet all their needs".

Israel wants to launch a full-scale invasion on this Rafah. Rafah has always been a flashpoint in the Israel-Palestine conflict, given its territorial proximity to Egypt. After the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, triggered by the declaration of the state of Israel in historical Palestine, Rafah came under Egyptian rule along with other parts of the Gaza Strip. Tens of thousands of Palestinians, who were displaced from their homes when the Jewish state was created, were settled in Gaza. During the Suez Crisis, Rafah came under attack when the Israeli troops were marching towards Sinai through Gaza. On November 12, 1956, the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) raided a refugee camp in Rafah, killing at least 111 Palestinians, which came to be known as the 'Rafah massacre'. After the Six-Day War of 1967, the entire Gaza, including Rafah, came under Israel's direct military occupation. Israel would retain its



The U.S. clearly warned Israel against launching a full-scale invasion of Rafah, arguing that such an attack would kill more Palestinian civilians. AP

direct control over the enclave until 2005. After the latest war began on October 7, Israel ordered over 1 million Palestinians living in northern Gaza to evacuate. Most of them fled their homes and moved to southern cities such as Khan Younis and Rafah. When Khan Younis was attacked, there was another exodus of refugees towards the south. Today, the lion's share of Rafah's population are internally displaced Palestinians.

War and talks

The past week saw dramatic developments in the Gaza war. The U.S. clearly warned Israel against launching a full-scale invasion of Rafah, arguing that such an attack would kill more Palestinian civilians. But Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has vowed that Israel would go ahead with the plan to invade Rafah, defying international pressure, warnings and pleas. But Mr. Netanyahu is also under pressure to bring the remaining hostages back.

Israel says 128 hostages abducted on October 7 are still in Hamas captivity,

though many of them are feared dead. There are growing protests in Israel, asking the government to strike deal with Hamas to bring the hostages back. Israel and Hamas, helped by mediators such as the U.S., Egypt and Qatar have held multiple rounds of talks in Cairo for a ceasefire deal.

While the finer details of the ceasefire proposal are yet to be made public, reports in Egyptian and Saudi media suggest that the mediators have proposed a three-phase deal that would see the release of all hostages and Palestinian prisoners and eventually bring the war to an end. In the first phase, Israel is expected to cease fire for 40 days and free Palestinian prisoners in return for the release of 33 hostages. In the second phase, the ceasefire would be extended by 42 more days, while all the remaining living hostages would be released. The third phase of the proposals are the most contentious, according to Arab media. Israel wants Hamas to release the bodies of all hostages and Hamas wants a comprehensive, lasting ceasefire and

full IDF withdrawal from Gaza.

Israel says no to both Hamas demands. IDF troops have been deployed in northern and central Gaza, effectively carving the northern tip of the strip as a buffer zone between Israel proper and Gaza's population (who have been pushed to the south). If Israeli troops withdraw from Gaza, Israeli officials say, Palestinians as well as Hamas militants would return to areas close to the border. And if Israel agrees to a lasting ceasefire, the remaining Hamas battalions (Israeli officials say four Hamas brigades are present in Rafah) would survive.

When Israel launched the war on October 7, it made its twin objectives public: dismantle Hamas and release the hostages. Seven months after the war, in which roughly 35,000 Palestinians have been killed, Israel has not met either of the objectives. One practical solution to the hostage crisis is to strike a deal with Hamas. But Hamas would release the hostages only in return for a ceasefire. And if Mr. Netanyahu agrees to a ceasefire,

Hamas would survive. This is the dilemma the Israel faces. Earlier, Biden administration officials had said Hamas was the major stumbling block for a ceasefire. Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated on May 4 that "the only thing standing between the people of Gaza and a ceasefire is Hamas". Two days later, however, Hamas's Doha-based leader Ismail Haniyeh said the group had accepted the ceasefire proposal suggested by the mediators in Cairo. The Hamas announcement came hours after the IDF ordered at least 1,00,000 people to evacuate from Rafah. Mr. Netanyahu's government immediately rejected the Hamas offer, saying it did not meet Israel's core demands. He later said Israel would never agree to end the war in Gaza as part of a deal with Hamas. In other words, the Israelis seemed determined to go ahead with the Rafah attack plan.

Tensions with U.S.

Mr. Netanyahu's tough line on Rafah has created tensions in Israel's ties with the U.S. Earlier, President Biden had said a full-scale attack on Rafah without a proper plan to protect civilians would be a redline for him. Last week, he announced that the U.S. would not supply offensive weapons to Israel if it goes ahead with the attack plan. The United Nations has repeatedly warned that any attack on the overcrowded Rafah would lead to a "humanitarian catastrophe".

If Mr. Netanyahu abandons the plan to attack Rafah and cuts a deal with Hamas for hostages, his government could fall as his far-right allies such as Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich have already warned against such a move. If he goes ahead with the plan, more Palestinian civilians would be killed, Israel would further be isolated globally and tensions would rise with the U.S. But Mr. Netanyahu does not seem to bother. "If Israel has to stand alone, it will stand alone," he said on May 10, less than a month after American, British, French and Jordanian defence systems, along with the IDF, shot down most of the drones and cruise and ballistic missiles launched by Iran towards Israel.

THE GIST

After the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, triggered by the declaration of the state of Israel in the historical Palestine, Rafah came under Egyptian rule along with other parts of the Gaza Strip

During the Suez Crisis, Rafah was attacked when the Israeli troops were marching towards Sinai through Gaza. On November 12, 1956, the IDF raided a refugee camp in Rafah, killing at least 111 Palestinians

After the Six Day War of 1967, the entire Gaza, including Rafah, came under Israel's direct military occupation. Israel would retain its direct control over the enclave until 2005

Rebel prince

Dushyant Chautala

The former BJP ally, who has offered support to the Congress to form an alternative government in Haryana, is fighting to keep his party legislators together

Vikas Vasudeva

Haryana is in political turmoil after three independent MLAs withdrew their support for the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government, and its former coalition partner, the Jan Nayak Janta Party (JJP), offered support to the Congress to form an alternative government.

As the State continues to witness breakneck political developments, 36-year-old Dushyant Chautala, leader of the JJP who became the Deputy Chief Minister of Haryana in 2019, is now facing a stiff task of keeping his flock of 10 legislators together, and fighting to stay relevant in the State's politics. His political acumen and leadership skills are at the test in the midst of the Lok Sabha election and in the run-up to the Assembly election, which is due to be held in October-November this year.

To bring down the government led by his old ally, the BJP, Mr. Chautala has offered support for the Congress from "outside". He has also asked Governor Bandaru Dattatreya to call for an immediate 'floor test' to determine the majority of the government.

In the 90-member State Assembly, which currently has an effective strength of 88, the BJP government, led by Chief Minister Nayab



ILLUSTRATIONS: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

Singh Saini, appears to be in a minority with only 43 MLAs by its side, two short of majority. But BJP leaders assert that their government is under 'no threat' and that if there be any need, "other MLAs" will support them, an indicator of potential support from disgruntled JJP MLAs.

Disgruntled MLAs

At least three disgruntled MLAs of the JJP, annoyed over Mr. Chautala's 'style of working', have met the senior BJP leader and former Chief Minister, Manohar Lal Khattar, fuelling speculation that they may switch sides, and even explore legal possibilities of splitting the JJP. At this juncture, Mr. Chautala, the co-founder of the JJP, is staring at a crisis as he is trying to secure his party, which was formed in 2018, after breaking away from the Indian National Lok Dal (INLD).

His party won 10 seats in the 2019 Assembly elections, and it played a key role in forming the coali-

tion government in Haryana.

After the split, the INLD and its breakaway faction fought to claim the political legacy of its founder, Chaudhary Devi Lal, a former Deputy Prime Minister and a noted farmer leader. In the 2019 Assembly elections, Mr. Chautala proved his mettle by winning 10 seats. The INLD saw a near washout as the party could win only one seat. The 2018 split in the INLD followed a bitter power struggle between two brothers - Ajay Chautala, who was then serving a 10-year jail sentence in a case related to a teacher recruitment scam, and Abhay Chautala, who was then the leader of Opposition in the Haryana Assembly and was running the party since 2013. Amid the family feud, Ajay and his son Dushyant floated the JJP.

Four and half years after the government was formed in the State, the BJP-JJP alliance broke down a couple of months

ago, amid differences over seat-sharing for the general election.

In the run-up to the polls, the JJP, which draws its support largely from the agrarian class (primarily the Jat community), found itself at the receiving end of farmers' anger as many farmer organisations confronted party leaders while they were visiting villages during the election campaign.

Aggressive stance

Of late, Mr. Chautala has been taking an aggressive stance against the BJP. The attempt was aimed at reclaiming the party's core support base, which seemed to have taken a beating after the year-long farmers' agitation against the BJP government at the Centre. As the BJP faced farmers' wrath over the now repealed agricultural laws and demand for higher support price, the JJP, the BJP's ally in the state, also faced the heat.

As the JJP is going through a rough patch, Mr. Chautala has twin problems at hand - one to curb the apparent rebellion within the party and the other to offset the resentment among farmer groups. Almost five years ago, he led the party to be a kingmaker in Haryana's politics. Today, he is fighting not to let the party he co-founded end up as a fringe group.

The gradualist

John Swinney

The SNP leader takes on the role of First Minister of Scotland at a tremulous time, when the party faces internal divisions, frustrated allies and a weakened economy

Joan Sony Cherian

On May 8, 60-year-old John Ramsay Swinney, a veteran of the Scottish National Party (SNP), was sworn in as Scotland's First Minister. Mr. Swinney takes up the reins from Humza Yousaf, the former First Minister who stepped down following a threat of no-confidence vote against him, after he ripped up his party's coalition agreement with the Scottish Greens over climate change commitments. This left the SNP with only 63 seats in the Holyrood (Scottish parliament), that is, two seats short of a majority. Mr. Swinney was able to hold the party in power by winning the support of 64 members of parliament and by the abstention of the Scottish Greens.

Being the third First Minister since Scotland's last election in 2021, after Nicola Sturgeon and Mr. Yousaf, Mr. Swinney said the appointment was "something of a surprise" but an "extraordinary privilege".

Mr. Swinney has held many a political office in his long career. He was head of the SNP from 2001 to 2004 as opposition leader and has held Cabinet positions under Alex Salmond and Ms. Sturgeon. He also served as Deputy First Minister under Ms. Sturgeon, and is the longest serving member to



hold the position. In 2016, he was appointed Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, a role in which he was widely criticised.

In 2020, he was subject to a no-confidence vote after he was accused of bringing in an exam system that unfairly penalised students from deprived areas. Even though he won the motion, in 2021 he stepped down as Education Secretary and took over the responsibility of post-COVID recovery. By 2023, Mr. Swinney had resigned from his Cabinet roles and taken a backseat in the party until the call for a new leadership arose.

Fight for independence

Mr. Swinney assumes office in the week that marks the 25th anniversary of the devolution of the Scottish parliament. Scotland has had a long-standing demand for independence from Britain, which rings strong to this day. It is out of this demand for self-governance that Scotland was granted devolved pow-

ers in 1999 after a nationwide referendum. Devolved powers mandate that Scotland can form legislation on issues such as health, transport and education while the power to legislate on defence, foreign policy, trade, immigration, and currency is reserved with Westminster.

Mr. Swinney joined the SNP at the age of 15 for its aspiration of independence. While he started his parliamentary career at Westminster in 1997, he was also elected to the first Scottish parliament in 1999. Mr. Swinney is part of what is called the gradualist faction within the SNP, where he believes that independence is a gradual goal with devolution of powers being one of the steps towards complete autonomy. However, the other faction, known as the fundamentalists, are sceptical of devolution and consider it a smokescreen to deter and delay full independence.

Keeping in line with the gradualist tradition, Mr.

Swinney has stated that efforts towards independence would be focussed on winning a majority in the forthcoming elections. He believes only through good governance and a strong economic policy will the public have faith in an independent Scotland divorced from the British Union.

He scrapped the position of Minister of independence, in charge of commissioning white papers on how Scotland will function as an independent nation, so that immediate concerns such as the cost of living crisis and the implications of Brexit can be given priority. Refuting allegations of undermining the goal of Scottish independence, the new First Minister reiterated that, "independence is going to be front and centre of our mission - it always has been - and the work will continue."

Other than the divide on how independence should be achieved, the power-sharing agreement with the Greens and policies on gender affirming care have polarised members of the SNP much further.

While Mr. Swinney has pitched himself as a man able to "listen to other people's perspectives" and heal divides, he has his hands full with a weakened party, a divided parliament and an economy reeling under inflation.



REFLECTIONS

{ THE BIG PICTURE }

Vaccine stockpile could help in battling bird flu

H5N1 is potentially a far more serious threat than Covid-19. While it is too early to ring the alarm, it would be foolish to not be prepared

Bird flu is now rampant in mammals: Since 2021, 37 new mammal species worldwide have been affected including foxes, polar bears and cows. Entire colonies of sea lions and Antarctic seals have been decimated. One in five milk samples in the United States (US) is reported to carry the H5N1 virus although pasteurised milk is safe for consumption. Cows themselves are not at high risk and have only mild illness that resolves in about a week, but over half of the cats at the Texas dairy farm where cows tested positive for bird flu died after drinking raw milk.

Coming on the heels of the Covid-19 pandemic, which killed millions of people and caused significant economic damage, it is reasonable to ask whether and how long it will take for this virus to be a problem in India. How worried should we be and what should we be doing?

Let's start with the areas of concern. First, H5N1 is highly pathogenic in birds and some mammals. In other words, it can cause severe disease or death. There have been 26 H5N1 cases reported in people in eight countries since 2022. Of these, 14 patients had severe disease, and there were seven deaths, which works out to a mortality

rate of about 250 per thousand cases. In comparison, the mortality rate for Covid-19 is about two per thousand. An epidemic that is much smaller than Covid-19 in terms of the number of people infected could have the same kind of devastating consequences as the Covid pandemic if our experience with poultry transmitted-H5N1 is any guide.

Second, unlike with Covid-19 where the elderly were most at risk, with H5N1, it is possible that both the elderly and small children are at risk if the new strains behave the way that existing influenza viruses do.

Third, as with Covid-19, once H5N1 has adapted to humans, it is difficult to put the genie back in the bottle. In other words, we may be looking at annual vaccinations against H5N1 since the variant will change slightly every year and the consequences may be serious enough that we do want people to get vaccinated.

Fourth, there is evidence that the virus has been transmitted from cows to poultry, potentially via human carriers. If the virus is similarly transmitted to pigs, that would be of concern because pigs carry many respiratory viruses that also infect humans. Once the H5N1 virus is established in pigs, there is a greater likelihood that a strain that could efficiently transmit between humans will emerge. This could be a few months or many years away, but given the enormous risk it poses, this is not a risk one should take lightly.

But there are reasons for hope. First, there is no evidence yet of human-to-

human transmission, and as of now, people are not yet at risk. Any possible infections are only from close contact with infected animals and there has been no reported transmission of the virus from human to human. The one farmworker in Texas who contracted H5N1 only had a case of conjunctivitis. In fact, it is possible that the virus may never acquire that ability or that the strain that is able to transmit from human to human only causes mild disease. Second, the current strain of H5N1 appears to be treatable with a widely available generic drug oseltamivir. Third, unlike SARS-COV-2 which hit us without any warning, we have a lot of scientific evidence on the H5N1 virus. Unlike the coronavirus, the H5N1 virus has been studied for years, although it could yet mutate in ways that surprise us. And lastly, vaccines against influenza strains appear



Ramanan Laxminarayan

to be at least partially effective against H5N1 – a situation different from Covid-19, where we were starting from scratch to develop vaccines.

How can we be better prepared? Our surveillance for new strains of influenza remains weak – to be fair, surveillance in animals even in high-income countries leaves much to be desired. Broader surveillance in wild animals in domesticated animals, as well as wastewater surveillance, are needed – without which we can only find the disease when it is reported in humans. That is simply too late. Although H5N1 that is circulating appears to be treatable, that does not mean that



H5N1 is highly pathogenic in birds and some mammals. In other words, it can cause severe disease or death

REUTERS

everyone in the country has easy access to oseltamivir. A national stockpile of this drug, similar to that practised by the West, could be helpful in case there was a pandemic tomorrow. That does not guarantee easy distribution, but it could help avert the panic that results in patients trying to procure medications with questionable value at high cost.

Although India is a global hub for vaccine manufacturing, not all components of a vaccine are made in India. Importantly, the flu vaccines rely on a critical component called an adjuvant that makes the vaccine effective. It is not clear that there is enough supply of adjuvants to serve the world's population in the case of an outbreak, and it may not be clear even what adjuvant we need until the first cases of human-to-human transmission

occur and we can figure out the specific subtype of virus that is causing these infections. Other countries, including the US, have already been testing H5N1 vaccines including in children, who would be among the first to receive them.

Also, flu vaccines are still grown in eggs and scalability is an issue. Without a stockpile, which necessarily means that vaccines may go to waste if there is no epidemic, India will be late in catching up and the same situation where the vaccination came too late for millions of lives lost in the second wave of Covid-19 could occur. The Global South, including India, does not typically vaccinate against seasonal influenza and so our ability to scale up in the case of a pandemic flu virus is constrained. Last, but not least, as was the case with Covid-19 where humans had no

previous experience with the virus, we are immunologically naïve concerning H5N1. Therefore, each person will likely need to receive two doses of vaccine to be protected.

While it is too early to ring the alarm, it would be foolish to not be prepared. There are many unknowns but one thing is certain. H5N1 is potentially a far more serious threat than Covid-19, and if we are counting on preparations after the first cases of human-to-human transmission, no amount of travel bans or airport closures (which are fairly ineffective incidentally) will be enough to save us.

Ramanan Laxminarayan is senior research scholar at Princeton University and president of the One Health Trust. The views expressed are personal

{ SUNDAY SENTIMENTS }

Karan Thapar



Listening to silence in the dance of language

It's no secret that English is not a phonetic language. How you spell a word has little connection with how you pronounce it. That's why a spelling test can be formidable. But I had no idea how often letters of the English alphabet are silent or redundant in the spelling of the simplest words of normal everyday use. You can probably find examples for almost every letter. I'll come to the few exceptions later.

As a document I've discovered on the net says, "letters persist in words despite not playing any discernable role in the word's pronunciation". Amongst the most obvious examples are b and g. Most silent bs come at the end of words and usually after m: bomb, climb, comb, crumb, dumb, lamb, limb, numb,

plumb, thumb and tomb. In the case of g it's often before an n: gnarl, gnash, gnat, gnaw, gnostic, gnu. But as sign indicates it doesn't have to be at the start. Indeed, as you can see from high, though and through it can often be at the end before an h.

Those of you who know will be aware that k is another misleading alphabet. The Lord alone knows what role it plays in knee, knife, knight, knit, knob, knock, knot, knuckle. But when it comes to p, I suspect it was purely designed to confound. It's silent before n in pneumonia and pneumatic and before s in psalm, psyche and psychology. But what's it doing in coup, receipt, and comptroller?

N it seems doesn't like m when it comes after it, as it does in autumn, damm, hymn,

limn, solemn. It hides in silence. That also seems to be the case with w and r. When the former precedes the latter, it defers to the strength of r.

Here are a few examples: wrack, wraith, wrangle wrap, wreath, wren, wrench, wrestle, wrinkle, wrist, writ, write, wrong, wrought. Of course w can be silent on other occasions too such as answer, sword, two and who. Ah well – but there you can hear it!

Even some of the strongest sounding alphabets – which many of us needlessly overstress – become inaudible on occasion. T is an example. You can't hear it in ballet, castle, listen and most certainly not in whistle. Not surprisingly, much the same is true of d. After all it sounds so much like t. But it's missing when you pronounce handkerchief and handsome. Even when you speak those words on a wednesday!

Now Professor Higgins may have had a fondness for Hertford, Hereford and Hampshire but I can assure you he would have known that pronouncing h is verbose in heir, honest and honour. So too in rhyme and ghost.

The letters that are rarely silent for they insist on being heard include j, with the almost solitary exception of marijuana, f and q. But don't forget x which is hard to miss except in that French import faux pas.

And, of course, there's v although I'm not sure if it's pronounced in covfefe? I'm afraid that's trumped me!

Actually what's true of x is also true of z. You hear it in zoology, zebra, zero but if the word originates from the other side of the English channel, such as chez, rendezvous or laissez-faire, it simply dazzles to deceive.

Now, tell me, did all of that surprise you? Did you ever think so many words have letters that are never pronounced? This, dear reader, is why when you're writing in English you can so easily go wrong. I often do.

Let me end with a little ditty, once again obtained from the net:

To be honest, does the H in rhyme ring a bell?
And can the J in marijuana anybody smell?
Who knows why the K in knee won't knock?
And why the L in walk or in calf won't talk?

.....
W is not write, its wrong ... get the clue?
Hush, no rendezvous with Z, goodbye, adieu

Karan Thapar is the author of Devil's Advocate: The Untold Story. The views expressed are personal

{ ENGENDER }

Lalita Panicker



How SHGs influence women voters in India

The increasing participation of women voters has now come to characterise elections, with many reports suggesting that they no longer vote according to the dictates of the patriarchy and are now a force unto themselves. Self-help groups (SHGs) across India have played a crucial role here. If they are being seen as harbingers of economic and social empowerment today, it must be noted that it has taken over six decades to achieve this.

The SHGs have travelled a long way from their inception in the late sixties. Back then, they struggled to secure bank loans and ensure the success of their small businesses. Today, the National Rural and Urban Livelihood Mission (NRLM) and microfinance institutions are vying with each other to extend support to the SHGs.

Neha Juneja, a Mumbai-based entrepreneur who runs a peer-to-peer lending platform said that the "thriving SHGs are a great asset class, pay back loans on time, and do not deserve to be starved of credit".

The SHG movement has come a long way from what was traditionally a platform for rural women to create new pathways for empowerment. For example, the linkages between SHGs and banks have helped rural women access credit from financial institutions with which they can establish small enterprises or improve their agri-based activities. Today, through SHGs, they aim to integrate themselves into national retail chains and acquire skills to maximise productivity.

The collectivisation of rural women on such a large scale has generated massive social capital, with the potential to transform rural India. Had it not been for the community-based training offered by SHGs, we would not have had such success in mobilising grassroots workers during the pandemic and other large-scale programmes. Today, SHGs provide support for women in accessing credit, managing records, preparing microcredit plans, and creating awareness around nutrition, health, livelihood programmes, and gender equality.

Akhila Sivasdas, executive director, Centre

for Advocacy and Research says, "The emergence of women as voters who can make a difference has occurred slowly but steadily over the years with them bargaining strongly for women-led development and women-centric schemes and by providing strong leadership on the ground for both the government and community. The benefits of social capital that women demonstrate is not only helping to formalise women's involvement and participation but also the lives of millions of families struggling to overcome crippling poverty."

It is not surprising that from 2015, the NRLM factored in gender equality as a pivot to the programme. Gradually, gender integration was streamlined as a separate strategy with dedicated staff and was included as part of the institution-strengthening vertical. The gender integration programme of NRLM primarily focussed on three areas – gender consciousness of women, institutional mechanisms to address the issues, and convergence for services through partnership with other departments. "Women are now more politically aware, and they know the priorities for the development of their villages and what needs to be done to close the gender gap," says Sarbani Bose, integrator, NGO Pradan.

Today, it is not uncommon to see SHG women members standing outside polling booths to cast their votes. Every major party is promising economic development and social security to women. The Bharatiya Janata Party's 2024 manifesto promises to increase the number of lakhpati didis from 10 million to 30 million, the Congress proposes the Mahalakshmi scheme, offering ₹1 lakh annually as an unconditional cash transfer. It appears that decisions on voting preferences are discussed at SHGs rather than within the family and this is one reason why there is such an upsurge in women making informed voting choices in rural areas. As women realise that power at the grassroots can affect power structures all the way up to Parliament, greater empowerment is sure to follow.

The views expressed are personal

Snake that eats its own tail, for ever and ever

May 8 marked the anniversary of the passing of Robert A Heinlein (1907-1988), a naval engineer turned author who brought "hard" science fiction (sci-fi) to the spotlight, with his stories grounded in science and fuelled by social commentary. Heinlein's mind was a playground of paradoxes, time loops, and mind-bending ideas that continue to warp the brains of his readers to this day.

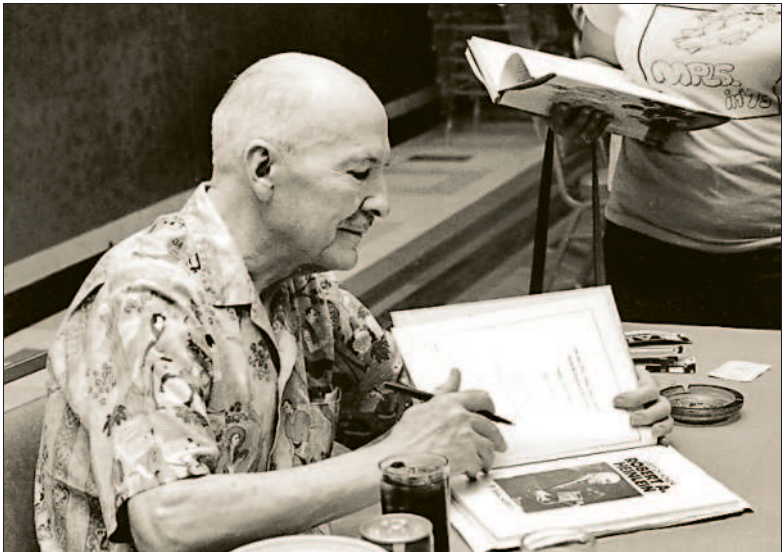
Think of the technology in the film, The Martian, or the social questions of The Expanse, and you're tapping into Heinlein's legacy. His visual settings are eerily visionary. The moving walkways in airports today can be found in his 1940 story "The Roads Must Roll". Waldos, a term coined by Heinlein to describe advanced robotic arms, is now essential in surgery, space exploration, and manufacturing. But Heinlein's ideas aren't confined to the realms of science fiction alone: The popular adage "There ain't no such thing as a free lunch (TANSTAAFL)", communicating the idea of opportunity cost, is central to his 1966 novel The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress, and predates the Milton Friedman's There's No Such Thing As A Free Lunch by 10 years. Still not impressed? Google where the word Grok – the name Elon Musk has given to his AI chatbot comes from.

Among his most iconic works is the short story All You Zombies, a mind-bending exploration of time travel pondering on the question: What if you were your own mother, father, son, and daughter? Now, if that sounds familiar, you've

watched the 2014 Spierig brothers film Predestination, where Heinlein's legacy overcomes the confines of the written word and makes a leap to the big screen. The film stands as a complex and haunting work in its own right, starring Ethan Hawke and Sarah Snook wearing a Leonardo Di Caprio look. There is a mysterious criminal, and a temporal cop, both going down a path that forces them to question everything they think they know about time and identity.

The film draws deeply from Heinlein's bizarre short story and yet expands upon the narrative. In addition to the core paradox, the film fleshes out in depth the wobbly world of its characters and the dilemmas that a time-bending universe would raise. The adaptation is so faithful to the book that scenes and dialogues are picked straight up. Both versions grapple with the same mind-twisting questions: How much is fate, how much is free will? And if we could change the past, what would the cost be to ourselves? But the film asks these questions more directly and within the precincts of a noir thriller setting. Now, how that works out is for the viewer to decide. However, once you read the story, you do yearn to see its primal simplicity on-screen. In this sense, the story, also a twister-turner, uses the predestination paradox to great effect without dropping a "hint" in every other sentence. We do wish for the Spierig brothers to have had a little more confidence in their audiences, and just let the story do its thing.

This is not to say the film is not telling, but it's a bit of a disservice to the original story. The film's premise is a time loop where a man and a woman are the same person, but the film doesn't explore the philosophical implications of this premise. It's a bit of a missed opportunity. The film is a bit of a disservice to the original story. The film's premise is a time loop where a man and a woman are the same person, but the film doesn't explore the philosophical implications of this premise. It's a bit of a missed opportunity.



Robert Heinlein's mind was a playground of paradoxes, time loops, and mind-bending ideas that continue to warp the brains of his readers to this day

WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

It turns out to be one of those rare instances of laudable visual storytelling where despite the story featuring only two characters speaking in great intimacy, the viewers are never affected by the boredom the talking heads syndrome normally induces. Contrarily, it stages its characters to appear mysterious and connected at the same time. For instance, when the character John played meticulously by Sarah Snook calls the barkeep a "son of a bitch", self-referencing himself and all versions of John in the past and future is a mind-bending use of the time loop.

The film marks its 10th anniversary but is extremely relevant to pop culture today owing to the complex plot principally held together by the metaphor of gender fluid experiences. It explores queer identities by unbundling how much identity is externally imposed versus internally defined. As Heinlein says, "a person is a person, no matter the circumstances of their birth." While the story and the film leave us with one dominant thought "if"

we have free will, it also stunningly underscores how our lives have meaning regardless of free will. Just like how the characters John and Jane's actions have emotional weight, however, bound by the overbearing limitations of paradox or fate they may be. It's also possible Heinlein is warning us about the dangers of time travel, compellingly arguing for us to live in the present and not bothering to delve into altering our past.

Whether you're a die-hard Heinlein fan or a newcomer to the world of time-travel paradoxes, whether you believe in free will and moral dilemmas, and whether you encounter this puzzle as a short story or as a film experience, it's bound to stick with you long after the credits roll (or after you turn the last page).

Padmapriya Janakiraman is a national award-winning actor and founder of Padma's Lit Club, a platform for sharing diverse, women-centred stories and Yash Mittal is a student at Jamia Millia Islamia. The views expressed are personal

{ SUNDAY LETTERS }

Curb hate speech, onus on speakers

This is with reference to 'Addressing citizens in a secular democracy' by Karan Thapar (May 5). When the man at the top himself speaks in a tone which makes it seem as if Muslims do not belong in the nation, one can imagine the effect on his supporters and those who with strong anti-Muslim feelings.

Antony Henriques

Gradual progress is key to peaceful borders

This is with reference to 'Resetting India-China ties in an era of tensions' by Ashok K Kantha (May 5). Incremental improvements with the end goal being cordial diplomatic relations, economic cooperation and tranquility on borders is the way ahead.

Deepak Bist

A suitable candidate

This is with reference to 'The best President India failed to have' by Pavan K Varma (May 5). I agree with Varma that Karan Singh, a philosopher, and statesman would have been a suitable candidate for the post of the President.

Subhash Taneja

Write to us at: letters@hindustantimes.com

Across
THE AISLE



PCHIDAMBARAM
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Why should a ‘strong’ leader lie?

HON’BLE PRIME Minister, Mr Narendra Modi, is a self-declared ‘strong’ leader. He often boasted of a 56” chest. His followers point to the taming of the Khan Market clique, uprooting the urban Naxals, decimating the *tukde-tukde* gang, teaching-a-lesson to Pakistan, virtually abolishing English as an associate official language, subjugating the mainstream media, and India’s assumed status as *Vishwaguru*.

With a strong leader, 303 seats under the belt and 12 chief ministers spearheading the campaign in their respective states, the march toward 370 for the BJP alone (and 400+ for the NDA) should have been a cakewalk. However, as BJP leaders admit privately, 370 or 400+ is no longer achievable and they would be happy if the BJP won a simple majority.

With a strong leader, 303 seats under the belt and 12 chief ministers spearheading the campaign in their respective states, the march toward 370 for the BJP alone (and 400+ for the NDA) should have been a cakewalk. However, as BJP leaders admit privately, 370 or 400+ is no longer achievable and they would be happy if the BJP won a simple majority

In Palestinian struggle, there’s more than an echo



Dalitality
AARUSHI PUNIA

JYOTIRAO PHULE called the caste system the oldest form of slavery, foreshadowing that there is no singular or original form of racism, but evolving forms of descent-based discrimination that often inform each other.

What is common to both Dalits and Palestinians is extreme racialised discrimination, humiliation and segregation at the hands of the ethno-national state. Both upper castes and Zionists assert scriptural authority, genetic superiority and cultural supremacy through the state.

In the ethno-national state, the dominant group hegemonises politics and cultural apparatus, and controls discursive practices and storytelling through history, narratives and media. Such a state is a *Carceralopolis*, where the dominant group has carceral control over the existence of the subordinate group that is invisibilised and violently exterminated.

Palestinian history and political assertion have been erased through statements like “Palestinians did not exist” (Golda Meir) and are “children of darkness” (Benjamin Netanyahu). Such rhetorical offenses draw from a history of racial othering. West Bank and Gaza have been occupied by Israel since 1967, and Palestinians have been economically impoverished and politically disenfranchised through expanding Zionist settlements, increased military surveillance, and violent massacres and incarceration.

While it is estimated that over 7,50,000 Palestinians were displaced in 1948 when Israel was founded, since Israel declared war on Gaza in October 2023, about 35,000 Palestinians have been killed, of which 13,000 were children, and over 1.9 million people displaced. Palestinian women have been sexually assaulted, Gaza bombed, children buried alive, all with impunity.

In the last 2,000 years, Savarnas have assigned Dalits many names: Chandala, Ati-shudra, Untouchable, and Scheduled Caste, all of which carry their own tenor of humiliation. They have been confined to impoverishing occupations like manual scavenging, carrying dead animals, cleaning toilets, leather work and toddy tapping. If the Indian state were to acknowledge the presence of Dalits across all religions, their population would be 30% of the country. However, the number of Dalits in academic

history
HEADLINE
MIRAPATEL



SANJAY LEELA Bhansali’s period drama series, *Heeramandi: The Diamond Bazaar*, tells the story of courtesans or tawaifs in Lahore’s red-light area of Hira Mandi and is set in the backdrop of the Independence movement.

While the show is said to have become one of the most watched Indian shows on the streaming platform, it has been criticised by some for faltering on facts. Beyond the glamour and the lavish sets of the series, how real is Hira Mandi?

Tucked into the northern corner of Lahore’s Walled City, next to the Lahore Fort, the famed ghetto is now littered with dilapidated buildings and indistinguishable streets. While Hira Mandi was once a thriving market, the playground of royalty, home to artistes, prostitutes and courtesans, today, its balconies are deserted and the shops lie in disarray.

It was under Sikh rule that Lahore’s redlight district got its current name. Hira Singh Dongra, a prime minister of the Sikh Empire, thought the area could be used as an economic hub. The grain market that Hira established came to be known as Hira Singh di Mandi (Hira Singh’s market) and, gradually, as Hira Mandi.

In *Punjabi Century* (2023), historian Prakash Tandon writes, “Hira Mandi by day was quiet and deserted, but after the sun went down, it came into a dazzling and brilliant life.”

Known by different names, tawaifs or royal courtesans occupied an important place in Mughal India. As historian Pran Neville writes in *Nautch Girls of the Raj* (2009), “they formed part of the retinue of kings and nawabs...To be associated with a tawaif was considered to be a symbol of status, wealth, sophistication and culture...no one considered her to be a bad woman or an object of pity”.

Courtesans were also exceptionally independent women by the standards of the time. While most women were not allowed to hold wealth or inherit property, courtesans during the Mughal period were financially independent, possessing agency over their lives and choices.

Sikh dominance over Punjab gave way to the East India Company in 1849. The British, however, were not taken in by the dancing women (whom they called nautch girls), with one edition of the *Punjab Gazetteer* of 1883 stating that “dancing is generally performed by hired nach girls and need not be further men-

The real story of Lahore’s Hira Mandi



of Pakistani cinema. Entertainment was considered beneath women from ‘higher class backgrounds’, so it was the traditional performers of Hira Mandi who became professional singers and dancers.

With the Islamisation of Pakistan under President Zia-ul-Haq, laws were introduced banning music and dance, among other “illicit” activities. This drove many families away from Hira Mandi, leaving behind only the most disadvantaged sections of women, including refugees from neighbouring Afghanistan.

Zerka Tahir, founder of the non-profit Communal Hub, spoke to *The Indian Express* about what remains of the historic neighbourhood. Tahir says that while Zia’s policies did lead to a crack-down on prostitution in Hira Mandi, there were other factors too that transformed the area.

“Technology, education, changes in family structure, and disease all impacted the industry,” she says, leading to the demise of the old Hira Mandi.

Describing the neighbourhood today, Tahir says, “Women of all ages can be hired, with women over 60 often selling their services for as little as Rs 50. If they have a stomach ache, they go into the streets,” she says, “and earn just enough money to buy one tablet of paracetamol.”

According to Louise Brown, sociologist and author of *The Dancing Girls of Lahore* (2005), the women of Hira Mandi are often confined to a life of destitution after multiple pregnancies and venereal diseases have ravaged their once youthful bodies.

Tahir says most people in Hira Mandi now choose to send their children away. It is not uncommon for family elders to send girls as young as 13 to dance troupes in the Gulf, India and Ukraine.

Most historians and experts agree that the Hira Mandi of today is starkly different from what is depicted in films and television shows. However, according to Tahir, the lives of women living there have always been romanticised, often to their detriment.

Some become rich and move their families out of the area. Some get married or become permanent vassals to men with many wives. Some experience brief fame and fortune in faraway lands. Most, however, end up where they began, veiled by the night, ensconced in the shadows, captive to the dismal magnetism of Hira Mandi.

She
SAID



ANGELLICA ARIBAM

EVERY YEAR I read the first two weeks of May. Mother’s Day is a difficult time for many of us who are grieving the loss of our mothers. Opening email and message inboxes becomes triggering as they scream gift ideas and offers for ‘your mom’ — the mom that I no longer have. They add on the emotional torment as the unresolved grief burrows itself deeper.

In 2021, my mother passed away after an open-heart surgery. It was a surgery that my stubborn-hearted mother didn’t want in the first place. In spite of the doctors’ insistence, she wanted to live out the limited number of days she had tending to our

Mother’s Day — without my mother



kitchen garden in the foothills of Manipur. It took me weeks and some emotional blackmail to convince her.

The surgery was successful and we were elated. But within hours, she developed various complications. What followed was a nightmare — she was on ventilator support for nearly a month as her organs started to fail. Due to COVID-19 protocols, my siblings and I took turns to see her during visiting hours.

Lying on a white bed with various tubes coming out of her body, my mother would hold onto our hands urging us to stay longer. Amid the sounds of beeping machines, we would narrate happy updates of our daily lives and urge her to not give up. She would nod and hold onto our hands a little tighter. She desperately wanted to

live, and survived the first two heart attacks.

But in the third week, as her kidneys gave up, she also began to give up. She would shut her eyes tightly, not reacting to anything we said. It was her way of telling us that she didn’t want to see us anymore. She was in pain physically and emotionally. She wanted us to let her go. But we weren’t ready and kept requesting the doctors to try whatever they could. A few days later, we lost her to another heart attack.

It has been little more than three years since I last saw my mother, to never see her again. My life changed forever in that moment. I wasn’t ready for goodbye then, and perhaps in my subconscious mind, even now. I often see her in my dreams, having our usual banter and arguing about mundane things. When the sleep breaks, it takes

a moment for reality to seep in. And these words by Meghan O’Rourke echo in my head, “Am I really she who has woken up again without a mother? Yes, I am”.

To the world, three years is a long time to mourn. But grief does not have a timeline; it comes and goes as it pleases. Sometimes it can be a fleeting moment, and sometimes it can engulf you like a heavy coat, just lingering on.

With time, I have accepted my new reality — that I am motherless now and the deep void that I feel in my being will be a part of me throughout this lifetime. But the guilt of the what-if-I-hadn’t-convincing-her scenario still gnaws at me. While I don’t cry raw anymore at the mere mention of her like I did in the first year, I don’t actively seek out her memories. I repress my feelings,

afraid of the floodgates it might open. It is still not easy.

In my limited understanding, I have learned that the loss of a mother is very different from other types of grief as the connection has been lifelong, in fact some call it pre-life referring to the umbilical cord. Her death is like being cut off from the anchor that tied us to this world. It is but natural to feel completely lost and to take our own time to process it.

I hope society spares us, the motherless daughters and sons, some thought as they celebrate today. It can begin with an acknowledgement of our existence, and perhaps a simple opt-out feature from their Mother’s Day tributes and campaigns.

The writer is a political activist and founder of Femme First Foundation

Fifth
COLUMN

TAVLEEN SINGH

Twitter @tavleen_singh



Modi on the backfoot?

WHY THE Prime Minister said what he did last week is a mystery. What is clear is that by openly charging India’s two richest men with sending “tempos filled with black money in sacks” to the Congress Party he has put himself in a bind. For those of you who may have missed the speech, what he said was that the “Congress Party’s Shehzada” had spent five years repeating the mantra “Ambani-Adani, Ambani-Adani” but stopped once the election campaign began. Why? He challenged Rahul Gandhi to declare how much he got from Messrs Ambani and Adani.

The response came immediately. Rahul Gandhi uploaded a video saying that if the Prime Minister knew Mukesh Ambani and Gautam Adani were sending him bags full of cash, why had he not sent the ED and CBI to investigate? Valid question. Meanwhile, the Congress president put a mocking tweet on X about friends no longer being friends and how this was a sign of how the times were changing. The Congress Party’s campaign committee quickly calculated that Rahul had used Adani’s name 103 times after the campaign began, proving that the Prime Minister got basic facts wrong.

Nobody is better at changing bad narratives into good ones than the BJP’s media managers. But their services were not needed this time. The Congress Party itself did the job. Those two crotchety old men who have acted as wrecking balls in the last two Lok Sabha elections came forward to distract people’s attention from what the Prime Minister so recklessly said. First came Sam Pitroda with his offensive, racist and ludicrous remark about the skin colour of Indians. This time he got the sack from his job as head of the Overseas wing of the Congress Party but no sooner had damage control been done than along came Mani Shankar Aiyar to cause more damage.

An interview he gave last month suddenly appeared on every news channel in which he is heard saying that a “muscular” approach to Pakistan could not work because it had its own nuclear “muscles in Kahuta”. His intention was to make the point that in the past ten years the good work that the Congress Party had done to keep Pakistan pacified had been undone by Modi’s hostile, acrimonious approach to the Islamist Republic next door. What Aiyar achieved with his interview was to harm the Congress Party instead of harming Modi. Congress spokesmen immediately distanced the party from Aiyar’s views.

The Prime Minister’s rash and puzzling speech has disappeared from headlines but has not been forgotten. Modi is such a skilled politician that he has almost never made the mistake of saying something that he might live to regret. So, what happened this time? What made him attack the two men who everyone believes count among his closest friends? And what action does he plan to take against them now that he has charged them with sending sacks filled with ‘black money’ to the Congress Party’s royal family?

The damage he has done himself is serious because it shows that he failed in his mission to end black money. He was obsessed with doing this from the time he first took office. It was almost the first item on his agenda. On state visits abroad he asked world leaders for help and when he cancelled 85% of our currency overnight in 2016, it was with the stated aim of ending black money. Instead, what demonetisation achieved was to cause serious harm to the economy and the destruction of small businesses. Black money has continued to thrive. When Modi lists his achievements, he never mentions demonetisation. Will he now similarly forget the very serious charges he has leveled against Messrs Ambani and Adani?

For the moment what is more important is that for the first time since this election campaign began the Prime Minister appears to be on the backfoot. None of the issues that he has raised in recent weeks have resonated with voters. This is because none of these issues were issues at all. When he declared that if the Congress Party came to power, it would steal women’s mangalsutras, it made him look vulnerable and slightly hysterical. He would have to be feeling very vulnerable to make so absurd a charge.

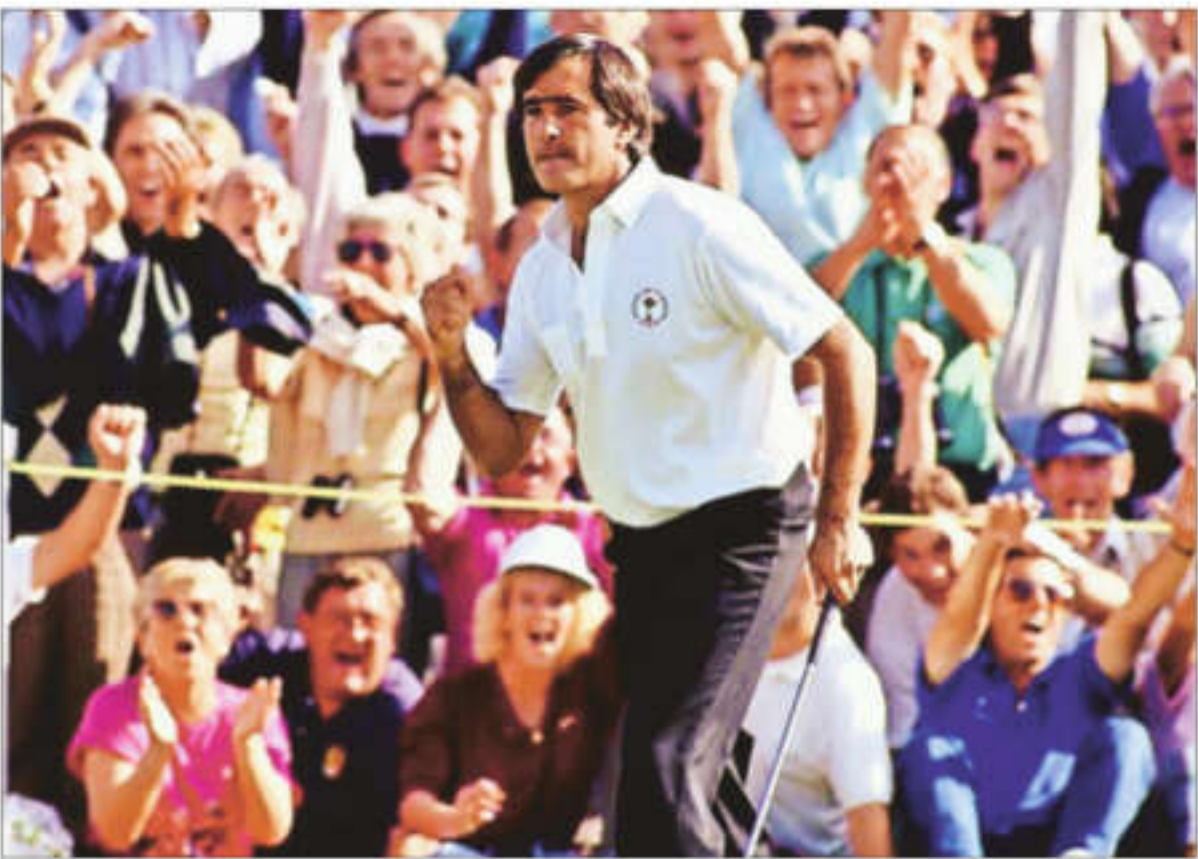
Then off he went to Ayodhya to pray once more at the Ram Temple and that seemed to have no resonance with voters either. His loyal adjutant, Amit Shah, stepped in to declare in feverish tones at a public meeting that “Rahul baba” should know that not even if his Nani came back into this world would she be able to stop the CAA. Did he forget that he was talking about Rahul’s Dadi and not his Nani? And does he really think that the amendment to the citizenship law is something that voters across India care about?

Having mulled over the mistakes that the BJP’s two biggest leaders have recently made, I have concluded that this happened because the campaign has dragged on much too long. If there is one thing that we can learn from this endless summer election it is that the Election Commission must find a way of completing the election process in a shorter period. When an election campaign lasts six weeks, everyone starts running out of steam. A torpor has begun to settle and a deep ennui. Everyone is getting bored.

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Opinion

SUNDAY, MAY 12, 2024



Seve Ballesteros was much more than a genius. He changed the very image of European golf

INSTAGRAM

Remembering Seve

Ballesteros’ legacy is about the indomitable human spirit

OVER THE TOP

Meraj Shah



LEGACY IS A tricky thing in golf. Exceptional golf swings live forever on YouTube. Ball-striking greats are remembered more by people who’ve actually seen them hit a golf ball: a video can’t really convey the quality and sound of an exceptional ball strike. Major champions, especially one-time winners, are immortalised on the trophies but eventually become names etched on silverware.

But there’s a handful of players who transcend the wash of the years and short public memory. Besides superlative golfing abilities, what really differentiates them is that they are, without exception, characters: not ball-hitting machines but individuals with strong, sometimes even eccentric personalities. And within this rarefied group, Seve Ballesteros — the Spaniard who passed away in May 2011 — has no peers. Like clockwork, Seve’s spectral figure comes back every May; the golf media is awash with stories and anecdotes; players young and old share their favourite memories, and there’s a glut of online *pundits* discussing his shot-making and technique. We use the words ‘legend,’ and ‘genius,’ somewhat loosely these days. But no one would argue that Seve — a man who once said, “My hands are my computer,” after scoffing at a swing monitor, or spun a greenside bunker shot into the hole with a three-iron (after betting that he could) — is the very definition of golfing genius. What often gets lost in the dazzle of Seve’s brilliance is his exceptional record through the years: 90 wins that included eight Ryder Cups, three Opens, and two Masters. He was much more than a genius. Seve changed the very image of European golf.

Perhaps the reason that Seve’s imaginative shotmaking is remembered with so much fondness is its increasing rarity in the modern game. Power is great, but flair and creativity are so much more attractive to watch. Don’t get me wrong: I love watching Bryson DeChambeau launching a ball into orbit. DeChambeau’s analytical approach, turning golf into a physics equation, is fascinating in its own right. But after a while of watching young players playing long drives, it’s hard not to feel a pang of nostalgia for the days when the short game was king. The days when a player’s imagination, not just their TrackMan data, could save a round.

Take the 1993 European Masters Open Championship at Crans Montana. Seve famously won there after hitting a miracle shot on the 72nd hole. Sitting on his knees on the pine straw, with half a backswing, Seve hit it above an eight-foot wall that the ball was lying seven feet from, over tall pine trees, and next to the green. He then proceeded to chip it in for birdie to win the tournament. It

was a shot of pure Seve — audacious, instinctive, the kind that made you leap out of your seat.

Fast forward to the 2023 European Masters, and most players in the field were hitting it well over 300 yards off the tee, which meant very different lines tee to green. And when they did land in trouble, without exception, most played the percentages — smart strategy no doubt, but a far cry from the swash-buckling spirit Seve embodied. The equipment, of course, is partly to blame. Drivers are now engineered to minimise spin and maximise distance, even on mishits. Wedges are so versatile that even the deepest rough seems manageable. And while these advancements have made the game more enjoyable for us hapless amateurs, they’ve also homogenised the professional game, turning it into a long-drive contest with a wedge-off for dessert. But let’s not lay all the blame on technology. Coaching has also played a role. Young players are groomed from an early age to swing for the fences to prioritise distance over touch.

The result is a generation of players who are incredibly skilled but perhaps a little less...shall we say, enchanting. We’ve traded the improvisational jazz of Seve for the meticulously orchestrated symphony of modern golf. It’s impressive, but is it as much fun to watch? I’m not suggesting we turn back the clock. The athleticism and power of today’s players are undeniable. But I do believe we can find a balance. We can celebrate the bombers while also nurturing the scramblers and the artists.

A welcome change, however, is the emergence of young players like Ludvig Aberg, who won the 2023 European Masters. Aberg can bomb it with the best of them, but it’s his touch around the greens, his willingness to play shots that most wouldn’t dare, that hints at a return to a more imaginative style. His performance at Crans Montana, navigating the tricky greens of Crans-sur-Sierre with the deftness of a veteran, was a glimpse of what’s possible when talent meets creativity.

Go watch the highlights of the 1979 Ryder Cup at The Greenbrier. Seve, paired with Antonio Garrido, faced down Jack Nicklaus and Tom Watson on the 18th green. With the match on the line, Seve holed a 20-footer for birdie, while Nicklaus, the Golden Bear himself, missed his from half the distance. That putt wasn’t just about skill; it was aboutchutzpah, the kind of unflappable confidence that Seve exuded. I can’t really imagine any of the current crop of players, not even the supremely talented Jon Rahm pulling off that kind of theatrics.

The secret to Seve’s legacy is relatability. It lives on in every golfer who dares to chip from the trees, who attempts the impossible flop shot, who embraces the chaos and uncertainty of the short game. It is in those moments of audacious creativity that golf truly comes alive.

A golfer, Meraj Shah also writes about the game

ACROSS THE AISLE

P Chidambaram



With a strong leader, 303 seats under the belt and 12 chief ministers spearheading the campaign in their respective states, the march toward 370 for the BJP alone (and 400+ for the NDA) should have been a cakewalk. However, as BJP leaders admit privately, 370 or 400+ is no longer achievable and they would be happy if the BJP won a simple majority

HON’BLE PRIME MINISTER, Mr Narendra Modi, is a self-declared ‘strong’ leader. He often boasted of a 56” chest. His followers point to the taming of the Khan Market clique, uprooting the urban Naxals, decimating the *tukde-tukde* gang, teaching-a-lesson to Pakistan, virtually abolishing English as an associate official language, subjugating the mainstream media, and India’s assumed status as *Vishvaguru*.

With a strong leader, 303 seats under the belt and 12 chief ministers spearheading the campaign in their respective states, the march toward 370 for the BJP alone (and 400+ for the NDA) should have been a cakewalk. However, as BJP leaders admit privately, 370 or 400+ is no longer achievable and they would be happy if the BJP won a simple majority.

Why change gears?

Mr Modi started his campaign confidently and stridently. The Congress’s manifesto was released on April 5, 2024; Mr Modi contemptuously ignored it. The BJP’s manifesto was released on April 14 but there was no celebration or effort to propagate its contents. The manifesto was titled *Modi Ki Guarantee*. By-passing its contents, whenever Mr Modi made a statement at a rally he signed off with the announcement, ‘This is Modi’s guarantee’. I have lost count of the number of Modi guarantees. However, what stands out is that Mr Modi gave no guarantee about *creating jobs for the unemployed* or *containing rising inflation*, the two topmost concerns of the common people. Mr Modi also deliberately did not speak — like a prime minister should during an election — about communal harmony, development, agricultural distress, industrial sickness, multi-dimensional poverty, financial stability, national debt, household debt, educational standards, healthcare, Chinese occupation of Indian territory or a hundred other serious concerns.



FIFTH COLUMN
TAVLEEN SINGH

Modi on the backfoot?

WHY THE PRIME Minister said what he did last week is a mystery. What is clear is that by openly charging India’s two richest men with sending “tempo-filled with black money in sacks” to the Congress Party he has put himself in a bind. For those of you who may have missed the speech, what he said was that the “Congress Party’s Shehzada” had spent five years repeating the mantra “Ambani-Adani, Ambani-Adani” but stopped once the election campaign began. Why? He challenged Rahul Gandhi to declare how much he got from Messrs Ambani and Adani.

The response came immediately. Rahul Gandhi uploaded a video saying that if the Prime Minister knew Mukesh Ambani and Gautam Adani were sending him bags full of cash, why had he not sent the ED and CBI to investigate? Valid question. Meanwhile, the Congress president put a mocking tweet on X about friends no longer being friends and how this was a sign of how the times were changing. The Congress Party’s campaign



PM Narendra Modi addresses a Lok Sabha election rally in Hyderabad

PTI

Why should a ‘strong’ leader lie?

On April 19, the first phase of polling in 102 seats was completed. Presumably, the penny dropped on April 21, and Mr Modi launched a full scale assault on the Congress at public rallies in Jalore and Banswara in Rajasthan. Mr Modi said: “Congress is trapped in the clutches of the Leftists and urban naxals. What Congress has said in its manifesto is serious and worrying. They have said that if they form a government then a survey of property belonging to every person will be done. It will be checked how much gold our sisters own, how much money government employees have. They have also said that gold owned by our sisters would be equally distributed. Does government have the right to take your property?” We can only guess that between April 19 and 21 Mr Modi received some information (intelligence?) that forced him to change gears.

Why lies and more lies?

Every allegation in the passage extracted above is a lie. As the days passed, the lies became bigger and more outrageous. From property to gold to *mangalsutra* to *Streedhan* to houses, Mr Modi alleged that the Congress will seize them and distribute them to musalmans, infiltrators and people who have more children. In another rally, Mr Modi jumped to religion-based quotas and inheritance tax. There was no end to the lies. Mr Modi even threw up an eco-

nomic gem like ‘inheritance tax on buffaloes’ and said that if a person owned two buffaloes one will be taken away.

The immediate objective was clear. It was to tar Indian Muslims with black paint and to polarise the electorate, and consolidate the Hindu voters.

What are the lies uttered by the Prime Minister is important, but the more important question is *why* is the Prime Minister uttering such lies. Be it noted, it is not one lie, it is a string of lies, and the lying continues. A prime minister who was confident of winning 370 or 400+ seats will not recklessly throw lies about his adversaries. He will challenge the Opposition parties to engage in a debate on his record. Mr Modi’s choice of lies — not his record — as the main battle tank is a mystery that has to be unraveled.

Why self-doubt?

Suppose Mr Modi knew the secrets locked in the EVMs. He may have reasons to worry because the conditions on the ground are very different from the situation in 2019. In the first place, Mr Modi is not able to set the narrative of the election. He is not initiating the debate, he is reacting to the Congress’s manifesto, albeit an imaginary one. *Secondly*, he is not able to match his promise with Congress’s promise and capture the attention of the electorate. *Thirdly*, the people resent the BJP’s tiresome slogans but Mr

from Aiyar’s views.

The Prime Minister’s rash and puzzling speech has disappeared from headlines but has not been forgotten. Modi is such a skilled politician that he has almost never made the mistake of saying something that he might live to regret. So, what happened this time? What made him attack the two men who everyone believes count among his closest friends? And what action does he plan to take against them now that he has charged them with sending sacks filled with ‘black money’ to the Congress Party’s royal family?

The damage he has done himself is serious because it shows that he failed in his mission to end black money. He was obsessed with doing this from the time he first took office. It was almost the first item on his agenda. On state visits abroad he asked world leaders for help and when he cancelled 85% of our currency overnight in 2016, it was with the stated aim of ending black money. Instead, what demonetisation achieved was to cause serious harm to the economy and the destruction of small businesses. Black money has continued to thrive. When Modi lists his achievements, he never mentions demonetisation. Will he now similarly forget the very serious charges he has leveled against Messrs Ambani and Adani?

For the moment what is more important is that for the first time since this election campaign began the Prime Minister appears to be on

Modi is not able to coin a new slogan like *achche din aanewale hai*. *Fourthly*, the lower voting percentage may have unnerved him because it could be an indication that his loyal voters did not turn up at the polling booths. *Finally*, the absence of RSS volunteers at the booths and the silence of the RSS’s top brass may have rung alarm bells in the BJP camp.

It is likely that Congress and other Opposition parties will make significant gains. Whether such ‘gains’ will amount to a ‘net loss’ for the BJP is the million dollar question. It is possible that Mr Modi also shares the more realistic view that the 2024 election is not a winner-take-all election in any state (with the possible exception of Gujarat). Mr Modi may have concluded that he should not count the elusive gains but the likely net losses. That thought may have caused him worry and the worry is translating into lies.

I cannot predict the way in which the people will vote, but I am convinced that the people can see through Mr Modi’s lies. And the people wonder why a ‘strong’ leader should lie.



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ODD & EVEN

ROHNI THORE



RAGING RHETORIC, RASH OF RUMOURS AND FEAR INDEX

THE speculations market is on fire as punts are threatened by raging rhetoric and a rash of rumours, theories and reveries. The cognoscenti are harbouring doubts and making acquaintance with nervousness. On Thursday, the benchmark Sensex slid over 1,000 points and the India VIX volatility index—the stock market’s Fear Index—attained a 19-month high this week. Data-dependent denizens, corporate tsars and investment bankers, who devour Peter Drucker and Peter Lynch, are speed-dialling and googling for insights on hearsay and heretical commentary.

Suddenly, the buzz catchers in the financial world are checking the odds at the Phalodi satta bazaar. They are seeking the views of pollsters on any signals off the exit polls. They are worried about implications of the Nitish effect on the Bihar tally. They are seeking answers about the Sena vs Sena and Pawar vs Pawar battles, and the erosion-of-seats count in Maharashtra. They are asking questions about whispers of possible losses in Gujarat, of four to five unsure seats in Rajasthan. Used to a world of incentives and motivation, they wonder if the guarantees provided by the Congress in Karnataka are outweighing Modi’s guarantees.

Sometime in September 2023, a senior investment banker who was returning from a dinner of high net-worth individuals, called to air a question. Was there any risk of the BJP not returning to power? The poser was triggered by the formation of the opposition alliance in Patna. A 10-year reign’s anti-incumbency was always going to be challenging. But it was too early for any determination of a trend. A few months later, the BJP swept the assembly elections in the states of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, settling the doubts.

It is useful to recall the statistics of the BJP-led NDA’s 2019 victory. The alliance swept up all the 26 seats Gujarat, won 41 of the 48 Lok Sabha seats in Maharashtra, 39 of the 40 seats in Bihar, 25 of the 28 seats in Karnataka, 24 of the 25 seats in Rajasthan, 28 of the 29 seats in Madhya Pradesh, and 9 of the 11 seats in Chhattisgarh. Modi Magic had taken the count of seats with 50-plus percent votes from 136 in 2014 to 224 in 2019, and the victory in the Hindi belt held the potential of a sweep in the crucial 200-odd seats where the BJP was in direct contest with the Congress.

In February 2024, the BJP scintillated its core constituency with a playbook promising ‘*Abki baar, 400 paar*’. The promise was backed by the euphoria which followed the consecration of the Ram temple in Ayodhya and the promise of a uniform civil code enigmised the core constituency. It was scaffolded by the large base of welfare beneficiaries and riveted to the promise of Viksit Bharat by 2047. The focus on investment-led growth catapulted the stock market indices to new highs, thrilling the investor community.

Cut to May 2024. What changed in the intervening weeks to catalyse the new questions? There is much bafflement among punters and the general public about the shift in campaign strategy. Following the spectre of low voter turnout in the first phase, the BJP’s campaign rhetoric has focused on the deployment of euphemisms of identity, resulting in a greater degree of polarisation. There is also a recurring hum of and curiosity about a rift in the Sangh parivar. The notion is contestable given that the Modi regime has delivered on the key aspirations of the RSS—the abrogation of Article 370 and consecration of the Ram temple—and promises to unveil more.

The debate among punters—and pollsters and pundits—is whether the shift in strategy will consolidate the core but alienate the swing voter. Arguably, for the players the questions are less about voting intent and more about market position. Those long on Modinomics are sussing up the landscape if they must go short on their punts. For sure, nobody is as yet calling or predicting a grand upset—the worst-case scenario envisaged is that the outcome will be closer to 2014’s. There is no escaping, though, that the high-velocity attacks are engineering a perception of vulnerability among believers and atheists.

There is cause of concern beyond partisan politics. India is the largest democracy. The largest election in the world has over 960 million voters eligible to exercise their right of choice on how they want to be governed; of this, over 18 million are first-time voters seeking a vision for their future. This week, Elections 2024 will witness voting in 96 constituencies in Phase IV—with votes already cast in 285 constituencies, we are past the halfway mark.

Theory has it that election campaigns are about ideas to resolve the dilemmas of competing compulsions and conflicting crises. Instead, the campaign—across party lines—has yo-yoed between claims and counterclaims, exposés and denials. The blitzkrieg of sloganeering has scarcely helped the cause of voter enthusiasm.

Nobel laureate Herbert Simon had once memorably observed that a surfeit of information creates a poverty of attention. The principle conceptualised by Simon owes its origin to public policy design—the impact of incomplete information and the implications for outcomes—and the construct applies to election campaigns too. The quality of campaigns and the nature of debates have left the voter wondering if his/her choice is being informed.

DEMONISING IS DEMEANING DEMOCRACY



POWER & POLITICS

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“Elections belong to the people. It’s their decision. If they decide to turn their back on the fire and burn their behinds, then they will just have to sit on their blisters.”

—Abraham Lincoln

“When widely-followed public figures feel free to say anything, without any fact-checking, it becomes impossible for a democracy to think intelligently about big issues.”

—Thomas L Friedman

ISSUES are dead, interred in the political graveyard of noxious nonsense. Slander has taken over. The meandering narrative of the current Lok Sabha elections has reduced a titanic exercise involving more than 900 million voters into a constitutional formality by integrating incessant invective imbred with indiscreet innovations, instead of upholding its topic-based elocution analogy.

The battle began on a high moral ground. A fight between Viksit Bharat by 2047 and Nyay for All. A mirror that reflects a Leader who Delivers vs Adversaries who Divide. For weeks, issues were confined to electing a government that governs, and dumping a party that destroys democratic institutions. BJP’s campaign began on a high note, as both the party and the prime minister unleashed their vikas astras of achieving a developed India by 2047. No saffron leader let an opportunity pass without counting the sarkar’s successes during the past decade. They publicised achievements such as constructing 35 km of national highways per day, 100 new airports, minimising terror attacks and

communal riots, ensuring record growth rates and enhancing India’s acceptability as a major diplomatic and economic voice at international forums.

The golden pledge of ‘Modi ki guarantee’ was a call to trust a leader who delivered more than what he promised over a decade. The opposition parties, meanwhile, stuck to their accomplishments when they were in power and what would do if re-elected. When Modi blamed the Gandhi parivar for India’s ills, the Congress used their icons to reinforce the fact that the foundations of democratic and industrial India were laid by its founders.

So far, so good. Then came the summer of malcontents. The heat and dust infected political mindsets metaphorically, too—they lost the big picture and started bickering over inane issues. It has turned into a scrimmage between two negative narratives. By the time voting for more than half the Lok Sabha seats was over, the contretemps between political rivals had turned toxic. Political leaders, their followers and sponsored social influencers splattered memes and media masala to lower the tone along caste and communal lines, using shamelessly competitive and disruptive denigration.

Election 2024 is now a personal feud. Minorities, mangalsutras and mandirs have become the stigmata of political crucifixion. The battle is down to a fight between Marauding Modi and Rehearsing Rahul. In the process, Modi has defined Rahul and the Congress as his biggest adversaries. He said: “For five years, the Congress *shehzada* kept chanting one thing. After his Rafale issue was grounded, he started a new chant. Five industrialists, five industrialists, five industrialists. Gradually, he started saying Ambani-Adani. But ever since the elections were announced, he stopped abusing Ambani and Adani. Today I want to

ask from Telangana’s soil, he must declare how much money they have taken from Ambani, Adani. Was there a deal? Why did you stop abusing Ambani and Adani overnight? *Zaroor daal mein kuchh kaala hai* (something is wrong).” Even hardcore Modi admirers were surprised. Modi chose Telangana for this verbal vilification because the Congress-run state recently signed numerous memorandums with the Adani Group for investments of over ₹12,500 crore.

Amit Shah, BJP’s master strategist, made it clear that the current election was between Modi and Rahul: “The 2024 election is a Rahul Gandhi versus Narendra Modi election. It is an election that pits ‘vote for *jihaad*’ against ‘vote for vikas’.” His twist in the tiger’s tail: the voter must choose between Modi’s

“Bharatiya guarantee” and Rahul’s “Chinese guarantee”. Shah has been setting the tone for a Hindutva-driven ideological charge using lurid saffron prose. Though he was speaking in Telangana, his message was meant for BJP cadres nationwide. He visualised a “triangle of appeasement” between the Congress, BRS and All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen, saying, “These people don’t allow the celebration of Hyderabad Liberation Day (September 17). They want to run Telangana on the basis of Sharia and Quran.”

A newly-converted BJP MP from Maharashtra, Navneet Rana, took the polarisation piffle forward while campaigning for her party’s candidate in Hyderabad. She lampooned an inflammatory remark Akbaruddin Owaisi made in 2013, “The younger brother (Owaisi) said, ‘Remove police for 15 minutes so we can show what we can do.’ I want to tell him, ‘It might take you 15 minutes, but it will only take us 15 seconds.’” She claimed the BJP candidate Madhavi Latha would “definitely stop Hyderabad from turning into Pakistan” and warned

anyone voting for the Congress or AIMIM would be voting for Pakistan.

The PM’s slogan of ‘*Abki baar, 400 paar*’ was paraded by prominent BJP leaders to promote a religious agenda, which wasn’t Modi’s original intention. Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, the raucously rising star in the saffron firmament, asserted in Odisha: “People ask us why we want 400 seats. We have to make sure Babri Masjid is never rebuilt in India. This is why we have to give PM Modi more than 400 seats... The Congress knows we are not going to stop at the Ram temple, we have to get every temple in our country released.”

The opposition parties aren’t holding their fire. Shiv Sena MP Sanjay Raut from the Udhav Thackeray faction tastelessly compared Modi and Aurangzeb, and predicted a similar fate for the PM. Mamata Banerjee, who is under tremendous political and agency pressure, called BJP netas “*looter*as” out to destroy West Bengal; she called Modi “*Insaan-hatya ka saudagar*”, rudely reminiscent of Sonia Gandhi’s “*Maut ka saudagar*” obloquy that boomeranged. Priyanka and Rahul Gandhi were not far behind in making fun of Modi with social media jokes and poll platform platitudes.

Have our loquacious leaders forgotten that foul mouths and fouler methods don’t win elections? Modi took the 2014 win on an anti-corruption plank. In 2019, he got a record mandate even after Rahul coined the slogan ‘*Chowkidar chor hai*’. The real *chowkidars* of democracy are the people of India. Every five years, they venture out from million-dollar villas, apartments, slums, villages and small farms to make up the decisive multitude determining the fate of the governing class. They are an army whose power can make or break governments. The people of India see voting as a day of empowerment, not a power grab. They expect clean voices and cleaner governance.

Just before India’s independence, Churchill had arrogantly wailed, “Power will go to the hands of rascals, rogues, freebooters. They will fight amongst themselves for power and India will be lost in political squabbles.” In these days of anti-colonialism fervour, it would be a pity if Winston got it right. Fortunately, a united and prospering India is in much safer hands for now.



THE CANNES AND CAN’T OF INDIAN FILMDOM



OPINION

NAMRATA JOSHI

Consulting Editor

Follow her on X @Namrata_Joshi

CAN we talk about this?” began a provocative Instagram post from actor Tanmay Dhanania shortly after his film, *The Shameless*, directed by Bulgarian filmmaker Konstantin Bojanov, was selected in the Un Certain Regard section of the Cannes Film Festival, which begins May 14.

Dhanania wanted to point out the power imbalance between Indians who get to attend Cannes and those who can’t. While the cast and crew of films like his are forced to scrounge around to get together the money for the trip, “people who have nothing to do with the festival, who have no films there, who don’t know what cinema means, let alone indie cinema, get sponsored”. Dhanania compared it, rather biting, to a circus troupe being special invitees to the Olympics instead of the athletes.

He was referring to the star ambassadors of the various beauty and fashion

brands who are flown into Cannes from India, among other countries, every year to walk the red carpet and pose for shuttbugs. Add to that the social media influencers who crashed the party last year on the French Riviera, faffing around on random panels and posing on the red carpet when no one was quite looking at them. However, their enormous fan bases and the celeb-hungry media were all agog back home.

This is not to diminish the clout and reach of stars and influencers. They have helped make Cannes a household word in India even though its correct pronunciation might be up for debate. At a time the number of hits, engagements and virality of content gets valued way more than quality, it’s perhaps fitting for Cannes to do with some outreach beyond the bubble of the converted. Also, the red carpet is serious business and the various brand associations keep the wheels of the festival moving, helping bring cinema to the cinephile.

A regular at Cannes knows that there exists a separation between the church and the state. For those devouring films, nothing else matters. For the majority, the game is all about waking up early, booking tickets online for their favourites and then queuing up outside Grand Theatre Lumière, Salle Debussy *et al* to view them. One can only hope that a bit of that passion for cinema also finds its place in the middle of the hullabaloo over gowns and tuxedos. All the more so in a year Cannes is laying out the choice

of films with an India connection. “Historically, China and India are important markets for films. They are making a marked comeback to Cannes,” said general delegate Thierry Fremaux while announcing the year’s programme.

Indeed, 2024 is a historic year that marks a record India presence. We have a film in competition after 30 years of Shaji Karun’s *Swaham*. Payal Kapadia’s *All We Imagine As Light* is competing with the likes of Sean Baker’s *Anora*, Francis Ford Coppola’s *Megalopolis*, David Cronenberg’s *The Shrouds*, Jia

have its restoration work platformed at Cannes, after G Aravindan’s *Thampu* in 2022 and Aribam Syam Sharma’s *Ishanou* last year. FTII student Chidananda Naik’s Kannada short, *Sunflowers Were the First Ones to Know*, competes in the LaCinef student section.

Three films play in the independent sidebars—Maisam Ali’s *In Retreat*, Karan Kandhari’s *Sister Midnight*, and *Nightbirds*, for which Indian filmmaker Ashok Vish collaborated with Maria Estela Paiso of the Philippines.

Beyond films, iconic cinematographer Santosh Sivan will be honoured at the prestigious Pierre Angenieux Tribute ceremony. As we go to press, Apoorva Charan, producer of the much-acclaimed Pakistani film *Joyland*, who has her roots in Hyderabad, has been chosen as a fellow for the Cannes Producers Network Programme.

“This time, it’s extra special. So many films with India connection, so many close friends... It really feels like a team is going,” wrote Dhanania. There are other things to note, too. Most of the films are either helmed by women or are women-centric. Kapadia, Ali and Naik are all FTII graduates. And almost all of the films are co-productions, pointing at the universal reception of Indian stories.

Neecha Nagar is the only Indian film to have won the Palme d’Or. How will the current lot do? Will they get accolades and awards? Will they generate enough buzz? For now, the world’s a stage for Team India at Côte d’Azur.



Cannes has become as much a place for influencers to get clicked on the red carpet as for cinephiles to gorge on world cinema. This year marks a record Indian presence at the festival

Zhang-ke’s *Caught by the Tides*, Yorgos Lanthimos’s *Kinds of Kindness*, Mohammad Rasoulof’s *The Seed of the Sacred Fig*, Paul Schrader’s *Oh Canada* and Paolo Sorrentino’s *Parthenope*.

There are other Indian films too in the official selection—Sandhya Suri’s *Santosh* and the restored print of Shyam Benegal’s classic, *Manthan*. It’s the third year in a row for Shivendra Singh Dungarpur’s Film Heritage Foundation to

registering a choice on an allotted day. Kejriwal’s re-entry into the fray, enabled by a prescient Supreme Court, must be as much a relief to the EC as to the voter. It may ignite fresh enthusiasm.

R Narayanan, Navi Mumbai

Caesar’s wife

Ref: *Frame sexual harassment charges against BJP MP* (May 11). Caesar’s wife must be above suspicion. An MP, elected by a constituency of lakhs of voters, should be above criminality. With a Delhi court framing sexual assault charges against BJP leader Brih Bhushan Sharan Singh, he might have no room to escape because the evidence seems strong.

Ravi Nair, Palakkad

Delhi durbar

It’s ironic that Telangana CM Revanth Reddy is fuming—just like his predecessor KCR—against Narendra Modi and Amit Shah for ‘Gujarati dominance’, dubbing the duo ‘Lok sultans’ to stir up local sentiments. This trolling won’t be taken even with a pinch of salt, since no Congress leader can take any

decision without bowing to the dictates of the Gandhi trio from the same Delhi.

U Atreya Sarma, Hyderabad

Drive through

Trade unions in Kerala are protesting transport minister K B Ganesh Kumar’s reform of the driving licence test. The state witnesses more road accidents than the national average. Most of them result from rule violations or lack of proper driving skills. The union’s demand is their business, not in the interest of the public. The government ought to go ahead with the reforms.

Bijumon P N, Idukki

Balan’s sarcasm

When asked about a family vacation the Kerala CM took while a party meeting was scheduled, Marxist leader A K Balan said, “Even god takes rest, why not Pinarayi?” Though he said it in humour, the effect was sarcastic and reflected the general apathy of party workers towards Pinarayi’s sojourn.

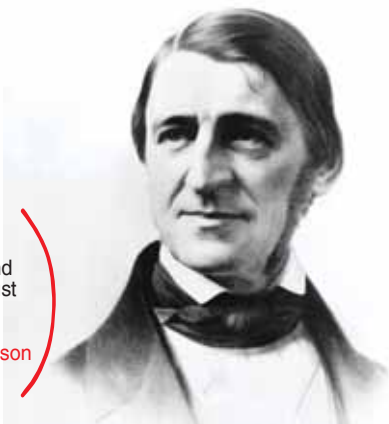
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“Though we travel
the world over to find
the beautiful, we must
carry it with us or
we find it not”
— Ralph Waldo Emerson



Of the 150 villages that exist in West Garo Hills of Meghalaya, only 13 to 15 are Songsarek villages. In these, only five or six houses continue to uphold the ancient Garo traditions and follow the rituals related to the animist society. Wangala dance, brewing of Chubitchi being a few, writes

NAVNEET MENDIRATTA

VIBING TO THE DANCE OF A 100 DRUMS

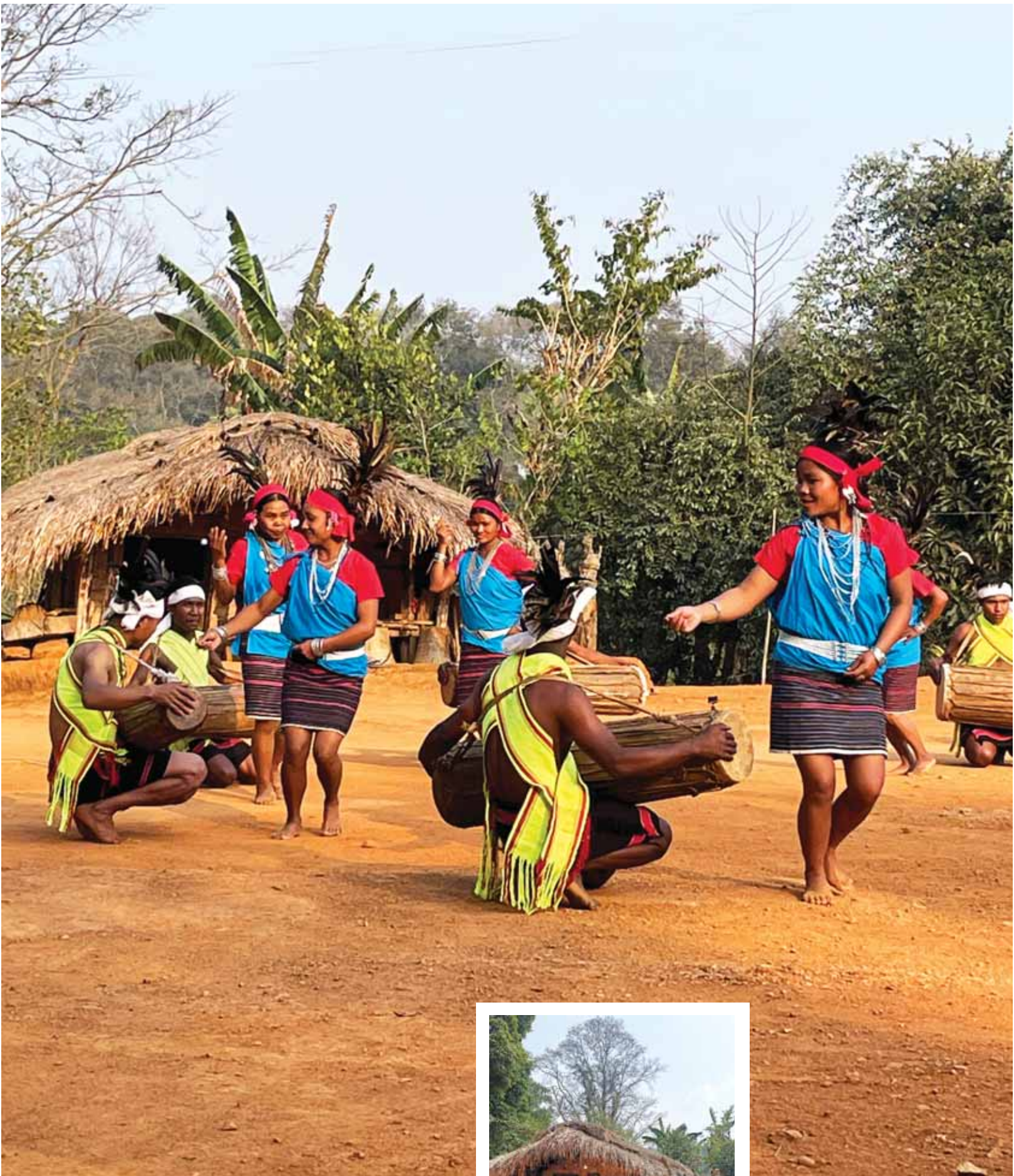
It is clearly the road less travelled. The West Garo Hills of Meghalaya in Northeast India may not have attracted the fancy of the tourists as their Khasi hills counterparts (yet), but that could well be a blessing in disguise for a region that is holding on to the last bit of ancient Garo traditions — the Songsarek practices. Songsarek is a pre-Christian animist religion that is fast losing out to conversions to Christianity, that spread in the region in the second half of the nineteenth century and intensified throughout the twentieth century. Currently, of the 150 villages that exist in the region, only 13 to 15 are Songsarek villages. In these, only five or six houses continue to actively practise the rituals related to the ancient Garo society.

A narrow hill road leads us to the Songsarek village of Gondenggre. Located in the Rongram subdivision of West Garo Hills district in Meghalaya, the village is located 18 kms from sub-district headquarter Rongram and some 36 kms from district headquarter of Tura. Our entourage comprises a group of nine Royal Enfield bikers and content crew who are here to document the living heritage of the communities in these regions as part of a unique partnership between Royal Enfield and UNESCO. The project titled, The Great Himalayan Exploration, involves engaging with Royal Enfield's motorcycling community and inspiring them to come forward to not just explore the landscape but to help preserve and promote the living heritage of the communities in these regions. Documentation is the first step in this direction. These practices range from performing arts (dance forms, songs, etc) to tangible crafts (handmade paper from tree bark, specific types of hats, etc), food practices (preservation techniques, culinary cultures), agricultural practices, local medicinal practices, body art and even indigenous spiritual and social systems.

KEEPERS OF THE TRADITION

Upon reaching the village, we are greeted by the Nokma or the village headman with a generous serving of *Chubitchi* or

the traditionally fermented (but weak) alcoholic rice beverage that is poured right into our mouths from an *abet* or a hollowed dried bottle gourd. It is the locals' way of welcoming the guests and must be accepted by them as a mark of honour. *Chubitchi* flows freely in Garo villages. There is no age or stigma attached to its consumption. It is an important part of every Garo celebration — be it religious rituals, meetings, social gatherings, birth, marriage, during *Wangala* (harvest festival) or even a house warming ceremony. It is said that in pre-modern era, the Garos would serve the drink before taking off for a hunt or to fight enemies. The traditional ways of making *Chubitchi* are said to have been passed down orally among the Garos until the arrival of Baptist American Missionaries. In the present day, though the knowledge of brewing *Chubitchi* continues to be shared in the interiors of Garo Hills, it is no longer a preferred practice in urban areas. Songsareks of Gondenggre are friendly albeit private people. Curiously is writ large on their faces as language holds them back from communicating freely with the outsiders. Rakkan M Sangma, Joint Secretary of the 100 Drums Wangala Festival Committee and Secretary of Garo Heritage Village plays interpreter and takes us through the rituals and practices of the villagers. “*Song* in the local language means village or a native place and *Warek* means houses built in a line. By that definition, *Gondenggre* is a spread out village with houses that are built in a single line,” says Sangma. “About 5-7 kms from the village, there exists a strong sacred grove called *A Song Kosi*. It is a special place where outsiders are forbidden from entering. No one is allowed to speak in that forest let alone pluck a single leaf. No one, not even a member of our tribe, can cause any harm to the trees, flowers, or animals there,” he shared. Cleanliness is a buzzword in most parts of Meghalaya. Made from bamboo, Garo houses typically last for about four to five years. The kitchen is usually located outside the house. A complete set up comprising kitchen and dining space at the entrance of the village is meant



SONG IN THE LOCAL LANGUAGE MEANS VILLAGE OR A NATIVE PLACE AND WAREK MEANS HOUSES BUILT IN A LINE. BY THAT DEFINITION, GONDENGGRE IS A SPREAD OUT VILLAGE WITH HOUSES THAT ARE BUILT IN A SINGLE LINE

to be used by the community for celebrations and meetings. The rooms are usually spread out. According to Sangma, a lot of taboos including “untouchability” *vis-a-vis* the outsiders are practiced even today. The outsiders are not allowed to enter or touch anything inside the Garo spaces. Sacrifice remains an inherent part of Songsarek practices. There is a sacrifice to mark everything that is considered important — it could be a wedding or any celebration, a big announcement, to appease the Gods, to ward off evil or even to fight a disease. The blood marks are like trophies in the village. The Songsareks believe in keeping their Gods happy.

DANCING TO A HUNDRED DRUMS

Wangala, the Garo traditional dance dedicated to their main Deity and the God of Sun, crops and fertility, *Misi-Saajjong*, features as an Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) practice. Inspired by the wagtail bird, the dance imitates the bird's behaviour, using musical instruments such as a flute made from buffalo horn and drums. It is a group dance where pairs of men and women wearing wagtail feathers in their headgear line up and move along a circle in short, slow but forceful steps. The dance is led by the Nokma who sings the traditional songs in a high pitch while the rest of the men play the drums. The Garo women folk make traditional dance gestures imitating the bird or even animals and clap. The women wear skirts made from handwoven cloth woven on looms. The typical pattern is that of the eye of the Goddess of wealth, *Susime*, resembling a diamond. Wagtail bird holds a special meaning in the Songsarek beliefs. The villagers closely observe the flight of the bird



to predict the waterfall for the season. Every *Wangala* or the harvest festival, the Songsareks put handprints on their doors (using three fingers) with rice flour indicating the water level and for good harvest. These imprints are usually made by the male members of the community outside the house of the Nokma, where most rituals are conducted. The Garos are a matrilineal, matrilineal and matrilineal society. They continue to carry forward the surname of the women of the family. The boys live with their parents till they reach puberty and then shift into a dormitory style bachelor home in the village till they get married into a girl's family. While the matrilineal aspect remains strong, the rules surrounding bachelor homes are somewhat easing out, shares Sangma.

THE GREAT HIMALAYAN EXPLORATION PROJECT

Royal Enfield's partnership project with UNESCO, The Great Himalayan Exploration, draws rider-researchers to document the Intangible Cultural Heritage of the Himalayas. “The aim is to document and safeguard the Intangible Cultural Heritage of the Himalayas and thereby, raise awareness about the living treasures that make up the beating heart of India,” says Bidisha Dey, Executive Director, Eicher Group Foundation — the CSR and Sustainability arm of Royal Enfield. According to her, over two editions and 16 curated rides, 119 rider-researchers have already documented 66 practices across the Eastern Himalayan states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, North Bengal, Sikkim and Tripura. “We are now set to extend our exploration to the Western Himalayas in 2024,” says Dey. “We conduct a detailed on-ground reece before rolling out the riders to ensure the assent of the locals and as respect for their privacy. We are especially careful to follow the community protocols on how to approach the community and then conduct capacity building programmes to educate the rider researchers before they set out on their journeys,” she shares. Among the practices recorded are: The black pottery of Tyr Shang village in the West Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya, *Muga* silk threads of Assam, *Mon Shugu*, the ancient art of making paper of Arunachal Pradesh, living roots bridges of Meghalaya, handmade mask art of Majuli island, Assam. “For us, the partnership is not just about the documentation. It's also about creating awareness about the intangible cultural heritage practices,” concludes Dey.

ENCALM'S WARM EMBRACE OF ATITHI DAIVO BHAVA



In an informative tête-à-tête with **SHOBORI GANGULI**, Encalm Hospitality CEO **VIKAS SHARMA** outlines his vision of revolutionising the world of airport hospitality

Possibly never before in history has the global hospitality industry and its ecosystem been as severely hit as it was during the 2021 Pandemic. Not even the two World Wars in the last century left nations gasping for breath as Covid did, with its lethal tentacles paralysing MSMEs, travel and tourism businesses, and their subsidiary industries. Unannounced lockdowns and travel restrictions drilled unparalleled fear into the human psyche, with no end in sight. But, as Charles Dickens put it in *A Tale of Two Cities*, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times...It was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.” Clawing back for survival under such adversity, the hospitality industry was quick to innovate. Mr Vikas Sharma, the Chief Executive Officer of Encalm Hospitality, entered this volatile world as a beacon of hope in the year 2021, in a territory unexplored and uncharted and at a time when fear of human contact reigned supreme.

Armed with the vision to infuse fresh life into the business of hospitality, and, of course, with an enviable arsenal of 25 years of experience in the trade, Sharma went about restructuring the landscape of airport hospitality through an unparalleled experience — much like the American Pioneer who wanted “to go where no man has gone before.” Air travel, even for those going business class, has its attendant share of anxiety and restlessness. Seeking to ease this, Mr Sharma, through Encalm, concretised a novel definition of airport services. “Hospitality” is the key word in this endeavour, says a proud Sharma.

In a short span of three years, Sharma today heads a 200 plus team which, according to him, is crucial in taking the organisation's long term objectives forward through “strategic thinking and effective communication.”

At a time when most airlines provide their Business Class passengers with state of the art lounges and customized relaxation plans without overheads, what does



VIKAS sharma, CEO, ENCALM HOSPITALITY PVT LTD

Encalm bring to the table, especially if the passenger has to pay for it? Sharma is quick to enumerate that, “Encalm Hospitality has become synonymous with exceptional hospitality and top-of-the-line services right from Atithya to the

Encalm Lounges and Spa.” Available in all three terminals of the Delhi Airport, Encalm Lounges are also available in Hyderabad and Goa. To ensure an “elevated airport experience” Sharma lists out the services the company has on offer.

Penetrating into the luxury realm of a regular lounge and Spa, Encalm's services and hospitality combine a range of assisted services, incorporating basic non-aviation chores such as assistance service, buggy services, and porter assistance. The company's offerings go beyond the aesthetics of bespoke carved lounges and Spas with a personalised “Atithya Meet and Greet” — constructed on the foundation of *Atithi Daivo Bhava* (Guests are equivalent to the Almighty), taking airport experience to another level altogether.

As the Encalm CEO proudly asserts, his knowledge and experiences help synergise the operational and management foundations of the Encalm brand. Needless to add, he has an impressive portfolio having served as the General Manager of Sheraton Hotel and Resorts, Director of Operations at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company and the Director of F&B at Four Seasons Hotel and Resorts. Operations, sales and marketing, finance and revenue management are his core competence. He was felicitated as the General Manager of the Year 2019 award by HOSI in association with Sheraton Hotel and Resorts, and Leadership Excellence Award by Marriott Hotel, again in 2019. An MBA graduate from INSEAD, Sharma has a bachelor's degree from IHM, Gwalior.

Interestingly, Sharma is also an avid cricket follower of cricket and badminton, the former fructifying into reality when Encalm became the Hospitality partner with the Delhi Capitals for IPL 2024. Talking about the partnership Sharma says, “As a lifelong cricket enthusiast, the sport embodies more than mere competition — it's a fervent passion fostering camaraderie and excitement. Partnering with Delhi Capitals underscores my enduring dedication to cricket and its profound community impact. Through Encalm Hospitality's alliance with this dynamic IPL team, we embrace cricket's essence, engaging with fans authentically and enriching the sport's vibrant legacy.”

PAWAN SONI pens down *his personal experience at the airport with Encalm's services to provide a 360 degree view of what this innovation brings to the table*

The hustle and bustle of travel can often leave one weary and longing for a moment of respite. Gone are the days when travelling was mundane. We are at a time when journeys in fact can be as exhilarating as the destination themselves.

During my recent trip to Italy, while passing through Terminal 3 (T3) International Airport in New Delhi, I stumbled upon the Encalm Prive Lounge — a sanctuary of luxury and comfort that undoubtedly ranks among the world's finest.

With a staggering capacity of over 550 guests, the Encalm Prive Lounge caters exclusively to business travelers, accessible either through business class tickets or higher with various airlines, or by paying an entry fee. Unlike other lounges, complimentary card benefits do not apply here; however, cardholders can access another Encalm lounge, albeit not as lavish as the Prive lounge.

Culinary delights await at the extensive buffet which is rivalling with the leading star hotels selection and offers separate selections for both vegetarians and non-vegetarians. I loved the watermelon cheese as a canape, prawns and garlic cream kebabs, Chicken biryani and even the simple but tasty beetroot halwa. The lounge's leaf-shaped bar is a visual delight, offering a range of complimentary and paid options that cater to every palate. Given current Delhi's excise policy issue, there were many brands including Prosecco that weren't available at the time of my visit.

The lounge boasts of four sleeping pods, providing weary travellers with a private sanctuary to rest and rejuvenate before their next journey. Of course this is a paid facility at `1000 plus taxes per hour.

One of the standout features of the Encalm Prive Lounge is its expansive conference room, which doubles as a personal dining room, perfect for business travelers or senior bureaucrats and VIPs looking to conduct meetings or enjoy a meal in a private setting.

For those looking for entertainment, the lounge offers a small gaming zone and a dedicated kids area, ensuring that travellers of all ages have something to enjoy during their visit. The virtual gaming zone and Xbox games comes as a chargeable feature separate from the lounge charge though it can be availed by only the lounge users. A small fitness centre and kids play area comes complimentary along with the lounge facility.

In addition to its luxurious amenities, the Encalm Prive Lounge also offers



excellent spa services. I had the pleasure of trying their 30-minute foot massage, which left me feeling relaxed and rejuvenated, ready to embark on the next leg of my journey. Currently this 30-minute spa came complimentary by using my DreamFolks card; else one will have to shell out `1500 for using this facility. Had there been a provision of complimentary foot massage machines and the massage chairs like at Singapore airport, I would have rated Encalm Prive lounge the best in the world without even blinking an eye.

While the lounge service came complimentary with my flight tickets, Encalm has another facility called Atithya Meet and Greet Service. So if you are a first time traveller or just worried about your parents or kids traveling alone, just avail this service from their portal that comes in various options — Silver,

Gold and Elite. This service provides you with a guest manager who will escort you from the entrance without having to wait in the queue, help you through check-in and immigration services. They try to help you go through business class immigration service but it depends upon the government official to allow it. And then they help you get the buggy till your boarding gate. If you have a business class ticket or are planning to use the lounge through credit cards, in my opinion, Silver tier option gives you the best value for money.

Overall, my experience at the Encalm Prive Lounge and Atithya Meet and Greet service was nothing short of exceptional. From its elegant ambience to its impeccable service, the lounge sets a new standard for airport hospitality. Next time you travel, consider experiencing the luxury and comfort of Atithya Meet and Greet Service and Encalm Prive Lounge apart from the usual shopping.

(Author is a food critic and founder of the Big F Awards. He can be reached at Pawan.Soni@indianfoodfreak.com)



Splendid Expedition Across Switzerland

Switzerland calls out to travelers with a taste for stunning mountain views, picturesque landmarks, and unique adventures. Step onto the Grand Train Tour of Switzerland for an incredible voyage through the country's rich culture and breathtaking landscapes. This train journey guarantees an unforgettable encounter with Switzerland's captivating charm

BY **AKANKSHA DEAN**

As travelers, we set off to find new horizons, discover new cultures, savor delicious foods, and create lasting memories. Switzerland is a great choice for explorers, with stunning mountain views and charming villages that become part of every traveler's dream vacation. While Switzerland offers many ways to explore, taking a train journey is a truly magical experience. The Grand Train Tour of Switzerland is an adventure not to be missed. This remarkable trip reveals the beauty of Switzerland's mountains and its rich history. You can start and end your journey wherever you please, with destinations like Zermatt, St. Moritz, Lucerne, and Lugano awaiting your exploration. For those eager to visit every stop on the journey, the Swiss Travel Pass is the perfect solution. This ticket gives you access to all the destinations along the route. Covering 1,280 kilometers, passing by 11 serene lakes, and revealing five UNESCO World Heritage Sites set against the stunning alpine backdrop, this train journey ensures an engaging and unforgettable experience.



MOST POPULAR TRAIN JOURNEYS THAT ARE A PART OF THE GRAND ROUTE

Hop on the Glacier Express, a legendary trip winding through the breathtaking Swiss Alps from Zermatt to St. Moritz. Take a journey on the Bernina Express to discover the Bernina Pass, Bernina Range, and the UNESCO World Heritage Rhaetian Railway. Travel along the Golden Pass Line, linking Lucerne to Montreux through stunning scenery. Enjoy the

Gotthard Panorama Express as it traverses the famous Gotthard Pass. Lastly, ride the Lucerne-Interlaken Express for captivating views of the Jungfrau region.

MUST KNOW

Switzerland presents a rich array of experiences, from enchanting urban centers to tranquil mountain hamlets, crystal-clear lakes to towering peaks, and from ancient vineyards to fine dining destinations. The Swiss Travel

System offers a smooth, comfortable, and upscale way for tourists to discover this enchanting nation. With the Swiss Travel Pass, visitors gain access to Switzerland's comprehensive public transportation network, enabling them to seamlessly traverse the country by train, bus, boat, or mountain railway.

Akanksha Dean is an independent food & travel writer

BY **PAWAN SONI**

Goa remains an ever-popular destination, with its property prices soaring post-COVID and a surge in demand for new eateries and nightspots. Each visit to Goa reveals new experiences, making it a perennial favorite. During a brief 3-day break from work, my wife and I opted for a villa stay over a traditional hotel, choosing the relatively new Villa Heliconia in Siolim.

LOCATION

Villa Heliconia is conveniently located near the MOPA airport, making it easily accessible from most places in North Goa. Situated close to the buzzing spots in North Goa, it even shares a wall with the popular restaurant Hosa. Known for its innovative take on traditional South Indian cuisine. I recommend trying Hosa for its exquisite interiors, great cocktails, and inventive dishes. However, ensure you have a reservation to avoid disappointment, as we found ourselves seated at an inconvenient high bar table for the last minute booking.

AMENITIES

The villa is spacious, boasting two large living areas and six rooms, along with a swimming pool and lifts. Ideal for groups of friends or extended families, the private

LET'S GOA...



pool is definitely a highlight. Decent-sized rooms, with at least two rooms featuring personal balconies ensures accommodation for kids and elderly as well.

HOUSEKEEPING

We were impressed by the attentive housekeeper, Shuvendu Kashyap, whose knowledge extended beyond housekeeping to include coffee and a variety of subjects. The entire team was polite and eager to please.

FOOD

One of the highlights was the option to have the staff

FACT SHEET

Villa Heliconia, 9 Ground Floor, Landmark, Plot No Syno.329, Vaddy, near the church, Siolim, Goa

Phone Number: 9350009000

prepare food of your choice, perfect for when you want a break from outside meals. I particularly enjoyed their dal, paneer, and tawa roti. Breakfast offered a variety of options, including eggs,

paranths, cut fruits, poori-aloo, and poha apart from beverages like fresh juice, tea and coffee.

During my visit, I discovered that the owner, Abhishek Aggarwal, and I are both from Gurgaon. I reached out to him to share my pleasant experience with the villa. Abhishek, an excellent hospitality professional turned real estate entrepreneur, shared his journey of success. His hard work and good fortune not only led to the opening of Villa Heliconia but also to several upcoming luxury projects in Goa, including a 4-bedroom villa in Morjim, a 5-bedroom super luxury Bali-themed villa in Siolim, and a 10-bedroom boutique property in Calangute, which will be rented out as individual rooms rather than a villa. Villa Heliconia, a dream fulfilled for Abhishek, is a testament to the fact that some dreams do come true.

(Author is a food critic and founder of the Big F Awards. He can be reached at Pawan.Soni@indianfoodfreak.com)

SAVING THE GREAT INDIAN BUSTARD

The Great Indian Bustard critically endangered and integral to India’s wildlife heritage, faces multifaceted threats including habitat loss, collisions with infrastructure, and poaching. As efforts to safeguard the species intensify, the imperative to reconcile competing interests between development and conservation grows more urgent



BKP SINHA



ARVIND K JHA

The WII had already identified ten potential locations for GIB breeding centres in 2017, setting the stage for proactive conservation measures. Drawing on expertise beyond borders, the International Fund for Houbara Conservation (IFHC) from Abu Dhabi was enlisted as a technical partner due to its successful track record in breeding other bustard species. The collective efforts resulted in the establishment of two breeding centres in Rajasthan, housing a total of 29 GIBs, bolstering hopes for the species’ survival

The Supreme Court of India in MK Ranjitsinh and Ors vs. Union of India has constituted a seven-member committee and tasked it with addressing the delicate balance between conservation initiatives for the Great Indian Bustard (GIB) and the installation of renewable energy projects in its habitat. This decision follows the Court’s acknowledgement of the challenges posed by its April 2021 directive mandating the burial of all power lines within the GIB habitat, a measure claimed to be expensive and impractical over extensive distances by Power companies and the Central Government. With the complex interplay between development and conservation at the forefront, the committee has to assess primarily the viability of reducing the area banned for overhead powerlines from 80,000 to 13,663 square kilometres. The GIB figures in Schedule I of the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, in Appendix I of CITES and is classified as Critically Endangered on the IUCN Red List. Included in the National Wildlife Action Plan, it has been earmarked for a recovery program under the Integrated Development of Wildlife Habitats by the Ministry of Environment and Forests and Climate Change (MoEFCC), Government of India. During the Mughal and British periods, the GIB was one of the top game birds. Historical accounts suggest that tribal Bhils used to set fire to the bushes surrounding their nests to trap females. The species has been facing numerous threats to its survival including occasional poaching, collisions with high-tension electric wires, fast-moving vehicles, and free-ranging dogs in villages. Additionally, habitat loss and alteration due to the diversion of grasslands and scrublands, extensive agricultural expansion, mechanized farming practices, and infrastructural developments such as irrigation systems, roads, and windmills pose significant challenges. Weighing approximately 15 kilograms each, their bulk poses a challenge when navigating around electricity lines or windmills, often resulting in fatalities or injuries. The dry semi-desert regions where the bustard once thrived, particularly in parts of Rajasthan, have also undergone significant transformation due to irrigation canals, converting the landscape into highly cultivated areas. Present-day threats include further expansion of linear infrastructure such as roads and electric power transmission lines leading to collision-related mortality. The proposed expansion of renewable energy infrastructure, including large-scale deployment of solar panels across desert and grassland areas, further jeopardizes the bird’s habitat. In its historical range, the great Indian bustard once existed across Western India, spanning 11 states, including parts of Pakistan, with strongholds in the Thar desert and the Deccan plateau. Known for its preference for flat, open landscapes with minimal disturbance, it thrives in grasslands. Their numbers, however, have dwindled dramatically, with only around 150 individuals estimated to survive as of 2018, down from around 250 in 2011. Most of the population, estimated at around 120, is concentrated in the arid grasslands of Thar, Rajasthan, particularly in the Desert National Park and the Pokhran Field Firing Range, with smaller populations reportedly scattered elsewhere in the country. In Maharashtra, two individuals had been reported in Nanaj, Solapur district, where the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) is actively involved in conservation efforts. Concerningly, however, the absence of the great Indian bustard in Nanaj in Maharashtra as well as in the Rollapadu Wildlife Sanctuary in Andhra Pradesh for the past few years suggests a looming risk of local-level extinctions. Known for their slow reproductive rate, GIBs lay only a few eggs and invest nearly a year in caring for their chicks. Establishing a founder population requires a minimum of 20 breeding females and 5 to 10 breeding males. In the relatively better populated Thar region, specifically focused upon in the



Supreme Court case, the looming risks of the maze of infrastructural development, food insecurity, conflicts, and climate change-induced impacts exacerbate the challenges faced by them. As regards actions taken to safeguard the dwindling population of the GIB, the MoEFCC, Rajasthan Forest Department, and Wildlife Institute of India (WII), came together in 2018 to initiate conservation breeding programs and conduct scientific research for GIB’s conservation. Notably, the WII had already identified ten potential locations for GIB breeding centres in 2017, setting the stage for proactive conservation measures. Drawing on expertise beyond borders, the International Fund for Houbara Conservation (IFHC) from Abu Dhabi was enlisted as a technical partner due to its successful track record in breeding other bustard species. The collective efforts resulted in the establishment of two breeding centres in Rajasthan, housing a total of 29 GIBs, bolstering hopes for the species’ survival. Further support poured in from WWF-India, which helped in crafting guidelines for a comprehensive State Action Plan for Resident Bustard Recovery Programme and backed future expansion plans in Gujarat. In Karnataka’s Siruguppa taluka, the Ballari Forest division proposed a Detailed Project Report with an

investment of INR 24 crores for a research centre dedicated to the GIB cause. In Maharashtra, with GIB sighted in recent years neither in Nanaj of Solapur nor in Warora of Vidarbha region, a proposed collaboration with Rajasthan aims to exchange tigers for GIBs, with plans to establish a breeding centre in Nanaj. Assessment of the overall strength, budgetary outlay, and position of the MoEFCC and forest departments in decision-making in the Government reflects that the effectiveness of efforts to secure the future of the GIB is just inadequate. The weakening of statutory instruments and establishments related to forest and wildlife conservation in the recent past is quite revealing in this regard. In the case of GIB also, on an uneven field, stakeholders grapple with the urgent need to balance developmental agendas with conservation imperatives, claiming to be providing a sustainable coexistence for this emblematic avian species. However, amidst endeavours by some professional foresters, a pressing challenge looms large today. About 66,337 sq. km of land for overhead transmission lines are considered despite WII’s recommendation that mitigation of powerline-linked mortality required a ban on high tension wires,

undergrounding of <66 kv wires, and retrofitting of existing wires with bird diverters. WII’s findings also underscored the perilous predicament, with an estimated 16 GIB fatalities annually due to collisions with high-tension lines in the Thar region alone. Such alarming mortality rates, validated by tagging efforts by WII, are in sharp contrast to the indication of the number of recorded mortality cases as insignificant before the highest court. Using a lower number of collision deaths as a basis for allowing a network of overhead powerlines in GIB habitats will be akin to advocating the discontinuance of medicines in a pandemic situation where due to a reduced number of survivors, deaths per day may be lowered. An approach of balancing conservation and development by permitting power projects, in a critically endangered species’ habitat with just about 140 survivors, currently less polluting than non-renewable resources deserves perhaps a second look. The idea of development and its impact created and sold by the most selfish species on earth pitted against the right to life of a species at the brink of extinction needs to adopt a much wider and multi-sectoral perspective. India’s insulation data in many areas, not natural habitats of GIB, presents

similar ranges as in Rajasthan and Gujarat. The Annual Mean Daily Global Solar Radiation (AMDGSR) map indicates 6.8 to 5.6 kWh/ m2/ day in different parts of Rajasthan and Gujrat; 6.0 to 5.8 in Madhya Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Ladakh; and 5.8 to 5.6 in states like Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, and Tamil Nadu. India’s solar power generation capacity having reached about 76 GW in FY24, is concentrated in Rajasthan and Gujarat with 17.8 GW and 10.1 GW. Large states like MP and UR are major disappointments. Authorities should consider the country-wide spread and benefits, site-specific costs on infrastructure, and the capacity utilization factor (CUF) figures reported to be 20 for Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh; 19 for Maharashtra, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Punjab, and Madhya Pradesh; and 18 for Gujarat. Considering this scenario, any honest concern for balancing conservation and development must, instead of compromising GIB’s future, explore and exploit the potential spread out in the country for solar projects. That would be true climate justice! (The writers are Former Principal Chief Conservator of Forests, UP and Maharashtra; views are personal)



REFLECTIONS

Social erasure of women

TOUCHSTONES
IRA PANDE

LET us take a break from the daily exchange of disgusting barbs being flung by our venerable political leaders at each other. The level of political discourse has sunk so low by now that short of using actual swear words, rival candidates have tried everything else. So, a resolute silence over who will win and who will lose the 2024 elections! As far as I am concerned — and I'm sure there are many like me — we have all lost. Pity this proud democracy and its citizens for having such a useless bunch of leaders.

That said, let me take you as far away from this muck as I can by recommending a film that needs to be seen and discussed for many reasons. Called *'Laapataa Ladies'*, produced by Aamir Khan and Kiran Rao, it is now available on Netflix for those who missed it in cinema halls. Long, long ago, Rabindranath Tagore wrote a story called *'Nouka Dubi'* (The Boat Capsized) that had a similar theme. A barge carrying two sets of newly-wed couples capsizes, and in the melee that follows, the brides get exchanged. The story was made into a film and although I never saw it, it always tickled my fancy.

After all these years, Kiran Rao has picked up the same dilemma and brought it up to the present times by including some interesting twists in the plot. *'Laapataa Ladies'* is set in the rural backwaters of the Hindi heartland, the last bastion of Hindu orthodoxy and patriarchal families. Like many of us, Rao says she always wondered what life in those sad-looking stations that trains pass by must be like. Dotted with wind-swept fields and often a mere cluster of mud *jhuggis* with thatched roofs, they belong to an era that the rest of India left decades ago. Dusty, dismal, with no visible signs of modernity (such as electric

The movie *'Laapataa Ladies'* has been directed by Kiran Rao.

Remember that many women are still laapataa. Worse, they don't even care to find themselves

ty pylons, Internet towers and *pucca* buildings), life here seems frozen in a time warp. As we whizz past them in air-conditioned coaches, munching snacks and sipping fruit drinks, it is difficult to register this forgotten India that we all prefer not to see or think about, and ever visit.

The main plot of Rao's film is a variation of the Tagore story, where two brides — their faces covered by veils — get mixed up in the confusion of alighting from a train and end up with the wrong husband and wrong villages. One finds a home in the wrong *sasural* but the other — the really lost bride — has neither a home nor a *sasural* and ends up sitting on the platform of a tiny railway station, hoping that her husband (whose name she does not utter) will find her. The efforts of the kindly station master and the local *thanedar* come to naught for Phool (this *laapataa* bride) cannot remember the name of her native village or that of her husband's village. Let me not say more about the delightful twists and turns that are negotiated by the scriptwriter and give the plot away, but here are some points that moved me.

Tempting as it must be to resort to stereotypes when creating low-level government characters, Rao manages to mine their softer side to reveal that humanity is still alive and kicking in India. Missing people are not just grainy photographs published in a remote corner of our newspapers, but lives that have an individual story that can shake one. That orphans, beggars and those with the least to offer are often the most generous among us, and that goodness is not yet completely buried by greed, goons and government *karamcharis*.

Beyond this, the curious case of a girl who doesn't remember her own name brought to my mind those countless women in our part of North India whose names were erased by their roles. So, *bahu*, *bahurani*, so-and-so *ki amma*, *bitiya*... all these were ways of making young brides forget that they had an identity of their own. Years ago, my nieces decided to create a family tree of the women in their father's family. They were young feminists who did not like the idea that the official family tree they were shown had only men in all the branches. So they decided to ask their grandfather (the oldest person in their family) to help them fill in the blanks. Shockingly, he did not know his mother's name because she had passed away when he was just three. His own sisters, surrogate guardians after his mother's demise, were known as Choti Di, Bari Di, and referred to as only that. Other loving female relatives were Chachi, Bua, Mami and so on. Their names were *laapataa*! When our family *panditji* conducted any *shraddh* or *puja*, he only asked for the names of the males on either side (the paternal and maternal) to be recited. No woman was ever remembered in such rituals after she died.

PN Haksar's beautiful memoir (*One More Life, 1913-1929*) is dedicated to all the nameless women of his family who gave him such a memorable early life, but who had no names other than the titles they were given in the family.

Think about this social erasure of women and remember that many women are still *laapataa*. Worse, they don't even care to find themselves.

'Direct intervention breaks cycle of abuse'

Star of the Prime Video documentary *'Women Of My Billion'* or *'WOMB'*, **Srishti Bakshi** embarked on a journey from Kanyakumari to Srinagar on foot to raise awareness about violence against women. She talks to **Sheetal** on a range of issues...



Srishti Bakshi feels that gender is the most under-resourced as a cause.

■ How was the journey documenting those women and their stories?

My journey started in 2016 when I came across the Highway 91 rape case. I was working in Hong Kong at the time and it just moved me to a degree where I felt very uncomfortable with the situation back home. I was also constantly reminded that women and girls are not safe in India. I decided to actually go on the ground and collect real stories of women. I wanted to find out whether there is any hope left in securing the future of so many girls. So, the journey has been very emotional. I felt the most comfortable when these stories took a turn into empowerment, when women were able to actually find their own way out of so much of trauma.

■ How do you plan to carry it forward? Are you in touch with these women?

I came with a background of brand marketing, so it gave me a certain edge to plan my journey in a way where it became a movement. If this was my skill-set, I decided to deploy it in the impact world. Currently, I am working at Global Philanthropic, a London-based firm, and we work in the direction of moving, planning and strategising how resources can be used for the impact sector. I receive messages from women every day. The girls that I met in schools were probably in class 4 or 5 and today, they are in class 10 and 12. I am in touch with them.

■ You have had the time to process your effort and the impact. How has it shaped you?

I think it's still shaping me into what I want to do and who I want to be. I have been able to validate that there are the right tools to make it happen. Say, for example, we were very much into financial literacy, independence and digital literacy for women when we were working. This can help women come out of the vicious cycle of abuse and violence. To be honest, now that I've worked in the impact field, I feel gender is the most under-resourced as a cause. People don't invest in this because they feel it's too difficult to attain and that is why they support other causes than support women and gender issues.

■ Besides your parents, the documentary shows how your husband has been a part of your journey.

My husband was the first person to say yes. It's rare and I completely understand my privilege and deeply appreciate it as well. My husband was super supportive. Every time he joined me during the walk, I would make sure that he had that opportunity to speak to the girls and women and the elders of the villages. I would make it a point to share with them that I am married. And then follow-up questions were like — How did I take

this step? What is my husband's reaction? How is he supporting me?

■ The documentary starts with the scene where you intervene in a domestic violence case. Does direct intervention help curbing it?

Direct intervention breaks the cycle in every which way. Having that opportunity to actually pull away from and reset can sometimes absolutely curb violence. So yes! Intervene. Please intervene because it does break it. There is huge merit in campaigns like 'Ghanti Bajao' and 'Darwaza Khadkao' because it can escalate very quickly in that mindset. Sometimes women end up losing lives, are burnt alive or are hacked to death, so what would you rather do? I would always intervene.

■ What is your take on the documentary *'To Kill a Tiger'*?

It's a beautiful documentary, again of a girl who endured something horrific and then a person who stood behind her, an unusual character in our Indian society, the father who took this fight to the finish line. I went into a deep reflection mode when I watched it. This is what we have noticed on the road and it is absolutely true to account on factors like how it is a very uphill battle. I celebrate that documentary so much.

■ Any subject that you wish to work on?

I have 1,000 new messages each day in my inbox to respond to. I find myself in that space of having so many voices coming towards me for support, cheerleading, encouragement, and of joining the journey. I am hoping to document in a book a lot of what I saw on the road. Why it probably won't be a documentary is because we only had like a 90-minute window to share with the world what we discovered. I don't want to be restricted. I would like to work with different projects in different ways.

■ You speak about women-related issues on public platforms, but there must have been a first time?

Some people are born orators, but I wasn't. In fact, my sister Apoorva was. My dad also speaks really well. So, there was influence. My very dear friend who actually played a big role in my speaking journey is Deepak Ramola. He specialises in life skills education and teaches at MIT. I knew that when I am with the women on the road, I have two hours to actually make an impact. Today, I am a little different in my confidence levels.

On Mother's Day, and every day

COL HP SINGH

I CAN'T forget that ear twisting I got from mom. I had taken a 10 paise coin from her purse to buy a *kulfi* without permission. Stealing is a bad habit was a lesson learnt, the harder way at that tender age of five. Her supervision and concern for me hasn't abated even after half a century of my existence. As the saying goes, life doesn't come with a manual, but it does come with a mother.

Born in a middle class family in the mofussil town of Nabha, she disregarded the patriarchal societal diktats that discouraged girls from various outdoor activities. Be it playing hockey for college or attending NCC camps or pursuing her passion for music, she didn't let gender hamper her dreams. Later, she chose to teach instrumental music as a profession, something that wasn't common among girls from the so-called 'good families'.

Finally retiring as a college principal, she was an epitome of women empower-

ment in her times.

Our father being in the Army was mostly away, posted in field areas. The responsibility of bringing up children singlehandedly fell upon her. During my years in boarding school, she would look me up every fortnight, travelling all the way in a bus on Sundays — the only easy day, perhaps, a working woman gets. When both her sons got commissioned, mom got the smartest salute from them. No doubt, a mother can take place of all others, but whose place no one else can take.

On entering teenage, I would get a pestering dose of lectures against drugs and juvenile vices to refrain from. 'I have raised him this far, now I entrust you with the responsibility of grooming him for ethical soldiering' — she wouldn't hesitate even to 'instruct' my first commanding officer, who had been my father's subordinate in the same regiment.

A house proud octogenarian, she still manages her kitchen. On my getting married, she packed a 'working kitchen' for

my bride, with an advice that the 'lady who manages the kitchen, controls the house'. Even today, she is our supplier of pickles, *pinnis*, homegrown mangoes and home-made wine. Before travelling, she never forgets to hand us an artistically packed meal for the journey. Love is invariably the secret ingredient in her cooking.

She taught me the concept of God and that faith has always kept me anchored. A silent prayer of gratitude is better than a prayer of request, is what I learnt from her. Whenever the sea of life got rough, and for some reason I found God missing, I looked upon my mother to help me steer the right course.

Now, in the evening of her life, we don't have much time left under her protective wings. I dread the deafening silence that will follow once she returns to her maker. To the world, she is our mother, but to her family, she is the world.

I feel blessed that she has held my hand for such a long time, a privilege that has been denied to many.

Long court vacation goes against consumer interest

CONSUMER RIGHTS
PUSHPA GIRIMAJI

I HAVE nothing against lawyers per se, but I certainly have strong reservations about their presence in consumer courts, because it militates against the very principle on which consumer protection jurisprudence and the grievance redress mechanism are built. They have not only slowed down the adjudication process in the consumer tribunals through repeated adjournments, but have also brought all the trappings of the civil court, making it difficult for consumers to fight their cases without lawyers.

Now they want the apex consumer court, the National Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission, to have long summer and winter vacations like the Supreme Court and the High Courts and have sought the intervention of the Delhi High Court to ensure that. If you look at the Consumer Protection (Consumer Commission Proce-

dures) Regulations, first notified in 1987 (under the Consumer Protection Act of 1986), later revised in 2005 and notified again in 2020 under the new Consumer Protection Act, 2019, none of them provide for winter and summer vacations. The Regulations mandate normal working hours on all working days of the Central government in case of the National Commission and all working days of the state government in case of state consumer disputes redressal commissions and the district consumer disputes redressal commissions. So, declaring summer and winter vacations clearly violates the law.

Yet, in a writ petition filed before the Delhi High Court, the All India Bar Association of the National Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission has sought directions from the High Court to the Union government as well as the National Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission to restore the summer vacation in the month of June and winter vacation in the last week of December in the calendar of the Commission, in consonance with the calendars of the Supreme Court and the High Court and other tribunals and commissions working under different ministries.

It is truly ironic that the lawyers, who are supposed to uphold the law, are seeking directions that go against the law!

Unfortunately, the consumer commissions at the national, state and the district levels did violate the Regulations of 1987 and 2005 and enjoyed summer, winter and even Dasehra vacations. In fact, a look at the National Commission's calendar shows the declaration of summer and winter vacations till the year 2020. The calendar, however, changes from 2021 when the National Commission decided to abide by the Regulation notified in July 2020 and put a stop to those vaca-

Consumer Protection Act mandates that cases be decided as expeditiously as possible. It is ironic that lawyers are seeking directions that go against the law

tions and asked the state commissions and the district commissions to follow suit. Initially, some of the states were reluctant to comply, forcing the consumer affairs ministry in May 2022 to write to the chief secretaries of the states and the state commissions, urging them to comply with the Regulations in the interest of timely disposal of cases.

The effect of this, along with facilities like e-filing and videoconferencing, can be seen in the fact that the consumer commissions are recording for the first time a new, highly positive trend — the number of cases resolved in a year is more than the number of cases filed in that year. In 2023, for example, as against 1.26 lakh complaints filed, the number of cases disposed of was 1.36 lakh. The record of the National Commission vis-à-vis the disposal rate was even more remarkable. Consequently, there is a slow decline in the number of pending cases before these commissions in the last few years. From 5,60,700 in 2021, the number of pending cases came down to 5,43,359 in 2023.

While consumers are upbeat about this, it is unfortunate that the lawyers are seeking an interim order from the Delhi High Court directing the National Commission not to list any cases in the months of June and the last week of December. In other

words, the lawyers now want a reversal of the encouraging developments of the last few years, just to suit their convenience.

With its promise of simple and speedy consumer justice, the Consumer Protection Act mandates that cases be decided as expeditiously as possible and within three months. The law also says that no adjournment shall ordinarily be given. But, unfortunately, adjournments have been commonplace, thanks to lawyers.

Studies on the working of the consumer courts, by the Indian Institute of Public Administration, have consistently underscored this. Pointing to frequent postponement of the hearings as the biggest impediment to speedy justice before the consumer courts, its report of 2020 said that in 71.8 per cent of the cases filed before the district commissions, adjournments, often given for frivolous reasons, delayed the proceedings. In 25.6 per cent of the cases, such adjournments exceeded seven!

The study, which analysed the procedural delay in the disposal of consumer complaints, also blamed lawyers for introducing unnecessary technicalities in the proceedings. Now, their writ petition, seeking to restore the long vacations of the apex consumer court, is certainly not in the interest of consumers or consumer justice.