



lounge

SATURDAY, MAY 18 2024

SOUTH INDIA'S WEB WOES

The web series landscape on OTT platforms is still at a nascent stage in Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and Kannada. Why have streaming shows in south Indian languages not tasted the same success as their Hindi language counterparts?

SEE PAGE 11



SIEMENS GAMESA'S INDIA WIND BIZ PUT UP FOR SALE | PAGE 16



THE ALPHA INFLUENCERS

'KIDFLUENCERS' OR TEEN AND TWEEN CONTENT CREATORS ARE GAINING A LOYAL SOCIAL MEDIA FOLLOWING FOR THEIR VIDEOS ON EVERYTHING FROM FASHION AND MAKE-UP TO BOOKS AND SCIENCE



FIRST
What tiger moms can teach us about being human

TASTE
Beets are having a gourmet moment

VANTAGE
Training children to be mindful content creators

CULTURE
How cinephiles bend the rules

A NOTE FROM
THE EDITOR

SHALINI UMACHANDRAN

Baby influencers
with big ideas

PRADEEP GAUR

The middle of May was the halfway point of the summer holidays as a child, when trips to the local library and video rental store increased as the days seemed to stretch longer and we needed more books and films to fill the hours. For “kidfluencers”, or tween and teen influencers, though, slow lazy summer afternoons are unimaginable. These are children who work hard on their social media presence, creating short videos on make-up, fashion, books, films and science for a large and demanding online following.

While Pooja Singh meets the “baby influencers” gaining a following for their beauty and fashion reels, Avantika Bhuyan takes a look at the workshops aimed at preteens wanting to improve their social media presence. She also talks to doctors and counsellors about the mental health toolkit that both child influencers and their parents may need. The parents claim to control these social media pages and though they as well as their children sound like they have worked out the delicate balance between fun and money, fame and stress, it's hard not to consider the long-term impact on the mental well-being of children who are, essentially, growing up to likes and shares. The child influencers' point of view may be different, but their audience and their aim is the same as any other influencer—adults who have the power to make them go viral. And yet, in a generation that was born into social media, it's equally hard to say they should not be influencers or content creators until they're old enough to vote. We have three stories that delve into this dilemma that Gen Alpha and their parents face.

Another good read this week is film writer Aditya Shrikrishna's story on the web series landscape in Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and Kannada on OTT platforms, which has not taken off the way content in Hindi has. Complement it with Uday Bhatia's column about the difficulty of finding the best of world cinema in India. And as always, there's a range of reading to do—from whether you should switch to smart locks for your doors, to beetroot's new place on the gourmet's table, to books and shows to put on your list.

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NEW ON SCREENS

A third season of 'Bridgerton', Man Ray's beguiling short films, and other titles to watch this week



BRIDGERTON

The popular Regency series on Netflix returns for a third season. This time the focus is on Penelope (series standout Nicola Coughlan), who has decided to take a husband, only for her longtime crush Colin (Luke Newton) to return and complicate matters. This season is based on *Romancing Mister Bridgerton*, the fourth book in the series by Julia Quinn. (Netflix)



POWER

This documentary about policing in the US tracks the institution from the 1700s to the present day, examining its political support, funding and biases. Directed by Yance Ford, who, with his 2018 *Strong Island*, became the first openly transgender man to be nominated for any Academy Award. (Netflix)

IF

A young girl, Bea (Cailey Fleming), suddenly gains the power to see people's imaginary friends (IFs). She teams up with Cal (Ryan Reynolds), who also sees IFs, to reunite the friends with the children who have outgrown them. This children's film, written and directed by John Krasinski, has a star-studded voice cast that includes Phoebe Waller-Bridge, Steve Carrel, Matt Damon, Brad Pitt, Emily Blunt, George Clooney and Bradley Cooper. (In theatres)



Compiled by Uday Bhatia

RETURN TO REASON

Apart from being a pioneering painter, sculptor and photographer, Man Ray also experimented with avant-garde film. This collection of his short “ciné-poèmes” is a fascinating look at surrealist cinema in its heady early years. (MUBI)

PLAN THE WEEK
AHEAD

COMEDY OF TWINS

The Shri Ram Centre for Performing Arts (SRCPA) Repertory is staging *2 BY 2*, written by Gulzar. An adaptation of William Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors*, the play follows the adventures of two sets of identical twins with identical names, Ashok and Bahadur. The adaptation has been successfully interpreted many times in theatre and cinema, such as the Sanjeev Kumar-Deven Verma starrer *Angoor*. This particular version of the play has been designed and directed by Salim Arif. Actors from the SRCPA effortlessly portray key characters such as the jeweller, police inspector and the twins to create a perfect scene of chaos. At *Shri Ram Centre Auditorium, New Delhi, on 18 and 19 May, 7pm onwards*.



URBANSCAPES

Nature Morte is presenting an exhibition, *Parallel Cities 2*, featuring artists such as Stefano Arienti, Alice Cattaneo, Mayank Austen Soofi, Martand Khosla, Dayanita Singh, and more. Curated by designer Andrea Anastasio, who lives between India and Italy, the show looks at the intersections between urban life, personal narratives and the human condition. “The selected works offer a glimpse into parallel dimensions of existence, inviting audiences to witness the myriad stories and identities that coalesce within the intricate tapestry of our cities, whether real or imagined,” states the exhibition note. At *Nature Morte, Dhanraj Mahal, Mumbai, till 6 July, Monday to Sunday, 11am to 7pm*. —Compiled by Avantika Bhuyan

LOUNGE
ONLINE

YOUR
FAVOURITE
WEEKEND READ
NOW THROUGH
THE WEEK

The best stories from
[livemint.com/mint-lounge](https://www.livemint.com/mint-lounge)
from the week gone by



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LIVE

Drop the ball on
perfectionism

Workplaces hinge on the culture of perfectionism, with those who strive to take on work beyond their defined job roles glorified. Perfectionism stems from a deeply ingrained cultural and societal fear of failure that starts from the school level, but what if this quest is counter-productive? Striving for excellence at the highest level can actually impact creativity and productivity, writes **Gee-tika Sachdev**, after speaking with psychologists as well as working professionals who consider themselves perfectionists. Anxiety, stress, and burnout can be a result, leading to decreased productivity and creativity. It's important for workplaces to foster a culture that values progress over perfection.



BUY

Motorola Edge 50
Pro: an all-rounder

Save for the rare flagship foldable, Motorola's flown under the radar for the past several years, only launching the solid and dependable budget Moto G series phones. With its Edge 30 and Edge 40 series in 2022 and 2023, the brand has clawed back into contention with mature offerings that balance design and features in each price segment, writes **Tushar Kanwar**. The latest, Motorola Edge 50 Pro (₹31,999/₹35,999 for 8/12GB), is a case in point. It ticks many hardware checkboxes with several segment firsts. It is a well-rounded package—solid display, good software and respectable camera setup—with a rather appealing price tag. There's also a defined emphasis on colours, materials and finish.



TRAVEL

Picking the perfect
bag for a vacation

Whether you're going to the hills or the beach, having the right vacation bag is important, one that is stylish and spacious enough to fit in your ID, wallet, keys, sanitiser, sunscreen and other essentials, while being practical. **Manish Mishra** speaks to stylists to find out what kind of bag is best suited to your particular holiday activities. If you're a solo traveller and plan on renting a scooter, hiking or cycling, for instance, a chic and utilitarian backpack is a good option. If you are going to spend an afternoon at the beach and plan to carry snacks, besides book and headphones, a structured bag in canvas or jute is the one to pick to ensure the contents don't get squashed.



PLAY

Neeraj Chopra in
competition mode

It wasn't 90m. It wasn't even over 88.38m, which would have helped him open the all-crucial Olympics year with a win at the Doha Diamond League. But it wasn't going to dampen the mood of Neeraj Chopra. Doha was Chopra's comeback into competition mode—his first international event since the Asian Games in Hangzhou in October 2023. He took some time to warm up to the challenge before his best effort of the day. In the last two competitions, he has broken away from the trend and has finished stronger than he started. Overall, the performance was a timely reminder of the star's quality as he prepares for the upcoming Paris Olympics, where he will defend his title, writes **Deepti Patwardhan**.



Mothers should be allowed to show their teeth



In Hayao Miyazaki's Oscar-winning film, *The Boy and the Heron*, the young protagonist Mahito follows a mysterious Heron (with a set of teeth and a twinkle in his eyes) through a life-changing adventure. Like many other Miyazaki movies, this one too tells complex stories through deceptively simple tropes—a boy, a talking animal, creatures both odd and good-looking. It strikes me that there is a larger metaphor in having an animal carry a message. One, of course, is the visual—it is unexpected to see and hear an animal speak. The other is implicit—the fact is that if we are to take a lesson, we will likely do so from a novel source. Would you listen to the person who you see on the street every day, or from someone who has never spoken before?

If one were to ask ecologists though, animals are always talking. They communicate stories of comfort and appreciation, distress and surprise. And the best stories are those in relation to others. For example, those of mothers and young.

On a searingly hot day in central India, I watched a mother tigress on the forest floor. She was lying with her back to us. Her body was like a broad log, lined with stripes. Her ears twitched occasionally, the black spots on them looking like moving eyes. Near her, a sambar kill spilled like a bloody set of flowers rushing through the ground, and one of her cubs tugged the skin on it. It was too young to tear the skin, but it kept trying; a game of strength-building and resistance. Another cub prowled nearby, paws too big for its body, steps and face set in determination as it moved around. I was looking at something akin to a domestic scene: the tigress had made the kill, she'd had her fill, and was now in much-needed repose. Her cubs had eaten too, and were presently clattering the metaphorical spoons in the cupboard. As I watched, the second cub came up to its



mother, its belly round like a half-moon, eyes full of mischief. It went straight for its mother's neck and head: climbing up, it started tugging her efficient ears. The tigress didn't open her eyes. A feeling of forbearance stretched around her—the look of a tolerating mother who is completely done with the day. The cub continued tugging, tiny teeth latched like hooks on to her skin. It would tug, then pause, look at its mother with rounded eyes, and then tug again. I watched, fascinated. She opened her mouth in a snarl. Her patience with her cub was begin to fray. It was still rather homely looking, when the call of a langur broke the air. In a snap, the tigress was up. Faster than my eyes could follow, she leapt towards something on the left. It seemed like everything scattered away from her, and her cubs ducked down. If I could describe the sudden movement as a sound, it would be the sharp sizzle of mustard seeds hitting hot oil.

After moving to the left, the tigress looked at something, her neck like an arrow. She was completely still—the muscular, deliberate stillness that conceals great strength. We followed her gaze. What hadn't been evident to us was clear to her: she was looking at a leopard who had come too close to her family. As we watched, he rapidly loped away. He wasn't going to take on an adult tigress. In the matter of a few seconds, the tigress had transformed from a patient playmate to a whip-smart soldier. She was perhaps no longer fully familiar to her cubs, and just a tad frightening—a mother with a wicked set of teeth. Patient, protective, and not always cuddly.

We often award human-like qualities to animals, but it's also rewarding to think about the opposite—what animal relationships can teach us about being human. For instance, the tigress is a reminder that our relationship with mothers is never just vanilla white

The tigress is a reminder that our relationship with mothers is never just vanilla white goodness.



goodness. Sometimes, that vanilla has a sting of mustard.

For one, our mothers know everything about us, including the versions of us we have left behind. When my mother and I speak, she tends to bring up something I did when I was eleven or eight, or twenty-one, laughing about something that now makes my toes curl. She doesn't just know some things, she knows all things, except the fact that I'm no longer eight, and that internally I have permitted myself to change. Conversations with mothers are rarely pure comfort: there's usually a tail of frustration in there. That's because like the familiar-yet-fierce tigress, our relationship with our mother is often loving but also endlessly complex.

Society tends to put mothers on pedestals, edifying them as monuments that keep giving; nature teaches us instead to embrace complexity.

On another day, I watched a purple sunbird bring insects to feed her chick. She was tiny, her wings a blur. It was nearly impossible to believe that something so small could have so much energy. Just then, a loud sound came from somewhere in the city, and she dropped the food in shock. She whizzed off into the bushes, returning after a few minutes with a new morsel. She was exhausted, but doing her best. She was also devoted, but that's not the virtue I want to remember her by. Instead, I'd like to consider her as an individual too: an expert bug hunter, learning and implementing a skill that helped her survive.

If I were to take Miyazaki-style lesson of learning from animal teachers, it would be this: our mothers are both comforting and unfamiliar. And they belong to us, but also to themselves. It is not a bad thing to take off mantles of glowing goodness, and permit them to show their teeth.

In *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis*, Amitav Ghosh writes on the need to tell stories that are beyond the human: "The great burden that now rests upon writers, artists, filmmakers, and everyone else who is involved in the telling of stories: to us falls the task of imaginatively restoring agency and voice to nonhumans." Calls by Ghosh and many other writers displace the supremacy of the human. They suggest that there is a wealth of culture in the natural world.

As a final lesson from animal teachers, one observes that animals live in the now. Thus, admonishments are dispatched with a lack of sanctimony. Anger is demonstrated, and then forgotten. The only high grounds are literal, not moral. We've just "celebrated" Mother's Day, with a surfeit of sales, sappy forwards, and promises that likely won't be kept. But I'd like to keep it real, even if I permit myself some sap. I'll remember the tigress the next time I speak to my mother—a lesson from the forest to the home.

Neha Sinha is a conservation biologist and author of Wild And Wilful: Tales Of 15 Iconic Indian Species. Views expressed are personal.

Society tends to put mothers on pedestals, edifying them as monuments that keep on giving; nature teaches us instead to embrace complexity

Medium Talk

More than small talk

First aid for your pets

WIZARD OF PAWS

Knowing the basics of first aid is important to provide crucial support till professional help can be sought

Nameeta Nadkarni

During an emergency for your pet, it's wise to promptly contact your veterinarian and make your way to the nearest clinic. Nevertheless, knowing the fundamentals of first aid is important for a pet parent to provide crucial assistance while professional help is en route.

It is essential to keep a first aid kit at home, which includes your veterinarian's contact details as well as essentials such as a thermometer, bandages, cotton, adhesive tapes, gauze and gloves, apart from antiseptic solutions such as Betadine and antibiotic ointments for wound care. Don't forget to include pet-specific anti-allergy medication. You can consider including hydrogen peroxide to induce vomiting in the pet if necessary, and a muzzle suitable for your dog to prevent biting in stressful situations. Being prepared with a well-stocked first aid kit can make all the difference in effectively managing emergencies.

One of the most common emergencies is an increase in the pet's body temperature. Dogs and cats typically have a normal body temperature range of 100.5 to 102.5 degrees Fahrenheit. If the temperature exceeds 103 degrees Fahrenheit, it may indicate a fever. To determine if your pet has a fever, gently introduce the thermometer into your pet's rectum for an accurate reading. A high-grade fever, above 104.5 degrees Fahrenheit, requires immediate attention.

Use a wet towel to help lower their body temperature. Consult with your veterinarian to determine if it's appropriate to administer paracetamol to your dog. However, it's crucial to note that paracetamol is toxic to cats and can be fatal. For minor cuts and bruises, disinfect



A well-stocked first aid kit can make a difference during an emergency. ISTOCKPHOTO

the wound with diluted Betadine solution. If there is bleeding, apply firm pressure to the area to stop it. Styptic powders can be applied to help with clotting and stop bleeding. After cleaning and applying pressure, bandage the wound to reduce further bleeding and protect it while you take your pet to the veterinarian. For nosebleeds, hold an ice pack on the snout to help constrict blood vessels until you can seek professional care.

In the case of dog bite wounds, immediately clean the area with Betadine. Dog bites can cause injuries that extend deeper than what is visible on the surface. So, even if the wound appears minor, visit a veterinarian to assess for any internal injuries.

Allergies can manifest in various ways in pets such as severe itching, redness of the skin or in more severe cases, facial swelling. If you notice facial swelling in your pet, immediately consult a veterinarian as this can progress to difficulty in breathing, which is life-threatening.

Seizures or fainting episodes in pets also require immediate veterinary attention. During a seizure, it's essential to minimise all stimuli around your pet. Avoid constantly touching, speaking loudly or shouting as this can exacerbate

the situation. Allow the seizure to pass naturally. Once the seizure has ended, carefully move your pet and transport them to the veterinary clinic.

If your pet has experienced a fall and is unable to get up, minimise their movement. Use a blanket to gently lift and support them to help prevent further injury during transportation to a clinic. Fractures can be extremely painful and may cause the pet to lash out or bite. Consider using a muzzle.

The ingestion of foreign objects and toxic substances is a common concern for pet owners. While hydrogen peroxide can be used to induce vomiting in some cases of ingestion, it's crucial to proceed with caution. In cats, hydrogen peroxide can be particularly irritating to the oesophagus and is not recommended. Additionally, in dogs that have ingested caustic substances like batteries, inducing vomiting may not be the best course of action. Similarly, when a pet has ingested a sharp object, inducing vomiting can pose a risk of further injury. Therefore, it's essential to use hydrogen peroxide only after consulting a veterinarian.

Nameeta Nadkarni is a veterinary soft tissue surgeon and pet blogger from Mumbai.



Ornithologist Devvrat Singh Mori; and the Amur Falcon Watch took place from 26-28 April in Gujarat.



Spotting the Amur falcon

The Amur Falcon Watch was the first systematic count of the birds entering India during their reverse migration

Vrushal Pendharkar

On the morning of 26 April, Manisha Rajput and four volunteers reached Nait village in Gujarat, walking to a field on the edge of a coastal cliff. They lay on beds placed there, and stared at the sky. As the day warmed, Rajput spotted three fast-moving objects. These were Amur falcons entering the Indian airspace after an overnight flight crossing the Indian Ocean from Somalia. Had she not been looking for them, Rajput would not have spotted the superfast birds.

Rajput was among 30 other bird-watchers at the first Amur Falcon Watch (26-28 April), a citizen science event organised by the Bird Conservation Society with support from the Gujarat forest department to count the number of Amurs passing over the Saurashtra coast. Teams of two or four participants took to their beds close to the sea in 13 locations spread over 100km in Amreli and Bhavnagar districts in Gujarat. "It was a coordinated activity, quite

historical," says Suresh Kumar, who is a scientist at the Wildlife Institute of India, Dehradun, and has been studying the falcon's migration since 2016. "Till now this systematic count of Amur falcons passing through has not been done anywhere else."

Every year Amur falcons undertake one of the longest bird migrations, a mammoth journey of over 20,000km. Beginning their journey around September in the Russian far-east, they come down to the Indian subcontinent through East Asia, fly over the Bay of Bengal before cutting through the Deccan region and crossing the Indian Ocean to enter East Africa and fly down to South Africa, summering in the southern hemisphere before flying back on a near parallel route. On their way back, the Amurs go up to the Horn of Africa, from where they skirt the Arabian peninsula, and fly past Pakistan before cutting into Gujarat and heading straight to Madhya Pradesh, over the Gangetic plains to the North-East again and upwards. They make an elliptical migration.

From the 15 falcons Kumar had tagged with satellite transmitters between 2016-18, it became apparent that the Amurs passed through Gujarat on their return migration. The Bird Conservation Society has been recording the Amurs' flight points and their numbers for the past three years. "This told us that the maximum numbers of these birds fly by

between 15 April and 15 May each year in this area," explains Devvrat Singh Mori, ornithologist at Ahmedabad University and executive member of the society.

The incredible aspect of the Amurs' migration is the oceanic crossings they undertake. Kumar believes they use the wind's assistance. During the Indian summer, it is the westerly currents that assists the birds. "The Amurs are smart enough to track these systems and are tailing them to glide into India," says Kumar. "Our tracking data supports this theory." Mori seconds this. He thinks they are less energetic on their return journey and make use of the winds to ease their effort. "When the wind speed is more, the falcon numbers increase in that direction," he says. Most of the birds the participants spotted were in flight. Only a few landed in trees or in intertidal areas where the tide was low.

To avoid a repeat recording of the same birds as far as possible, all 13 teams were asked to simultaneously observe the sky for the first 20 minutes of every hour between 10am and 6pm. This also increased the detection rates of the birds. In total, 150 birds were seen.

The Amurs pass through 23 countries. "This is really amazing as these birds connect lots of people and cultures," says Viral Joshi, programme coordinator of the event.

Vrushal Pendharkar is a Mumbai-based environment journalist.

Source

A compendium of stylish objects for some chic travelling

SNUG BUG
Gucci Appliquéd Straight-leg Track Pants
Baby pink cotton-jersey track pants featuring the signature "GG" appliqué. Available on net-a-porter.com; ₹85,406.

WHEEL AWAY
Hermès Pre-Owned R.M.S Trolley Suitcase
Golden brown leather suitcase featuring flat top and telescopic handles and 4 wheels. Available on farfetch.com; ₹52,27,302.



GET STRAPPIN'
Valentino Garavani Rockstud Leather Thong Sandals
Azure-hued leather sandals with adjustable straps decked with platinum finish studs. Available on mytheresa.com; ₹86,011.

DON DAPPER
Sicilian Placement Print Silk Shirt
Exude dapper Italian vibes in this silk shirt with an unconventional print from Shantanu & Nikhil's latest Sicilia collection. Available on shantanunikhil.com; ₹18,500.



FRUIT POP
Blue Stripe Cotton Shorts With Fruit Motifs Embroidery
Regular fit men's blue-striped shorts with slant pockets. Available on geneslecoanethemant.com; ₹4,499.



POWER PASS
Allover Crystal Passport Holder
Judith Leiber Couture passport holder with deep-blue crystals. Available on judithleiber.com; ₹49,681.



Compiled by Mahalakshmi Prabhakaran

LOUNGE LOVES

Things to watch, read, hear, do—and other curated experiences from the team



HOPPING ON MANGO
Summer is the perfect time to gorge on mangoes. The season is also ripe for trying new mango-inspired beers. Bira 91's Superfresh White wheat beer—which is a bit high on the citrusy side—recently introduced a fresh take on mangoes and berries. The Superfresh White Mango (ABV of 4.7%), which I tried recently, doesn't exactly shout mango but does enough to leave you with the right flavours. It's lighter in colour than the mango lassi ale that Bira introduced in 2022. The beer is low on bitterness, which might work with some drinkers. If you want to look beyond Bira, then the New England IPA from Effingut and Brewdog's Hazy Jane (also an IPA) are the closest I have come to experiencing my favourite fruit in other beers that are available in the National Capital Region.

—Nitin Sreedhar



A CLEAN ALTERNATIVE
It has always been deodorant sprays for me unless I am travelling, when I switch to deo sticks, and so, I never got the idea of a deodorant cream. I wasn't really sure of how a cream could have you smelling nice for long. Well, it just took a dab of the Bare Bar deodorant I was gifted recently to make me an instant convert. Bare Bar's deodorant cream is clay-based and contains shea butter, mango butter and coconut oil, which lend it the consistency of a body butter. It's easy to massage on to your underarm and lasts at least for eight hours. I use the Neroli deodorant whose aroma is citrusy and herby, and perfect for this season. If you are someone who's finicky about what you put on your skin, this one's a lovely alternative to a stick or a spray.

—Mahalakshmi Prabhakaran

THE MAGIC OF MDOU MOCTAR
M dou Moctar's new album is a perfect storm. On his previous five albums, the singer-songwriter from Niger has offered a sinuous, melodic and driving brand of guitar rock. You can feel the gears shift on *Funeral for Justice*, which is audibly angrier. Hopefully, translations of Moctar's lyrics (in Tamasheq) will show up at some point, but even without them, the urgency and agitation of *Sousoume Tamacheq* and *Oh France* are clear. Moctar reworks the Voodoo Chile-esque blues jam *Imouhar* from *Niger EP Vol. 1* into a blistering five-minute track. But the most seductive track might be *Takoba*. Moctar sings in a mesmerising low hiss, with out-of-focus backing vocals adding to the sense of dreamy dislocation. —Uday Bhatia



THE WISDOM OF OLDER WOMEN
I am a fan of Julia Louis-Dreyfus. She played the irreverent character of Elaine Benes in *Seinfeld*, survived breast cancer and now hosts the podcast *Wiser Than Me* that recently won a Webby. In every episode she (with her impeccable diction) interviews women who are older than her to imbibe their wisdom. Louis-Dreyfus is 62 and the women she interviews are typically in their 70s and 80s. I started with the episode of one of my favourite writers Anne Lamott, 70. She talks about staying sober, getting married for the first time at 65 and finding support through an alcoholics anonymous group. At the end of the episode, Louis-Dreyfus has a segment with her mother, 90, to sum up the conversation with her guests. Each episode runs a gamut of emotions—I couldn't have asked for a better companion for my daily walks.

—Jahnabee Borah



STREAM OF STORIES
RAJA SEN

The mothers of invention



A still from the French comedy 'Fiasco'.

In Ram Gopal Varma's inimitably candid memoir *Guns & Thighs*, the filmmaker describes in detail how he manipulated his way to his directorial debut. As a lowly fifth assistant director, not only did Varma lie to the film's eventual star, Nagarjuna, and the producers, but he deliberately botched a narration to create a situation where taking on him as director felt like the only possible option. "I coned and lied to everybody concerned," Varma writes, "but the one and only truth was that I genuinely believed that *Shiva* would be a far superior film."

Directing a film is a feat. A movie crew is a village—with all kinds of inhabitants—and somehow a director must marshal them in order that they can bring alive a vision that, at first, only the director can see. Direction is not only artistry, like writing or painting, but an administrative juggle involving manpower, money, logistics and, last but not the least, incredibly insecure creative folk. The artist must also captain the ship. Many a lie must be told, many an ego must be massaged. The filmmaking waters, you see, are always rocky. Netflix's new French comedy *Fiasco* is about a shipwreck. Shown as behind-the-scenes footage of a film set where everything goes to hell, the series—absurdly accurately—captures both the helpless slapstick of the filmmaking juggle as well as the never-say-die desperation of a director to tell a story, against astronomical odds. Every lie told on the set is in service of a storyteller's vision, and most of them in *Fiasco* are told by the hapless Raphaël Valande, a first-time filmmaker armed with a beautiful script... and not much else.

A director must have charisma, Raphaël is told, and—as a young man who can barely say "action" loud enough—he flounders from the start, unable to take charge or to assert himself. It doesn't help that everything feels personal to him. The film is about Raphaël's own grandmother, a fighter in the French Resistance. He's nursing a lifelong crush on his leading lady, Ingrid (a lovely Leslie Medina). He also has distrustful producers, an on-set chef with no sense of taste, and a friend, Tom, angling for the part of a viking. The stage is set for chaos, but, like in filmmaking, more goes wrong than you'd expect.

Besides the on-set chaos, *Fiasco* doubles up as a vague whodunnit because there is a saboteur behind the scenes. Someone is out to get Raphaël's film, trashing his set, blackmailing the producers, and leaking videos online. Not only does the director frequently put his foot in his mouth, but his gaffes are out there for the world to see. Raphaël is a nice enough guy who just wants to tell an anecdote about Christian Bale (which isn't really an anecdote) but every single one of his decisions turns out to be a disaster.

Raphaël is played by Pierre Niney, who has also co-written and co-created the show with Igor Gotesman. Niney, who excelled in the 2014 biopic *Yves Saint Laurent* as the titular icon, is wonderful as the gobsmeared director who keeps tripping himself up. This is cringe-comedy bordering on cruelty, and while Raphaël is unquestionably a fool, Niney makes sure we see the incurability of this romantic. I'm reminded of the impassioned stupidity of Thomas Middleditch in the great HBO comedy, *Silicon Valley* (JioCinema). Direction is a quixotic task, yet, as Raphaël chases cinematic windmills, we can see the stars in his eyes.

The director is surrounded by great characters (and suspects), including the film's over-the-hill producer Jean-Marc Torrossian (Pascal Demolon), overbearing leading man Pierre Jacomet (superstar Vincent Cassel) and, perhaps most amusingly, Raphaël's childhood friend Tom who gradually takes on a different character. Played by *Call My Agent's* François Civil, Tom is a buffoon who, unable to actually perform on set, takes method acting to disastrous extremes, justifying every action as something his alter ego wants to do.

Raphaël's film about the Resistance fighter is spread across several time-lines, featuring Vikings, cavemen and the Enlightenment and—at one particularly cash-strapped moment—there is product placement in a scene set inside a concentration camp. The crew's travails are reminiscent of Eleanor Coppola's *Hearts of Darkness*, a documentary about the nightmarish rigours her husband Francis Ford Coppola faced when making the classic *Apocalypse Now*. Behind the laughter, *Fiasco* has true affection for the firefighting behind filmmaking.

When Raphaël bares himself to Ingrid, finally saying something sincere, she smiles back at him. It is a genuine moment. "Not bad," she says. "Not bad, right?" he asks, smiling. "Maybe we could put it in the film." There he goes again, rewriting while he still can. The thrill of filmmaking is that while everything can indeed get ruined, everything can also—just as suddenly—be righted. Inspiration can strike just as hard as misfortune.

We call movies magic because those who made them don't know how on earth they did it. It's anything but science. The great films about filmmaking madness—like François Truffaut's *Day for Night* or David Mamet's *State and Main*—give us a sense of the unpredictable dance behind the scenes. *Fiasco* is a fun ride that makes me want to revisit those masterworks. It is a series reminding us to share in both credit and blame. Despite what the end titles tell you, a film is not made by one person.

Raja Sen is a screenwriter and critic. He has co-written *Chup*, a film about killing critics, and is now creating an absurd comedy series. He posts @rajasen.

STREAMING TIP OF THE WEEK

Firefighting on a set isn't just a director's job. The exquisite French series *Call My Agent* (Netflix) features a mix of dedicated and immensely stressed-out agents doing everything they can to pacify, placate and persuade their celebrity clients. A film crew is bigger than you know.

The mean streets are no happy home for dogs

There are 60-80 million street dogs in India, and more than 90% have to be sterilised in a very short time to see a reduction in their population over the next 10-15 years



CULT FRICTION
SANDIP ROY

Cricket is finally evoking American passions. That's Cricket, the dog, not cricket the game. In her recently released memoir *No Going Back: The Truth of What's Wrong with Politics*, South Dakota's Republican governor Kristi Noem wrote about shooting Cricket, a 14-month old puppy she deemed "untrainable". Cricket, she complained had disrupted a pheasant hunt, killed the neighbour's chickens and tried to bite her. "I hated that dog," writes Noem. So she led her to a gravel pit and killed her. And while she was at it, she decided to put down a "nasty and mean" goat as well, name unknown. Noem, who hopes to be on the shortlist for Donald Trump's vice-presidential picks, thought the anecdote would burnish her reputation as a practical, no-nonsense politician who doesn't shy away from tough choices. Instead she's been facing bipartisan backlash. American politicians can afford to be ultra tough on deaths in Gaza, campus protesters, Ukraine, Black Lives Matter. But puppies are a different ballgame. It's not about putting an animal down. It's bragging about it. That's just not cricket. Everyone from right-wing media outlets to Walt Disney's grand-niece, the film-maker Abigail Disney, is lambasting her. Noem should have known better. Republican senator Mitt Romney's presidential campaign in 2012 was rocked when he recounted what he thought was a funny family story about tying his Irish setter (in its kennel) to the roof of the car on a 12-hour trip in 1983. Now even Romney is trolling Noem. "I didn't eat my dog. I didn't shoot my

dog. I loved my dog, and my dog loved me," said Romney, according to *HuffPost*. Given the bizarre state of American politics, no one knows whether Noem shot herself in the foot or actually improved her chances to make it to Trump's vice-presidential shortlist. But dogs evoke strong passions the world over. As a famous politician closer home memorably said that one feels bad when a puppy gets run over. Compassion for a puppy killed in an accident was held up as the lowest common denominator of our humanity. But nothing, not even Bharatiya Janata Party-Congress mud fights, get WhatsApp groups as worked up in India as a post about the country's dog problem. One side shares every news story about packs of stray dogs attacking children. The other side calls them heartless puppy-killers. The ones worst off are those who love dogs but also maintain that India's stray dog population is out of control and needs some hard choices. They are stuck between a dog and a hard place. Ecologist Abi T. Vanak told me earlier this year that too many people go around feeding dogs in the name of compassion but take zero responsibility for their well-being. "Real compassion would involve forcing the state to take more responsibility and building good quality shelters. And if you don't think you can see dogs in shelters, please adopt them." He feels all the well-wishers doggedly feeding street dogs compound the problem. "The more dogs we feed, the more dogs there are on the street." Vanak is a dog lover. He has a rescued dog at home. And he knows his views will raise the hackles of many dog lovers. There are by some estimates 60-80 million street dogs in India right now. And sterilisation cannot keep up with the booming dog population because we just do not sterilise enough dogs and we do not do it fast enough. More than 90% of the dog population has to be sterilised in a very short time



It is hard to resist the impulse to feed a hungry puppy.

ISTOCKPHOTO

to see a 70% dog population reduction over a 10-15 year period, say Vanak and other experts. India is nowhere close to that. And animal control laws in India have very little teeth. If you have a chronic biter in the neighbourhood that's not rabid, there's very little anyone can do legally. Few will disagree with the likes of Vanak that a dog's life on the streets is no picnic. There is 80% pup mortality within the first year, claims Vanak. The dogs are pelted with stones, maimed in traffic accidents, scrounge for food in garbage dumps. Yet we are hard-wired to go *awww* the moment we see a puppy. I am no exception. The logical part of my brain understands Vanak. When I read about dogs killing the critically endangered Indian bustard, I am aghast. Yet it's hard to resist the impulse to feed

a hungry puppy. Evolution has tied us together as a species. We might think we are doing the dogs a favour by feeding them. But in reality they are nourishing us as well. As a species, we are hungry for the love a dog can provide. "It's not just food they want," filmmaker Jesse Alk, who made a documentary called *Pariah Dog* (2019) about Kolkata's street dogs and their eccentric feeders, told me. "They are deeply lonely. Take the mangiest street dog. Even if you don't have food, if you go up to him and pet him, most of them will melt." Our street in Kolkata has quite a family of dogs. A neighbour takes responsibility for feeding them, sterilising them, taking them to the vet. Every day the neighbour goes to the park to summon them for lunch and dinner and returns like the Pied Piper with the dogs in tow. Chutney at our own house was born

on the street. He was one of four siblings. Three perished within months, under the wheels of cars. Chutney's mother deposited him in our garden for safe-keeping. One day as we were watching television, we heard a knock at the door. When I opened it, we found the little puppy looking at us literally with puppy-dog eyes after pushing at the door. Now he is ensconced in the house. He sulks if the air conditioner is not turned on on warm nights, eats American snacks and yak milk chews after dinner, though his true love is Marie biscuits. He went to my niece's wedding in his customised red brocade doggy "*sherwani*". The problem is we have room for one Chutney in the house but not for a dozen. Their lives on the street remain fraught. Handsome, one of the friendly boisterous dogs on our street, was suspected of contracting rabies. Somehow

the neighbour cornered him and got him confined to a room. All night she was unable to sleep as the dog shredded the plastic chair and tore the sheets. The next day Sanjoy, from the veterinary clinic, showed up. We watched with trepidation as he lassooed the thrashing foaming dog and jabbed him with a needle. "How long will it take?" I asked. "That's just the anaesthetic to calm him down," Sanjoy said. Eventually, Handsome flopped down and was quiet. He seemed almost resigned as he accepted the lethal dose. "When will he die?" Someone asked. "He's gone," said Sanjoy. They dug a grave for Handsome at the back of the house and dragged him there. Covered in bleaching powder, Handsome looked oddly docile—as if talcum-ed after a bath. The animal control men joked about dog ghosts while someone got a few flowers and *bael* (Bengal quince) leaves from the tree outside. "Throw some earth on him," said Sanjoy and we did. Then the hard-bitten cynical man shovelled dirt over him and said something rather lovely. "Poor guy, go in peace. Come back to a better life next time." We lit two candles on his grave before we returned to our own homes. Handsome reminded us yet again that mean streets can be no happy home for tens of thousands of dogs despite our sentimental attachment to them. He was luckier than most that someone watched out for him beyond feeding him scraps. But it was a sad end for a handsome dog. Yet it's not every day a street dog with rabies gets a neighbourhood send off. In these toxic polarised times that's something. *Cult Friction is a fortnightly column on issues we keep rubbing up against.* Sandip Roy is a writer, journalist and radio host. He posts @sandipr

Help 'kidfluencers' care for their mental health

With children of all age groups spending a considerable amount of time online, how does one gauge how much is too much?

Avantika Bhuyan
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Thirteen-year-old M.K. has been watching the online channel, *Ryan's World*, ever since he was 6. Run by Ryan Kaji, 12, and his parents, the channel—with its unboxing of toys, easy science experiments, and daily slice-of-life vlogs—has nearly 36 million subscribers from around the world. M.K. is one of them. As he has matured, the Delhi-based student's likes have shifted from unboxing of giant Easter eggs to DIY experiments. During the covid-19 pandemic, with time at hand, he decided to try content creation as well. Borrowing his mother's phone, he created short videos using the widely available DIY STEM (science, technology, engineering, and maths) kits. Once his parents—both doctors—approved his videos as they were based on educational material, he began to share these with his friends. Buoyed by the appreciation, M.K. wondered if he should start his own channel. Apprehensive about digital safety, his mother suggested a private page on social media, where she could monitor the followers being added. So, in 2022, M.K. started a private page, linked to his mother's account, dedicated to his experiments at home. As his friends as well as his parents' friends praised his content, M.K. hankered to put out more videos. His mother would find him awake late at night looking up experiments to replicate at home. Last year, he started asking for equipment—a DSLR camera, microphone and more—to enhance the quality of his videos. "I had thought of this as a home project—something that kept him constructively busy. However, it was turning out to be a preoccupation, which was distracting him. Some of the equipment he wanted was expensive, and when we refused to buy it, he got irritated," says his mother, R.K., 42, a gynaecologist. The family has spent considerable time in the past six months counselling M.K., while also enrolling him for outdoor activities such as football and swimming. M.K. is not alone in exhibiting signs of irritability that come with spending too much time on online content—be it as passive consumers or as creators. "If I see 10-12 clients in a day, seven to eight are



young digital content creators exhibiting this aggression," says Dr Manoj Kumar Sharma, professor of clinical psychology, SHUT clinic (service for healthy use of technology), NIMHANS, Bengaluru. While this kind of behaviour is exhibited in the case of extreme addiction, parents should keep a lookout for signs of irritation and anger at being denied access to equipment, or the opportunity to update the channel or page started by the child. With children of all age groups spending a considerable amount of time online, how does one gauge how much is too much? The answer to this might vary from child to child. One needs to keep a tab on whether children are getting adequate sleep, are focused on academics and have a healthy social life. "However, there is something known as the cognitive error

of minimisation. Once kids feel that there is minimal impact on their daily lives, they don't foresee the need for a change in their engagement with digital media or with content creation," explains Sharma. Slowly, they start becoming aggressive and demanding. However, since their daily schedule is going well, they don't realise the impact on themselves or on their family members. The solution to this lies in keeping lines of non-judgemental communication open within the family. Parents or caregivers ought to be aware of what content the child is putting up, and at what time. "When the communication is collaborative, it becomes easier for parents to guide kids," says Sharma. Today, one can find workshops on ways to create content while keeping digital safety in mind (see *Schooling kids to be dig-*

ital content creators' on page 10). There are modules on time management and ways to maintain your privacy while experimenting with the digital medium. Khushnaaz Noras, a Mumbai-based consulting psychologist, feels there needs to be mentorship even on mental health for content creators. To the teens who come to her for guidance, she suggests a simple thing: Learn the difference between good content and viral content. "Good content could be something that gets 50 views and 10 likes but ranks high on quality and value. On the other hand, something that goes viral could just be someone staring at a camera, with a famous quote written on top, and it could reach one million people. Likes are not proportionate to quality," she elaborates. Even if one person has benefitted from

A pertinent conversation that families must have with young digital content creators is on exit strategies, even before the child starts putting out content.

what has been uploaded, that is good content. Parents also need to ask themselves if their child being a content creator is an ego booster for them. "Are adults making a big deal out of it by boasting in groups that their kid's video has got thousands of views? Remember, when one video reaches thousands, and the next one only hundreds, your child will feel a low sense of worth. Nine to 10-year-olds don't need this kind of feedback in life," says Noras. "Every child has to understand that not everything has to be displayed on social media, and parents play a huge role in helping understand that." A pertinent conversation which families must have is on exit strategies, even before the child starts putting out content. "We need to assure them that they will be fully supported in the decision to shut down the channel or page, whenever they want," says Noras. Children feel secure in the knowledge there is an exit strategy in place, and in constant reiteration of the fact that the real world is independent of the virtual world. No one will remember you by the likes and views that you get in real life. The harsh reality is that being on digital platforms often means leaving oneself open to cyber bullying and trolling. A poignant case in this context is that of Pranshu, a 16-year-old queer self-taught make-up artist from Ujjain, who lost their life by suicide in November 2023 due to a barrage of hateful homophobic comments. Children can learn about keeping their mental safety intact as they go along even if it means disabling the comments section. In a lot of cases, since the pages and accounts are managed by parents, children never get access to public feedback. Another option is keeping channels and pages private, with their accounts dependent on their parents, who will get constant updates about security breaches, comments and more. "Tell the kids that if the video becomes anything apart from what you are showing—say, you are putting out something related to art—and people, both public and peers, shame you for the equipment that you use, the way you look or the backgrounds that you use, shut comments completely, and shut your mind," suggests Noras. "Don't be shy of blocking, deleting if anyone is making life difficult."

BEETS BEAT MEAT TO GOURMET SEAT

The humble beetroot is being used in fresh, innovative ways to let it shine on fine-dining menus—and it is a surprising hit

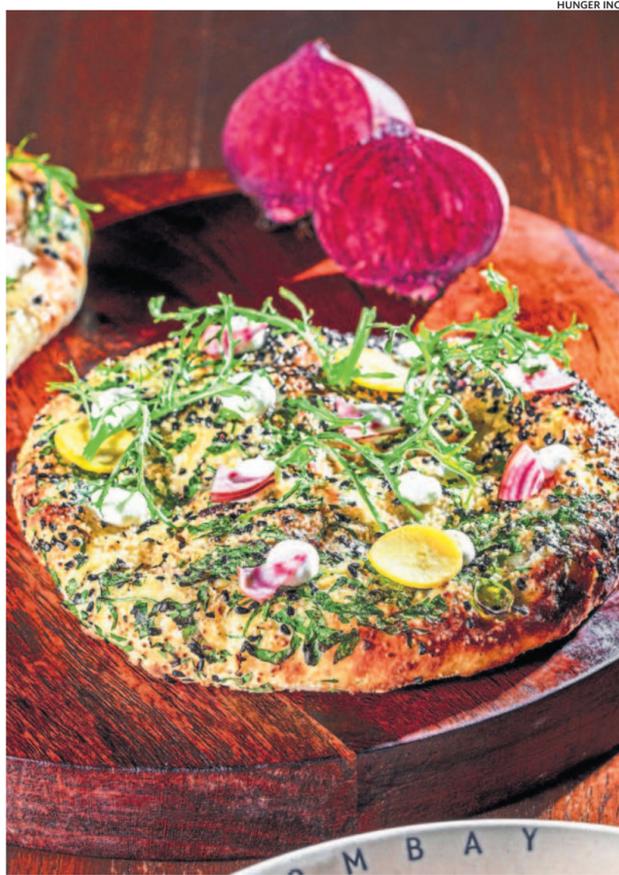
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Dwight Schrute, the irascible assistant regional manager and passionate beet farmer from *The Office*, would have been happy with this development. The butt of jokes for his devotion to beets—remember the line “Beets, Bears, *Battlestar Galactica*” arch nemesis Jim Halpert uses to impersonate him?—Dwight’s 60-acre beet farm was symptomatic of something aggressively uncool. But guess what? Dwight is having the last laugh.

Beetroot, the earthy, deeply unglamorous tuber, is getting a gourmet makeover in kitchens across the world and in India. Chefs are roasting it, pickling it, dehydrating it, making a foam out of it, stuffing it in pasta, using it in cocktails, thin-slicing it into a carpaccio, and even using spherification techniques to create jelly-like globules. It can be found in salads with goat cheese, as a gnocchi, in a *kulcha*, in a tequila cocktail and in a risotto. During the peak of the pandemic, when chef Ritua Dalmia started retailing meal prep boxes under the brand name Diva Casa, one of the most popular dishes was her famous beetroot and goat cheese risotto. Three years down the line, beets, which have never enjoyed wholesale popularity in Indian home kitchens (with notable exceptions like the Tamil beet *poriyal*, Bengali “vegetable chop” and Hyderabad *chukandar gosht*, mutton slow-cooked with beetroot), have made their mark on gourmet menus.

During a recent pop-up at The Conservatory in Bengaluru by Mumbai restaurant Bandra Born, chefs Gresham Fernandes and Manoj Shetty plated around 40 stoneware bowls with their signature “Beets Meat” dish. It had beets cooked multiple ways: dehydrated, chewy and almost meaty bits that reminded several diners of prunes; thin-sliced vinegary beet slivers; and a hunk of roasted beet, all of it resting on fermented cream, topped with apple slices, oxalis leaves, and chilli oil.

“Yes, beetroot has traditionally been underrated. Everyone hates it. That’s why we decided to give it some special treatment, show it some respect,” says Fernandes. Beets are interesting, he says, because



HUNGER INC



NAVU PROJECT

(clockwise, from left) Smoked Beetroot Kulcha; Beet Risotto; and Beets’ Meat.

while they are available through the year, some traits like sugar content and texture keep shifting. Although he mostly works with the regular tuber available at the local market, occasionally his supplier provides varieties like locally grown Italian Chioggia and Candy Cane beets.

“I’ve been working with beets for over 10 years and there’s nothing I haven’t done with it—roasted it, cooked it sou vide, dehydrated it, baked it with butter over 5-6 hours... Dehydrators were not common in India a decade ago, but now you can easily dehydrate raw beetroot, which creates a textural change and gives it a meaty,

chewy texture while the sugar content caramelises,” he adds. To figure out what goes well with beets, Fernandes thought of mushrooms, which have a similar earthiness, and what goes well with them—goat cheese, cream, sour cream—and voila, it worked with beets too.

A few things have come together to elevate beetroot, including a growing inter-

est among chefs in showcasing vegetables on their own and not just in salads or as an alternative to meat dishes. Chef Hussain Shahzad, executive chef at Hunger Inc who heads the kitchens at Mumbai restaurants The Bombay Canteen, O Pedro, and Papas, gives the example of making a mushroom curry because you have a chicken curry on the menu.

Alongside, chefs are using more local and seasonal produce in interesting ways and have adopted modern cooking techniques and adapted them to local ingredients and tastes. Like most root vegetables, beets are versatile and have body, says chef Kanishka Sharma, partner at Bengaluru’s NAVU Project, and can be roasted, made into chips, baked into crackers, and pureed to be used in a variety of ways. “It’s about letting vegetables shine in their own

Chefs are roasting it, pickling it, stuffing it in pasta, using it in cocktails, thin-slicing it into a carpaccio, and even using spherification techniques to create jelly-like globules

light,” says Sharma, who runs the intimate, bistro-style restaurant with an ingredient-led philosophy with chef Pal-lavi Menon. “It’s not about replicating the experience of eating meat or providing an alternative to it. We work hard to make sure that we highlight local vegetables on our menu, and beets are inexpensive and easily available through the year,” she says. NAVU has served a beetroot risotto made with barley, finished with horseradish and garnished with fennel and pickled baby beets, as well as a beetroot dish with fresh mulberries.

Working with vegetables like beets poses something of a challenge to chefs and gives them a chance to get creative, says Shahzad. It’s surprising how ubiquitous beetroot juice is in the kitchen, he says—used as a pickling liquid, in pasta or bread dough, to chicken liver pate to bring out a richer colour, and in practically all tomato-based sauces—but finally, the spotlight is on the root vegetable itself.

The current summer menu at The Bombay Canteen features a Smoked Beetroot Kulcha inspired by Kolkata’s beetroot cutlet, for which beetroot is grated and cooked in mustard oil with a blend of onions, tomatoes, spices and mashed potatoes. Topped with a local feta and sprinkled with poppy seeds, the *kulcha* is garnished with yellow and red baby beets and mustard greens. There’s also the creamy Beetroot Poriyal hummus, inspired by the Tamil beetroot stir-fry with coconut. Hussain’s favourite is the *thayir sadam* at Papa’s with beetroot, goat cheese, and the aromatic herb shiso, which reminds him of his childhood in Chennai. “It’s made with sushi rice and goat’s cheese and served with slow-cooked beetroot, which is dehydrated and rehydrated till it is intensely flavoured,” says the chef.

If you’re excited to try using beetroot at home, you couldn’t go wrong with Yotam Ottolenghi’s advice. Instead of pressure-cooking the life out of the tuber, roast it whole in the oven for an hour and toss it into a salad, slice it and eat it as is with some olive oil or cheese, or bake thin salted slices into savoury crackers.



Liqueurs work like flavour bombs in cocktails.

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Liven up drinks with liqueurs

Indian liqueurs are trickling into the homegrown cocktail scene, and it’s time to give them a try

Sayoni Bhaduri

Homegrown spirits, from gins to whiskies and rums, are filling shelves, but there is a made-in-India alcohol category that’s slowly coming into focus. Indian liqueurs are trickling in, and it’s time to give them a try.

In January, Kumaon-based Himmaleh Spirits—the makers of Kumaon & I gin—introduced a cold brew coffee liqueur, Bandarful. It uses regional rice varieties, like Noori *basmati* rice from Uttarakhand, locally sourced brown sugar and single-estate Arabica coffee beans from Chikmagalur. In 2018, Goa-based liquor brand Desmondji introduced *mahua*-based liqueur, DJ Mahua Liqueur, made with the eponymous flower from central India. Quaffine, another Goa-based cold-brewed coffee liqueur brand, launched in 2020. All of these can be enjoyed on their own mixed with ice, soda or chilled water.

Although there are a handful of made-in-India liqueurs, it’s hard to spot them in bars. Brands like the French Cointreau, Italian Sambuca and Mexican Kahlua are more commonplace. Do Indian bars prefer imported liqueurs over homegrown ones? Bartender Prantik Haldar of Mumbai’s The Bombay Canteen says, “We don’t necessarily prefer imported liqueurs over homegrown ones. It’s more about availability. We often use liqueurs like amaretto, limoncello and Baileys, which aren’t locally made or widely available here. In India, we have some homegrown liqueurs like coffee liqueur, sambuca, and triple sec, but the variety is limited. Indian distillers can look at introducing liqueurs like amaretto, which goes into many classic cocktail recipes. It will attract more customers compared to less familiar options.”

Despite bartenders’ hesitation to use homegrown liqueurs, the segment is picking up. Rajasthan’s heritage liqueurs, known locally as *asava* and dating to the 15th and 16th centuries, need a special mention. They were made with herbs and were known for their medicinal rather than intoxicating properties. In 2005, the former Mahansar royal family of Shekhawati in Rajasthan took the onus of reviving these heritage liqueurs. They launched the Maharani Mahansar range of liqueurs, featuring the saffron-flavoured Somras, the rose-based Shahi Gulab and the citrusy Narangam (orange). It takes 8-10 days to process liqueurs from herbs, spices, dry fruits, flowers and fruit with generations-old recipes. For now, these are available in Rajasthan, Haryana, Delhi, Punjab, Madhya Pradesh, Daman, Diu, Silvassa and Goa. “We aim to be pan-India brand by 2025. We will also start exporting to Australia, New Zealand, United Arab Emirates and Japan soon,” says Surendra Pratap Singh, managing director of Shekhawati Heritage Herbal, the parent company of the brand.

In 2006, Goa’s Adinco Distilleries launched Cabo White Rum With Coconut Liqueur, which has since gained a cult following. Solomon Diniz, managing director of Adinco Distilleries, dislikes Cabo being compared to Caribbean Malibu and strongly advocates its provenance as a spirit-liqueur hybrid made by infusing natural coconut extract in white rum. Diniz aims to export it to Thailand soon.

The gin market is crowded and rum is picking up, but the liqueur industry has ample space for experiments and new launches. With the rise of cocktail culture and popularity of indigenous ingredients, homegrown liqueurs will get the much-needed impetus.

To end on a sweet note, enjoy Bandarful like a dessert shot. Mix 30ml of Bandarful with 15ml of caramel sauce and coconut cream each, shake with ice and pour into a waffle cone. Garnish with roasted marshmallow and raise a toast.

Sayoni Bhaduri is a lifestyle journalist based in Mumbai.

Cut kitchen time, up your squid game



OUR DAILY BREAD

SAMAR HALARNKAR

I don’t know about you, but I find that time is an increasingly scarce commodity.

I often think that if I were in government service, I would already have retired—unless I had made it to the 0.1% talented, lucky or connected enough to have become a secretary to the government or director general of police or lieutenant general or whatever. But I never made it to the civil or armed services, so that is a moot point.

Instead, as the co-owner of a struggling startup in a profession that the government regards with a jaundiced eye, it’s challenging to keep running in place. Once, a few hundred employees reported to me. These days I struggle to get the sole teenager at home to listen to me.

A decade ago, my plan for the threshold of 60 was to travel, read, and cook my way through the rest of my life.

I now find only the last is a constant. There’s little time or money to travel and reading is a luxury. As for cooking, I

cook because (a) I like what I cook, (b) it’s better, cheaper, and healthier than eating out, and (c) my teenager gets grumpy if I don’t. That’s something, I suppose. The approval of a teenager can be as satisfying as a fat increment.

The act and art of cooking has a hierarchy of time. This column has always been about quick, creative cooking, but I’ve often indulged in some involved, time-consuming recipes and tested my patience—and undoubtedly yours, dear reader.

Last week I realised I was a bit frustrated by what I was eating—lots of vegetables and mostly chicken or fish. Of the three, I have no problem with eating fish every other day, but I realised I had not cooked red meat in a while, including my favourite, slow-cooked pork. The reason was apparent—the lack of time.

So, fish is my mainstay these days. It works very well for the teen, who is supremely content with my 10-minute, mild Goan fish curry, with *idiappam*, her favourite comfort food after *mos-ranna* (curd rice). Sometimes, a rack of ribs grills slowly while I work, but it’s always fish for a quick lunch or dinner.

The focus on fish works for me because fish has always been the centre of life in the Halarnkar kitchen.

My vegetarian Goan grandmother always ate fish and never understood why Kannadigas goggled when she did.



There is nothing that cooks faster than squid.

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During the summer, we trod warily, as crabs scuttled around my aunt’s house on Bandra’s bandstand in Mumbai, in the days when there were only rocks at land’s end, not Taj Land’s End. There were no promenading crowds because there was no promenade.

We sometimes spent mornings on the rocks prising out *kalwa* or rock oysters, triumphantly carrying them back to my aunt, who was too gentrified to consider cooking them. But she needed

the crabs fresh, so they were allowed to explore her flat during their end of days, until she needed them for the pot.

We cheerfully ate salted *mori* or shark, and dried prawns or Bombay duck were welcome concessions for us children on vegetarian Thursdays. *Tisriya* or clams and fresh prawns were Sunday specials.

One fish missing from this bounty of the sea in our home was squid. I’m not sure why. It’s not that we don’t eat

squid along the coast. The Konkanis fry or curry squid, and further south in Karnataka where I grew up, *koonthal* is very popular indeed. I suppose squid was unavailable inland in those days, a delicate fish like Bombay duck. These days delicate fish travel quickly and frozen. The once unimaginable is now mundane.

This week, when I found myself more pressed for time than ever—a function of a greatly heightened news environment thanks to the elections and family illnesses—I thought hard about what I could cook quicker. I knew squid was very quick, but I had never made it before.

I gave it a shot. I am pleased to report that nothing was faster to cook.

Only that morning, I had eaten a *masala-laden* (but delicious) Kerala *thalassery* fish. The teen disapproved. “It’s so strong,” she complained, referring to the spice. So, I chose a mild Italian recipe.

The squid itself cooked in literally a minute, the accompanying garlic, chilli, and parsley in another minute. A little garnish of basil and lemon, and presto. She added it to pasta and dinner was done. I’d say two minutes to pat the squid dry, which is important, two minutes to prep, and three minutes cooking time. Seven minutes from prep to table.

I now have a squid game to speed up dinner, so expect to hear more. Oh yes, the picky teen approved.

LEMONY SQUID WITH CHILLI, PARSLEY AND BASIL

Serves 2

Ingredients

250g squid rings
Juice of quarter lemon
1 bird-eye or any other red chilli, split
2 tsp parsley, chopped
3 large cloves of garlic, mined or thinly sliced
1 tsp basil leaves
Sea salt to taste
2 tsp olive oil

Method

Pat-dry the squid. Heat 1 tsp olive oil in a pan. Ensure the pan is hot. Saute the squid rings for about a minute. Remove quickly so they do not become rubbery. Add sea salt. In the same pan, add the second tablespoon of olive oil and saute the split red chilli (remove seeds if you want to reduce the heat), garlic and parsley for a minute. Put back the squid and toss together. Remove from flame, mix with lemon juice and garnish with basil.

Our Daily Bread is a column on easy, inventive cooking. Samar Halarnkar is the author of *The Married Man’s Guide To Creative Cooking—And Other Dubious Adventures*. He posts @samar11 on Twitter.

Time to smarten up the locks on your door

A smart lock is just as safe as a mechanical one—only the authentication is via digital means. Should you invest in one?

Abhishek Baxi

Every morning, as the mad scramble to get to the bus-stop with my son culminates in rushing out of the door and slamming it behind us, I don't have to worry about whether I'm carrying my keys. On my return, I simply press my thumb on the lock to unlock the door, and done!

That's the beauty of smart locks. While mechanical locks have physical keys, smart locks open via authentication using an electronic keypad, a biometric sensor, an RFID access card, or a companion mobile app. As digitisation enters every area of our lives, many tech-savvy Indians are exchanging their old mechanical locks for smart locks to secure their homes. At the same time, there is steady adoption by builders who are installing smart locks in new units to cash in on the "smart home/office" pitch.

According to a 2019 Research Nester report, the mobile app-based smart door lock market in India is projected to reach \$216.61 million (around ₹1,800 crore) in 2025 from only \$15.44 million in 2017, registering a growth rate of 39.79%.

UNLOCK CONVENIENCE

In their core, smart locks do not enhance security compared to mechanical locks, but they add a layer of convenience that in turn, leads to better access control and raises the security posture. Arindam Paul, chief business officer at Atomberg, an Indian company which manufactures and retails smart locks, says, "Some people feel smart locks are safer than traditional locks as they can remotely monitor and track every entry and exit."

Smart locks make it easy to get in and out without the need to juggle keys or have someone lock/unlock the door. They unlock several additional scenarios. You can allow one-time or permanent access to visitors to your home. One can give temporary access to a neighbour, for example, who's volunteered to water your plants while you are on vacation. At our home, my sister, who lives close by, has permanent access enabled.

Akhil Pruthi, a Goa-based education management professional, has enabled fingerprint-based access for his cook. "She gets in by herself daily. There's no physical key involved—so I don't have to worry about its duplication." Plus, the app provides an activity log, which ensures that access is not misused.

All smart locks are made to fit wooden doors of a certain width and the existing



Smart locks make it easy to get in and out without the need to juggle keys.

ISTOCKPHOTO

lock hole with little to no modification. While most brands offer free installation in major cities, a local carpenter can also install them.

People in rented homes are often wary of replacing locks because when they are vacating the house, removing an installed lock might damage the door. A good workaround is to buy a cheaper, regular lock (with the same mortise and similar handle dimensions as the smart lock) and replace it when moving.

Some smart locks also support Wi-Fi, which allows monitoring access and remote management, integration with smart home platforms like Google Home and Amazon Alexa, and additional functionality with other smart home devices, especially security cameras and doorbells. That said, the inclusion of Wi-Fi introduces more complexities and security breakpoints, and hence, some users prefer to avoid such integrations. A breach in home Wi-Fi can expose the lock.

OPTIONS ON THE TABLE

Yale, one of the world's oldest lock manufacturers, was one of the earliest brands to offer digital access solutions in India—mostly in plush offices and hotels. It has a wide portfolio of smart locks for homes, but they are quite expensive (starting from ₹10,330 and going all the way to ₹68,999). Godrej, with its strong legacy of locks, has a similar range of smart locks—more affordable than Yale. The smart lock industry might be at a nascent stage in India but is opening up vigorously. Till last year, digital locks contributed to only around 3-5% of the overall lock category

for Godrej. It is projected to account for more than 10% of the overall category for the company within a couple of years.

Some of the interesting and relatively affordable options are from home automation upstarts in India, like Qubo (a Hero Group company), Atomberg and Zunpulse. While Atomberg and Zunpulse only have one variant, Qubo offers half-a-dozen options to choose from.

Atomberg, widely known for its smart fans, has Atomberg SL1 (₹15,299) that offers a comprehensive access control solution with a packed features list. It's a good looking, solid offering with a capable companion app. There's no Wi-Fi support, which is fair in its price segment, but that brings down the smartness quotient.

Qubo has something for everyone—at different price points from ₹7,990-19,990. The good thing is that the functionality and access methods across the range are mostly the same and they differ only in build quality as well as the number of bolts it packs. There's a Wi-Fi lock gateway sold separately (₹3,990), which allows you to remotely unlock the door from anywhere

or enable virtual assistants like Alexa and Google Assistant to unlock the door without getting up from your couch. It also allows integration with Qubo Video Doorbell, allowing you to unlock the door from within the app. Then there's Zunpulse Wireless Smart Door Lock (₹11,000) that has most of the features in an affordable package. Zunpulse has a Wi-Fi gateway (₹2,500) that enables remote unlocking and monitoring but without support for virtual assistants or integration with smart home devices, including the company's video doorbell.

One has to keep in mind that smart locks, like all connected devices, are vulnerable to hacking. While breach of other smart devices might be an invasion of privacy or lead to cybercrimes, a smart lock breach may jeopardise one's safety or put one at financial loss. Even though they make lock-picking less likely, a sophisticated hacking attempt can get past the barrier. However, such a heist will be the digital equivalent of an organised robbery attempt—not something a typical user needs to worry about.

Of course, most manufacturers are constantly working to mitigate any vulnerabilities. So, it's a good idea to buy a smart lock from credible, trustworthy brands instead of random sellers online. And, always keep the app updated so that your guard is up to any new threats. That said, I'd imagine there's a limit till when a brand supports a smart lock after which it might be exposed to any future vulnerabilities—unlike traditional locks which often last for decades.

Abhishek Baxi is a technology journalist and digital consultant.

According to a 2019 Research Nester report, the mobile app-based smart door lock market in India is projected to reach \$216.61 million in 2025 from \$15.44 million in 2017

THE WEEK IN TECH



1 OPENAI UNVEILS ITS GPT-4O MODEL

ChatGPT-maker OpenAI announced a new flagship model on 13 May that can process commands across audio, vision, and text in real time. GPT-4o (where "o" stands for "omni") can accept any combination of text, audio, image, and video as inputs and generate any combination of text, audio, and image outputs. OpenAI said in its blogpost that the new model can respond to audio inputs in as little as 232 milliseconds, with an average of 320 milliseconds, which is similar to human response time. The company also released a list of demonstration videos which showed how the model can be applied in several ways, including as a real-time translator. The company also announced that it has created new safety systems within the model to provide guardrails on voice outputs.

2 GENERATIVE AI COMING TO YOUR GOOGLE SEARCH

At the recently concluded Google I/O conference on 14 May, the tech giant announced that it is introducing AI-generated answers to Search. Soon, users will be able to see an AI summary of their search results on Google—a feature known as AI Overview. Liz Reid, vice-president, head of Google Search, explained in a blog post that the new AI features in Search are the result of a new Gemini model, which brings together Gemini's advanced capabilities—including multi-step reasoning, planning and multimodality. Users will also be able to adjust their AI Overview with options to simplify the language or break it down in more detail. AI Overview will be rolled out in the US first, followed by other countries.



3 64% OF INDIAN ORGANISATIONS HIT BY RANSOMWARE IN 2023: REPORT

A new report by cybersecurity solutions company Sophos on 14 May revealed that 64% of Indian organisations were affected by ransomware attacks in 2023. While the rate of ransomware attacks against Indian organisations went down (from 73% in 2022), the impact on victims has intensified, with higher ransom demands and recovery costs. Ransomware is a type of malware that locks, withholds data or information and compels the victim to pay a ransom to access it again. The report further revealed that the average ransom demand was \$4.8 million (around ₹40 crore), with 62% of demands exceeding \$1 million. The median ransom paid was \$2 million.

—Compiled by Nitin Sreedhar

REVIEW | GOOGLE PIXEL 8a

Is this the best Android smartphone today?

The Google Pixel 8a seems to have struck the perfect balance of aspirational, premium and practical

Shouvik Das

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MOUNTAIN VIEW, CALIFORNIA

What do you want from a smartphone? After a decade and a half of iterative innovations, most smartphones today hardly have a differentiating edge. In such a market, as a user, all that you'd ideally want is a device that works for any task—be it gaming or photography. Of all the devices you can get your hands on, it is the Google Pixel 8a that strikes a balance of all features—along with a handful of cutting-edge smart.

The Pixel 8a is the most affordable and least jazzy smartphone from Google. It costs half as much as the Pixel 8 Pro, but when you look at it closely, you realise there's next to nothing that you miss out on. All this, at a pricing that is decidedly "affordable" in modern day terms—and you have what, prima facie, is the best Android smartphone in the market today.

'IT JUST WORKS'

The irony here is that it is Apple, Google's cross-town rival, that popularised the phrase "it just works". Yet, at a time when Apple's smartphones have retained their lofty halo, Google, with its Pixel 8a, seems to have struck a balance of aspirational, premium and practical.

At the heart of this is the Pixel 8a's compact dimensions. The smartphone is nearly identical to the base version of Apple's iPhone, with a 6.1-inch display that is big enough, but not unwieldy. With soft, rounded edges and a smooth rear panel, the smartphone feels every bit as premium to hold and use as devices that are twice as expensive.

The Pixel 8a uses a 120Hz display, which is smooth and makes the menus look slick as you scroll through, while streaming video content is a great experience. Google claims to offer seven years of security updates and feature upgrades on the Pixel 8a, which potentially gives it at least twice the lifespan as most competing devices from other brands. If Google sticks to its word, then we have a winner in our hands.

OF COURSE, IT'S ABOUT AI

You can't go too far in the tech world today without mentioning AI. At his I/O 2024 keynote on 14 May, Google CEO Sundar Pichai joked that a drinking game could



The Pixel 8a has compact dimensions but still feels premium. GOOGLE

have been made from the use of AI by Google in its two-hour keynote presentation. Side note: Google made 121 of them.

The Pixel 8a, too, uses AI as its main feature and in many ways, is the first smartphone at its price range to extensively offer AI features. You get Gemini Nano

running natively on the Pixel 8a, which you'd see in Google's Live Transcribe and summaries in the Recorder app, and the "Magic Audio Eraser" and "Magic Eraser" for videography and photography, respectively.

With the first, you can select a segment of your video that has any background noise that you want removed, and have the underlying AI model "understand" the noise and remove any similar noise of that nature from the entire video.

The same applies for Magic Eraser, which will let you edit or delete objects or people in a photograph. In our initial week's usage, Google's AI chops have clearly improved, leading to more actual desired results.

More importantly, what's good to note is that Google's AI innovations on the Pixel 8a feel less gimmicky, and more practical in a neat, compact form factor.

experience on this note and can be assured of getting Android and security upgrades before anyone else. There's hardly anything in this entire package that Google gets wrong—the only thing that you can perhaps point at is a below-ideal battery life. But it isn't so low that it'll disrupt your life. Could you really want more from a workhorse smartphone? The only doubts would be longevity and reliability. Historically, Pixel smartphones have faced hardware issues in the long run, which can potentially nullify all the above points. That remains to be seen. Then, there's the pricing. Google is charging ₹53,999 and upwards for the Pixel 8a, which is three-tenths lesser than what the Pixel 8 and equivalents from other brands cost. Despite it being nearly 25% higher than the Pixel 7a, it is safe to say that the Pixel 8a warrants this pricing. It does not feel unjustified, although what does feel unfair is that Google decided to significantly hike the Pixel 8a's price in India—its global pricing of \$499 (around ₹41,600) remains constant. That aside, it is one of the best Android smartphones in the market today.

Google Pixel 8a went on sale on 14 May, launched ahead of Google I/O 2024, the company's annual conference. The author was in Mountain View, California to cover Google I/O 2024 at Google's invitation.

GOOGLE PIXEL 8a
Display: 6.1 inch, with up to 120Hz refresh rate
RAM: 8GB; ROM: 128GB
Processor: Google Tensor G3
Battery: 4,492 mAh
Price: ₹53,999

TICKING OFF ESSENTIALS
Beyond the AI and its dimensions, the Pixel 8a packs in all the essentials. The 64-megapixel main camera takes excellent photographs, significantly thanks to Google's underlying AI rendering the photos. The battery stamina is not the best, but can nearly last an entire workday—perhaps with a quick, 15-minute charge towards the end of the day. You get a clean, unfettered Android

The lives of India's baby influencers

'Kidfluencers' or Gen Alpha content creators are gaining a loyal social media following for their videos on everything from fashion and make-up to books and science

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P

allavi Thakur, 14, can belt out make-up hacks as easily as the periodic table. Want smoky eyes that can go from day to night? "Go more brown and less black," she says, showing the two colours in an eye palette. "Don't go so heavy on the kajal," she says, pointing to my kohl-lined eyes. Fancy a more sculpted face? "Make upward strokes," she explains, picking up one of the 10 make-up brushes on her dressing table and demonstrating the sweeping motion from her cheekbones towards the hairline.

Unlike chemistry formulae, Pallavi never learnt anything relating to make-up by rote. It's been a watch-learn-experiment process since 2020, when she was 10. As soon as covid lockdown restrictions were lifted, her mother, Poonam, started a salon in a 50 sq. ft space near the Delhi-Faridabad border. While the mother painted the faces of brides-to-be, Pallavi sat quietly behind, imagining ways of turning it all into technicolour artwork. Like, making the eyelids resemble the morning sky. At night, using her mother's vanity box, she would turn those thoughts into reality with her face as the canvas. In a span of three years, Pallavi's experiments became bolder and better. Poonam, 32, was convinced of her daughter's unique talent. So much so that she created an Instagram account for Pallavi in July 2023.

Since then, the 14-year-old has gained over 160,000 followers, by regularly posting 30- or 60-second Reels. The class X student works on the content almost every alternate day from 9pm-3am. The recording happens on an iPhone 13, gifted by her mother last year, and editing on Instagram. She's learnt everything on her own, Poonam says proudly. "I just help her zero in on the content and her outfit. The make-up, the editing... she watches many videos to learn all these skills; it's all her hard work."

In most Reels, Pallavi lip-syncs trending songs, wears coloured contact lenses, and demonstrates a make-up look inspired by something she and her mother have found attractive on social media that particular day. One recent Reel has a look inspired by *Wonder Woman's* clothes; another shows her attempting the viral porcelain-like look from Maison Margiela's 2024 Paris fashion week showcase; and then there's one where she's drawing Lord Krishna on her cheek. Art on a young face explains her big social media pull—in one of her first videos that went viral in October, Pallavi uses make-up to create a look that seems like she's wearing a *Money Heist*-esque mask, only that it is sparkly and glamorous. A majority of her followers, Poonam explains, are women. Going by the comments on her posts, they either want to replicate the look, or want to know the shade of a lip gloss or the brand of a mascara.

It's this kind of make-up-enamoured fan following that Pallavi wants to grow. "India doesn't have many creative make-up artists; it's a very international thing," she says when we meet at her mother's salon on a Saturday. Pallavi is wearing a black T-shirt, matching cargo pants and canvas shoes, her hair swept into a high ponytail. There's no trace of make-up on her face, and she looks younger than her 14 years. "I want to be the first big creative make-up artist from India who's recognised globally," she says. "I want to be a trend-setter, and I know it will happen soon."

Two things fuel her confidence: the consistent rise in her followers and requests from beauty brands for collaborations. Till date, she's done about five such partnerships, all overseen and negotiated by her mother, and mostly based on a barter system, where brands send

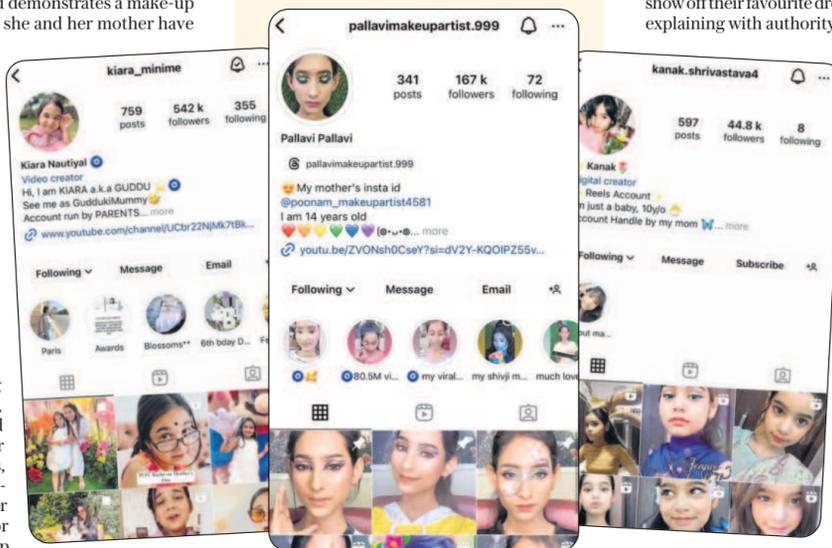


Gwalior's Kanak Shrivastava, 10, has over 44,000 followers on Instagram.

The growth of social network users in India

YEAR	No. of users (in millions)
2015	142.23
2020	518.92
2021	639.47
2022	755.74
2023	862.08
2024 (estimated)	957.58
2025 (estimated)	1,041.56

SOURCE: STATISTA



make-up products, sometimes worth ₹50,000, to promote. Money can wait, her mother, insists. "I want to be famous first," Pallavi says, raising her voice to be heard over the blast of a horn from a passing train—the railway track is opposite their salon.

Being famous is an aspiration shared by a growing number of teens and preteens, essentially Generation Alpha (those born between 2010-24; India has over 330 million individuals in this group), who, with the encouragement of their parents, want to build a career as a social media content creator. It could be about lip-syncing trending funny videos, re-enacting a movie scene, grooving to a dance routine, reviewing toys and books, even showing off their favourite cosmetic products and styling hacks. For these boys and girls, all that fun and play is a

way to gain fame and wealth—a trend that's already on the upswing in the West.

There's no official data on the growth or number of Gen Alpha influencers, also known as baby influencers or kidfluencers, in India, since most accounts are run by parents. There's also not much information available on the gender break-up. But if you scroll through social media, it seems that most fashion and beauty-related kidfluencers are girls.

Their content is not too different from that of Gen Z or Gen Y creators—nor is their audience. A Gen Alpha influencer, who specialises in a digital-first world, is doling out make-up tips for mature skin, reviewing a moisturiser that "promises" baby-like skin, or creating a "Get ready with me for a play date" video—something that essentially looks like a child performing for an adult audience. These little ones appear naturally comfortable in front of the camera—they open PR packages with as much poise as excitement, enthusiastically participate in trends and show off their favourite dresses, photo books or lipsticks, explaining with authority why they like it. It's all these characteristics that make them attractive to brands that are constantly looking for fresh and relatable faces—and to consumers of social media.

There's definitely money to be made as a content creator, irrespective of one's age. At present, there are no laws regulating child social media influencers and their collaborations with other businesses and brands. India's influencer marketing industry is likely to reach ₹3,375 crore by 2026, from the estimated ₹2,344 crore this year, says an April 2024 report by accounting firm EY and Collective Artists Network's Big Bang Social, an Indian creator marketplace. "With 50% of mobile usage dedicated to communication strategies is essential for marketers," says the *State of Influencer Marketing in India* report. "It is expected that there will be 740 million active smartphones in India by 2030. Consequently, three out of four brand strategies are expected to include influencer marketing."

Small wonder then, kidfluencers are becoming a darling of brands. They make for an ideal choice when it comes to selling anything that's aimed at the young shopper—from toys, gadgets, books, clothes and shoes to cosmetics and skincare creams. Vaibhav Pathak has a theory about what makes a child- or teen-next-door valuable to brands in India. He's the co-founder of Dot Media, which runs TGB Troop, an influencer marketing agency that works with



Being famous is an aspiration shared by a number of teens

over 200 creators, including one who is seven years old. "Kids are considered innocent. So, when they endorse a product, an instant trust factor is built with the viewer. It's how we used to go to the neighbour's house and see their child play with a toy. Once back home, we demanded the same toy. The exact thing is happening, but on social media. Parents who are watching that Reel want that toy for their child, and the child who's watching it wants it for themselves."

Talking from a more commercial point of view, he says children's products tend to be more expensive (just to give an idea, a pair of Nike sneakers for a 10-year-old costs over ₹10,000). "The kids' market is growing exponentially; millennial parents want their kids to look stylish and they are willing to spend money. And when a young influencer endorses a product, instead of an adult as has been done traditionally, there's a likelihood of a better ROI (return on investment)," Pathak claims.

What attracts the parents to social media as a platform to promote their child's talent?

Pathak has an explanation: "You never know who will turn out to be the next Justin Bieber. Social media has created that hope because there's space for everyone now. Remember how disappointed kids and parents used to be



Pallavi Thakur, 14, and her mother, Poonam, at their salon in Delhi.



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s and preteens who want to become content creators..

when they were eliminated during (TV show contests) *Boogie Woogie* and *India's Got Talent?* Platforms like Instagram are giving a chance to everyone to improve and prove themselves daily; the ones who get eliminated here are those who stop posting regularly."

A STRICT SCHEDULE

That's something Gwalior's Kanak Shrivastava, 10, is very particular about. To ensure her mother- and brother-managed Instagram account keeps growing, she posts a Reel every alternate day, replicating trending make-up videos. When she's out of ideas, the class V student asks her 44,000-plus followers what make-up looks they would like to see.

In her recent videos, for instance, she attempted Jennie Kim's Met Gala 2024 look, complete from eyes to the clothes (she used a *dupatta* to match the South Korean singer's midriff-baring blue wrap dress by designer Alaïa). In another, she offered a bridal take on the *Asoka* movie-inspired make-up trend after requests from followers—mostly women in the 18-32 age group, informs her brother, Harsh, 20, who's studying engineering.

Like Delhi's Pallavi, Kanak does her own make-up, something she learnt watching her older cousins. Expo-

You never know who will turn out to be the next Justin Bieber. Social media has created that hope... Platforms like Instagram are giving a chance to everyone to prove themselves daily

VAIBHAV PATHAK
CO-FOUNDER,
DOT MEDIA

Childhood is a journey of building self-esteem. When you expose your child and their creativity to the world wide web, you end up opening them to constantly seeking validation

DEBMITA DUTTA
PARENTING
CONSULTANT

sure to YouTube and Instagram prompted her to experiment with her mother's lipstick, foundation and eyeliner when the world was under lockdown. By 2021, she had started an Instagram account with the support of her family, with that same hope: to become somebody.

Till 2023, she was posting mostly static shots, in different make-up looks. "They weren't doing that well. I was still around 10,000 followers. And one day, I posted a Reel on glass skin make-up (it was trending that time) and it went viral," says Kanak over a video call. "So, since past few months, I am only doing Reels, and they are working." Each of the Reels are made over a weekend in a span of four-five hours. "I follow a strict schedule throughout the week to stay disciplined," Kanak says. Her brother says she's among high rankers at school. "I want to build a beauty brand when I grow up," she says. "So, I need to focus on my work and studies."

Kanak's strict weekday schedule: leave for school at 7am, return by 2pm, finish homework by 5-6pm, eat dinner and sleep by 10pm. Weekend schedule: wake up at 8am, start prepping for Reels by 11am, work till 8pm or 9pm, depending on the content, eat dinner, sleep by 10pm. There's no place for play, but definitely for a daily day-night skincare routine: cleanse, tone, moisturise. "I need to take care of my skin since I use so much make-up," she says. "If my skin looks bad, it will show on camera."

She does her own make-up and costume for the videos. Her brother helps in editing videos, posting and negotiating deals with brands, of which there have been four. Among the latest was with Mars cosmetics, where Kanak is doing a "Get ready with me" using a BB cream foundation, liquid eyeshadow, mascara, velvet lipstick and powder blush.

Muskan Jain, brand manager at Mars cosmetics, which positions itself as "make-up for everyone", believes working with young content creators is the company's way of extending support towards creative people. "It helps us show inclusivity, that make-up is for everyone and you can be creative with our products," explains Jain.

Besides getting the opportunity to play with make-up and try different products, what Kanak likes most about her social media presence is that it has turned her into a local celebrity. "I like when people stop me and ask for selfies," she says. "When you are focused on one thing, you will succeed. I don't have time to play and make more friends; I study and have two pets (guinea pigs), I play and talk to them."

Pallavi gives a similar answer when I ask her how she spends her free time: "I don't go out much. I watch cartoons. And rest of the time I am either studying or thinking about what make-up I will do next."

There's an argument to be made that social media might help youngsters like Kanak and Pallavi engage in creative expression, and offer innovative entertainment to users of social media, but such content can consciously and unconsciously leave a deep impact on the content

What the law says on kid influencers

There are no laws to protect child influencers

The National Commission for Protection of Child Rights, a judicial body, has come up with guidelines that cover children's social media content made for financial gain by parents, guardians, or family. The guidelines are directions and not enforceable in a court of law. Some of these include:

► Child/adolescent shall not perform any tasks during school hours and between 7pm and 8am.

► Child/adolescent shall not be engaged in such tasks of helping which hinder or interfere with the right to education of the child, or attendance in the school, or which may adversely affect education, including activities which are inseparably associated to complete educational such as homework or extracurricular activity assigned by school.

► No child/adolescent should made to act in a way that is inappropriate to the child or that may distress him/her or put him/her in embarrassing situations.

► No child/adolescent should be exposed to ridicule, insult or discouragement, harsh comments or any behaviour that could affect his/her emotional health.

creator and the consumer. For starters, cosmetic products are known to include toxic chemicals (that shimmer on lipsticks is actually micro plastic) that can affect the skin.

Secondly, skincare products encouraging teens and pre-teens consumers to start exfoliating early can further feed their insecurities and self-consciousness around how they look. Pushing beauty products on social media, with sophisticated algorithms already feeding the exposure in the background, beauty filters and incessant talk of "flawless skin" can make any youngster feel they are not good enough the way they are.

As mentioned earlier, there are no laws when it comes to child influencers or content creators. The National Commission for Protection of Child Rights has come up with guidelines that cover children's social media content made for financial gain by parents, guardians or family. The guidelines include a list of conditions, like no work during school hours and between 7pm and 8am. These guidelines are directions and not enforceable in a court of law (see "What the law says on kid influencers").

"Children have always played with dolls and make-up in their houses. It becomes problematic when they start treating themselves as dolls on the worldwide web," says Bengaluru-based Debmitta Dutta, an independent parenting consultant who runs The Parenting Place clinic. "They change make-up, the way they talk and dress depending on what people will like; that's not creativity, that's seeking approval. Such activities can make them realise that it's all about looks and performance."

Delhi-based Sonal Kapoor, founder-chief executive of child rights organisation Protsahan India Foundation, agrees: "Childhood and adolescence are critical periods for formation of identity and sense of self. Social media often prompts children to craft a persona for external validation, shaping their self-image around what others like rather than what they truly enjoy."

What goes viral has a lot to do with the social media platform's sophisticated algorithm as well. As Kapoor explains: "Linking of self-esteem to constant public

approval, with unrefined coping skills in childhood, is dangerous because a noticeable portion of what makes a video successful online is the algorithm, and if a video does not do well, the child may not understand that. Instead they might take it as a personal attack on their character, skills or efforts."

That's where parents need to be more alert, says Dot Media's Pathak. "It's an ethical concern. Plus, you are also exposing your child to a lot of bad characters. So, parents need to be extra vigilant at all times."

Then there's the trolling. Often the posts of Gen Alpha content creators are full of comments telling them to focus on studies or to stop being adults; many comments are also sexual in nature.

Keeping this in mind, Meta, which owns Instagram, has launched over 50 safety tools and features. "Instagram requires everyone to be at least 13 years old before they can create an account (some regions have different age requirements). Accounts that represent someone under the age of 13 must clearly state in the account's bio that the account is managed by a parent or manager," says a Meta spokesperson. "We're building on our work to provide age-appropriate experiences for teens, and to make it simpler for parents to shape their teens' online experiences, and taking additional steps to help protect teens from unwanted contact by turning off their ability to receive messages from anyone they don't follow or aren't connected to, by default. Before a teen can change certain Instagram settings they will now need approval from their parents through Instagram's parental supervision tools."

ALL EYES ON YOU

Most parents I spoke with are well aware of the risks and the never-ending trolling. Pallavi's mother Poonam says: "It gets too much sometimes. People say all sorts of things to her, 'go study', 'you look like a ghost' (*ghost*). It affects me more than her. I am her mother; I know what's best for her. She will never let her studies suffer."

That's one of the reasons she doesn't let Pallavi use her iPhone too much. "I post the video, respond to comments, count the number of likes. And she's not allowed to use make-up when she's not on camera; she's too young for all this in real life," says Poonam.

Kanak's brother, Harsh, has put similar restrictions: "She makes and posts videos, and then I take over. When a video doesn't do well, I tell her not to be upset but take it as a learning experience."

Anjali Nautiyal doesn't allow her daughter, Kiara, to touch the phone after recording her video that will eventually be shared with the seven-year-old's 500,000 Instagram followers. "I choose her clothes, the music, the content, and I shoot, edit and post the video," says the Gurugram-based software tester, 38, who works with a multinational.

Kiara, who's represented by influencer marketing company TGB Troop, became famous when she was four, during the pandemic because of her fun "Guddu ki Mummy" character, which continues to revolve around her real-life interactions with family. Soon, she was creating content on kids' fashion, toys, even travel vlogs, with encouragement from her father and mother. "I always wanted to be an influencer, and my husband had interest in acting," says Anjali over a video call, while Kiara peers over her shoulder with a wide smile on her face. "When Kiara came along, I was very happy. I used to dress her up when she was tiny. When lockdown happened, I posted a video of her and it went viral. That's how this journey started."

Since then, Kiara has done many collaborations, all tightly managed by her parents. On an average, she does one promotion in two months, which pays around ₹1 lakh. "We can easily make ₹40 lakh a month seeing the number of brands that approach us. But we don't want to do that to her. Even now, if she doesn't want to do a particular video, I instantly stop. Either we come back to it later, or we just don't it. I will stop doing this content stuff if tomorrow she says no."

That's the other thing most parents said: they will encourage their child to pursue their ambition as long as they want, and support them if they are exhausted from creating content.

I ask Pallavi if she ever gets tired of making Reels. She does, she says. But it's worth it, she adds. As I leave the salon, her mother recalls an episode when they had gone to meet a celebrated local make-up artist at an event. "Everyone was running towards that guy to get a selfie. I asked Pallavi to come and take one as well. She said to me: 'I don't want to run after people. I want people to run after me.'" Pallavi interjects: "Isn't that the perfect dream?"



Kiara Nautiyal, 7, with her mother Anjali, in Paris.

Schooling children to be mindful content creators

Being an influencer is a career kids aspire to, with professionals training them to be creators while staying safe online

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On her YouTube channel, Raaina, 12, briefly introduces viewers to author Enid Blyton and launches into a review of *The Twins at St Clare's*. "The book in the series was first published in 1941. The one that I am reading is the 75th edition, and was published in 2016," she says confidently. Started in July 2021, during the pandemic when children were increasingly online, Raaina's channel, *Toys & More by Raaina*, focuses on unboxing toys and reviewing books. Besides Blyton's books, she has reviewed the first of the *Harry Potter* series, while also creating content for Christmas and World Peace Day.

For Raaina, the channel, which has 150 subscribers, is not a means to go viral or gain popularity as an influencer, but is an experiment with digital content creation. "My friends have their own channels, which are not related to education or academics. Theirs is related to music and dance. I would like to focus on something constructive like books," says the Delhi-based student of class VII. Her videos feature elegant backgrounds with vibrant side panels relevant to the review. There are smooth transitions and soothing background music. She creates sophisticated videos with basic equipment—a phone, a ring light and a phone stand. What does she keep in mind while creating content? "That it should be age-appropriate and add value to the viewer's life," comes the reply.

Raaina picked up this positive approach towards digital content creation, together with some cool editing skills, at Creativity. Helmed by former radio jockey Rima Medhi, the Mumbai-based initiative is one of the few in the country to offer mentorship on digital content creation for children aged 6-16. There are both online and real-world sessions for children on various forms of content creation, ranging from radio jockeying and stand-up comedy to podcasting and TedTalks (Creativity officially has access to the TED-Ed curriculum). Of these, the junior YouTube programme has turned out to be popular since Medhi started it in 2019—over 100 children have participated in the workshop since.

Raaina had been participating in online workshops at Creativity for the past four years, and started taking personal classes on ways to start a YouTube channel in 2021. "I have learnt a lot about voice modulation and ways in which people can relate to your content. My public speaking skills have become better. I also did a comedy workshop with Rima ma'am, and it helped me add age-appropriate jokes to my YouTube content," says Raaina, who started her channel after the workshop.

Medhi feels that the nature of digital content a child creates depends on the parents—some are very keen while others are mindful of the amount of exposure they want their child to have. "We have to gauge the nature of the child—some like to unbox toys, some like to review books and exhibitions. Some even like to show how to (arrange and) align books and toys in their room," says Medhi. The YouTube workshop started as an experiment in 2018-19, but as she saw the increasing number of enquiries, she launched it as a full-fledged programme in 2019 and entered into collaborations with institutions such as the National Centre for the Performing Arts. Group workshops cost ₹4,500-5,000 (physical) and personalised mentorship (online) starts at ₹15,000.

Raaina's mother—who did not want to be named and requested the use of the child's first name as she's known on YouTube—first heard of Creativity four years ago from her friends. To her, the important thing was to enhance Raaina's public speaking skills, and not turn her into some kind of an influencer. The regular feedback from Medhi appeals to her. "She makes a video and sends it to Rima, who explains modulation, the arrangement of objects, ways to make an activity more engaging," she says.

'NATURAL' CONTENT CREATORS

What makes Gen Alpha—those born in the early 2010s, with the last of their generation yet to be born in 2024—such natural digital content creators? Ashley Fell, director of advisory at McCrindle, an Australia-based research agency, said in a



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Generation Alpha are active contributors from a young age; (below) Creativity mentors children in various forms of content creation, ranging from radio jockeying and podcasting to TedTalks.

recent LinkedIn post: "What differentiates Gen Alpha's online presence from Gen Z, who were the first to be considered digital natives, is that they're not even trying to be influencers—they just are."

In an email interview to *Lounge*, Fell elaborates that Generation Alpha have not known a world without digital devices and social media. "They are active contributors from a young age. Unlike previous generations, where content creation often required deliberate effort and strategy, Gen Alpha's innate familiarity with digital platforms enables them to organically produce content that resonates with their peers." This is a phenomenon seen across the world with digital content creation considered a popular career goal by children.

In urban India, children are still taking baby steps to find their comfort level with digital media—the focus is on experimentation and not on making it one's sole preoccupation. Gurugram-based Deepti Singh, who runs English vocabulary and communication classes as well as mentors children to craft age-appropriate book reviews for digital media, has noticed a difference. "I teach Indian American kids in the US as well as Indian children," says Singh, who runs the social media page "English Hub". "There, children as young as six want to become influencers. For them, it is all about going viral, while in Indian cities, the emphasis is still on adding some meaning to the content. That is why, at this early stage, it is important to mentor them on important things like vocabulary and digital safety." *Lounge* reached out to YouTube for comments, but received no response.

SAFE SPACES FOR LEARNING

That children and their parents are actively seeking guidance is a positive sign. According to Fell, this proactive approach not only enhances their technical proficiency but also fosters collaborative learning and community building within the digital sphere.

At Creativity, a group of YouTubers' workshop starts with brainstorming ideas and finding areas of interest. Medhi then

works with each child, mapping out their ideas for the channel, understanding how many videos they are looking at and balancing that with the kind of time they can spend without disturbing their studies.

"The workshops are not about them facing the camera and climbing the popularity charts. Rather, we focus on confidence and research-backed content," says Medhi. Then comes the technical training: using software like Canva to create a logo for the channel, taglines, editing on apps such as InShot. "We also talk to parents about digital safety. I suggest that they keep the channel private to be shared among family and friends. However, if they want to make it public, then it is advisable to upload it on YouTube Kids instead of the main platform," she adds. Medhi also offers one-on-one sessions, for 12 weeks or more, with the child putting in one hour a week.

Mumbai-based Varaha also offers mentorship to kids aged 5-18. During the pandemic, founder Alpana Kamdar Mehta got a lot of requests for classes on creating YouTube content, and she started online masterclasses on content creation and editing for children aged 9 and above. "Some parents reached out saying that

at their home.

Sonali Dalal Mulchandani, a teacher in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, first heard of Varaha workshops from a friend in Mumbai. Her son, Abhir, now 13, has been participating in such sessions since he was 10. "Children's lives changed dramatically during the pandemic. Kids such as Abhir were maturing, and trying to find a sense of self and identity. That's where workshops such as these helped," she says. Abhir enrolled in one workshop on mentoring and another on podcasting. "There were sessions on how to hook the audience followed by digital support on editing, background music and finally on how to upload the podcast. I have seen a change in the way he speaks publicly and shares ideas more confidently. He has recorded a podcast for his school's podcast channel," she adds.

PARENTS AS MENTORS

Parents, too, have their own social media pages and channels and mentor children. Radhika Kapoor runs *Bookmarked2023*, a page for book reviews on Instagram that she started a year-and-a-half ago when her daughter's school placed a lot of emphasis on reading and reviewing books. On *Bookmarked2023*, you will find reviews by 11-year-old Shanaya and her friends, who share a love for reading. "I noticed that older kids were not into reading. I wanted to do reviews to inspire them, and others, to pick up books," says Shanaya.

While the page is managed by Kapoor, Shanaya has taken over the making of the videos. Kapoor mentors her on the script and the language, and she has seen the way in which Shanaya has evolved in her skills. "She works hard on her editing and artwork. Sometimes she goes for multiple takes until she is satisfied with the outcome," adds Kapoor. In the future, Shanaya might take guidance on editing and shooting at workshops to hone her skills further.

To ensure that Shanaya doesn't spend more time online than is required, Kapoor has kept the reins of the page in her hands. She handles the logistics and keeps Shanaya away from needless distractions such as comments and page views. The page, then, becomes a safe space for Shanaya and her friends to express their thoughts on what they love the most—books.

For children aged 16 and above, there are academies by brand consultancies such as Speakcraft. It runs *Speakcraft Academy*, which calls itself one of the country's first "influencers school", to offer online learning opportunities. "We launched the *Speakcraft Academy* last year with the vision of helping aspiring influencers by pooling in knowledge from experts in the industry," says Vansh Kumar Rajput, executive director and CEO, north and west India. "One psychology student, who had just finished class XII wanted to create content on her learnings in the field. We taught her how to write a short script and ways to portray that effectively on camera," he explains.

Rajput, along with his business partner Soumyabrata Sengupta, conceived the idea during the pandemic, when the team of consultants noticed a shift in the way people were creating digital content—people were learning by imitating popular content creators. "We teach how to create and market original compelling content, craft a personal brand and embark on the long process of monetising it. There are shorter courses for younger people on basics such as steering clear of pages that offer to buy you fake followers," says Rajput.

BUDGET YOUR TIME ONLINE

The Indian Academy of Pediatrics has put forth guidelines on engagement with digital media, and recommends limiting the screen time to two hours for young children, aged 5 and above. A lot of young digital content creators are consciously trying to budget their time wisely, guided by their parents. "When she started putting up reviews, she was younger. Now, her school work takes a lot of her time. So, we make use of holidays and weekends to update the page," says Kapoor. Raaina follows suit. She too works on content only during the holidays.

Effort is being put in by families to keep trolls at bay too. Raaina has disabled comments, and her mother monitors the channel closely. And in Shanaya's case, since the page is managed by her mother, and she doesn't have any other social media presence, the 11-year-old never has access to any kind of public feedback.

Task Shanaya, what is it about the whole content creation process that appeals to her—is it the editing, the scripting or shooting? "Reading," is the reply. It seems that the young content creators have their hearts in the right place.

DRAWING THE LINE

How to ensure your child content creator doesn't spend too much time online

► Keep non-judgemental communication open within the family

► Parents should be aware of when and how much content the child is posting

► Prioritise good content over viral content so that children don't chase likes and shares

► As a parent, don't boast about likes and shares your child gets in your social circles

► Have a conversation about exit strategies even before they start posting content

Courtesy Dr Manoj Kumar Sharma of NIMHANS, Bengaluru, and Mumbai-based consulting psychologist Khushnaaz Noras

their kids had YouTube channels, but the material they were posting was not relevant. Others felt their children were talented but didn't know much about body positioning and voice modulation. A few kids said they had seen a friend's channel but didn't know if they had similar confidence to start their own," says Alpana.

Around the same time, she also started podcasting workshops, which have now become immensely popular. "The medium offers a sense of anonymity while allowing you to be a research-based digital creator. We have seen children upload podcasts on Lego, on self-defence. Some use it as part of their portfolio-building activity to show interviewers later," explains Alpana, who offers both group and personalised sessions. Prices vary from ₹1,500-6,000 per session per child depending on the requirement.

Some new trends have emerged since the pandemic. People are doing workshops that are more personalised and specific. Some ask for help with content creation while others want guidance on camera angles. A few request for masterclasses to be held at home. For instance, Alpana is doing a set of 10 sessions on "polishing" screen presence for two sisters in Mumbai



The growing pains of south Indian web series

Why have streaming shows in south Indian languages not tasted the same success as their Hindi language counterparts?

Aditya Shrikrishna

Vilangu, a police procedural set in a village near Trichy with its narrative marred by caste, culture and politics, is one of the better web series to come out of south India. In an interview to YouTube channel Galatta Plus last year, its writer-director, Prasanth Pandiyaraj, elaborated on the challenges facing long-form series creators in the south. He mentioned "Mumbai" at least three times. He spoke about how he must convey his pitch and story to the local team of an OTT platform, then impress the head, after which they take it to Mumbai for a final call. There could be many challenges in the intervening stages, like his inability to articulate his ideas in English or adopt an exacting approach to express a local cultural setting. He spoke about how much gets lost in this process and the underlying difficulties in conveying even an idea for a web series.

The web series landscape on OTT platforms—long-form storytelling that is not mainstream soap operas—is still at a nascent stage in Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and Kannada. In Hindi, or Mumbai to use Prasanth's nomenclature, it has burgeoned to now boast its own awards categories. It has also become cross-cultural: Amazon Prime's *Poacher* (2024) has at least half the characters speaking in Malayalam, and *The Family Man* and *Farzi* have south stars Samantha Ruth Prabhu and Vijay Sethupathi, respectively. Hindi streaming is now its own ecosystem that shares top talent with Hindi cinema, creating avenues for lesser-known actors and writers. The pandemic aided its growth, and the stagnation of Hindi cinema pushed bolder stories towards streaming.

But this growth has not trickled down to south India, whose filmic styles and big names have been co-opted by Bollywood—from Atlee to S.S. Rajamouli to Allu Arjun and Prabhas. An Ormax Media report published in May 2023 found that in 2022, there were 44 OTT originals released on streaming in the four south Indian languages (more than 90% in Tamil and Telugu), while in Hindi, it was more than double that number. But why, apart from a few meagre names, has long-form storytelling from the south not grown at a similar pace?

A few shows have made an impact: *Vilangu*, Muthukumar's *Ayali* (Zee5), the Sharath Jothi-directed docu-series *Koosé Munisamy Veerappan* (Zee5) and Pushkar Gayathri's *Suzhal: The Vortex* (Amazon Prime). Ormax Media's yearly report on streaming originals in India is yet to look at the numbers and viewership of non-Hindi shows. It's simply not big enough.

One would think that at a time when mainstream cinema is unable to look beyond stars and action entertainers to attract audiences to theatres, there would be intervention to widen the slate through OTT. According to Pushkar, a significant stream of new shows, Hindi and other-



wise, were being greenlit till about mid-2023, but the brakes have been applied all over due to a global churn. Yet, for streaming in the south, the issues are both creative and financial.

The biggest challenge is writing specifically for long form. Filmmaker Madhumita (K.D.), says a lot of them are still trying to understand writing for a web series. "It's not a three-act structure like film. In a series, we must write a five-act structure, the process is different, and the writing room is different." Suman Kumar, co-writer of *The Family Man*, *Farzi* and *Guns & Gulaabs*, says there aren't enough qualified writers. "In the series space, the writer is the hero. Availability of writers and understanding the difference between a two-hour film and a web series is key."

One of the challenges is that popular culture in the south is film- and star-obsessed in a way that audiences up north are not. The Ormax Media report revealed that OTT content in south Indian markets is largely driven by film. Films always have priority over long-form streaming originals because the audience down south is drawn in by stars and cinema-going is habitual. Sharath Jothi talks about a vicious cycle. "It is not financially viable for someone to take a year or two and get into a world, research and write a proper screenplay. So, the solution then is to quickly do what we know for sure the audience will like."

Malayalam cinema today has a great ecosystem dedicated to writing, while Tamil and Telugu have more writer-directors. Sharath feels that the Malayalam industry has a respect for writers that is lacking in Tamil. "I feel we have to groom talent who could only write for screen."

Insiders believe this transition will happen soon. The other transition is getting star actors to streaming. Most south series are small scale now—the networks bet on the story. But as their scale grows, even a great story will need a big name to push for production. Pushkar says film directors will gravitate towards this medium if they have a ready script. But we are a few years away from star actors warming up to the idea of web series. It is also currently impossible to create a star culture around streaming: the fidelity of the theatrical fan doesn't exist in the OTT space.

Networks too have their work cut out. Prasanth mentioned that Mumbai remains the decision-maker for all streaming. Economics dictates that more shows are made for a Hindi-speaking audience. It is still a new market, which is why we see more thrillers and procedurals. But the platforms are also limited by the decision-makers' worldview. A former content executive from a popular OTT platform, on the condition of anonymity, talked about an idea that came up, a show set in an elite school in Chennai. An executive in Mumbai compared it to Ashim Ahluwalia's Hindi show *Class* (Netflix) and asked why they should do something similar. "It's difficult to explain that an elite school in Chennai can be very different to an elite school in Mumbai or New Delhi. A kid can still come to this school on a bicycle."

Pushkar-Gayathri feel this is the time to go for small shows, with OTT platforms looking for hyperlocal stories. A young writer had pitched the duo a show set in the IT industry in Bengaluru; they wanted to make the show bigger and set it in Singapore or Hong Kong. "When we took this to a very senior person at a platform, they said they have experimented with such an idea, like a trans-European show, and found that it doesn't work. Unless you can identify who your primary audience is, it is not going to cross over."

Gayathri says the audience needs to take ownership of a show—either at a linguistic or cultural or state level. This ownership is especially important when looking at multiple seasons. Suman mentions how a little show on Hotstar like *Save The Tigers* found loyal fans in the Telugu audience with its relatable characters and humour. The second season recently dropped.

For Sharath, the challenge with *Koosé Munisamy* was to contend with pre-conceived notions of Veerappan. It took a lot of back and forth to get through the idea that his series was about the people caught between the law enforcement and Veerappan. Madhumita believes the Mumbai heads help balance the business side of things, while the localised creative team is more attuned with a show's cultural sensibilities. With a single producer, filmmakers often have more independence. But with the set systems of OTT platforms, they must adapt. Madhumita sees it as a marriage. "As filmmakers we must get used to the idea that someone is bringing business acumen, and we get feedback on our work even before going to floors. At the same time, the platforms will have to understand that this person knows best, it is their story, something they've created in a universe familiar to them."

What is now required, says Pushkar, is a larger investment from the networks in the south ecosystem. He feels the global churn happened too early in the journey of Tamil and Telugu shows. "We need to take the start of the Tamil and Telugu web series market as 2021-22. We are only two years into this OTT journey. We need five more years for it to stand on its own legs. As of now, it is an adjunct of the larger space that is the Hindi series industry."

Aditya Shrikrishna is a freelance writer and film critic.



(from top) Stills from 'Ayali'; 'Suzhal: The Vortex'; 'Koosé Munisamy Veerappan'; and 'Vilangu'.

In 2022, there were 44 OTT originals released on streaming in the four south Indian languages while in Hindi, it was more than double that number

Of pirates, hard drives and cinephilia

India can be a difficult place for dedicated cinephiles. Piracy often jumps in to fill the gaps



Bootleg DVDs in Carriedo Market, Manila; and (below) a scene from 'Taxi'

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Last week, the chaos of house painting unearthed a cardboard box I'd deposited under a bed years ago. Inside were dozens of DVDs in thin plastic jackets with smudgy photocopied cover art. All were Film 101 standards—*Jules and Jim*, *Wings of Desire*, *Metropolis*, *Notorious*—bought between the ages of 21 and 26 at hole-in-the-wall shops in Mumbai and Chennai but most often in the dank underground of Delhi's Palika Bazaar. There was an unvarying routine: you would ask for foreign films, be offered porn, explain that you meant the other kind of foreign film, bargain half-heartedly, and stumble into the sunlight clutching Renoirs and Kitanos that may or may not play when you got home. It had all the unreliability and exhilaration of a drug deal.

WORLD VIEW

A look at what's making waves on the global cinema scene

It goes without saying these were bootleg DVDs, ripped from the original Criterion Collection and Kino and Artificial Eye releases. Thus, my first steps towards a broader appreciation of cinema were founded on piracy. It wasn't a moral conundrum at all. If you wanted to watch foreign films, this was just what you did.

A few years later, homegrown labels like Palador and Lumiere started releasing world cinema titles. I was earning by then, and graduated from bootlegs. But DVDs never really took root in India. Instead, by the end of the 2000s, torrents had taken over. They altered the reality of being a cinephile. Instead of hunting down a favourite director's films one title at a time, you could download a "filmography" overnight. Hard drives became the new currency: a mark of your seriousness was if you arranged by director, country and genre or just dumped them into a giant "movies" folder.

A decade and a half later, it's as much, if not more, of a struggle in India to access cinema that isn't recent or mainstream. I subscribe to six streaming platforms. I watch at least one film a week in theatres. I spend an unwise amount of money buying Blu-rays from US and UK retailers, because you just can't get them in India. And yet there's so much I miss out on, films that critics in other countries watch as a matter of course.

Three very different cases in the last month or so have led to discussions about piracy on social media. There was the 2023 Japanese film *Godzilla Minus One*, which played with great success in cinemas in various countries (predictably, it never made it to India). Last month it was released on streaming exclusively in



Japan, and was duly downloaded and streamed illegally elsewhere. The second case was on a much smaller scale. Vera Drew, director of the 2022 indie *The People's Joker*, which released in US theatres in April, quoted a post on X asking for a print of the film, saying, "I get it, I used to torrent, but this was an indie project made by a group of broke trans people. If you steal this film or torrent it, you are actively hurting the queer community." Responses were divided between those who felt it was only right for an artist to want to want their film seen by paying customers, and those who said it was hypocritical to admit to torrenting but not expect it when it came to your own work.

Then there was *Monkey Man*, a Mumbai-set action film in which Dev Patel fights right-wing politicians. It had a digital release in the UK in April following a spell in theatres. With no theatrical release in India likely (the Central Board of Film Certification still hasn't confirmed a ban, even after an RTI to the effect was filed), and no takers for streaming, a handful of viewers went ahead and did what they've done for the past two decades—bent the rules to watch a film they would otherwise never see. This resulted in some pearl-clutching and an alarmist piece by a Bollywood trade website seemingly out of airport looks to report on.

Piracy is a serious issue for the Indian film industry, with annual losses of ₹20,000 crore. It's not hard to see the root of the problem—this is a film-crazy nation where the theatrical experience has become prohibitively expensive. Even if money is not an issue, it's difficult to manage a well-rounded film diet—by which I mean watching new and old films in a variety of languages—without bending the rules. There are no dedicated repertory cinemas where arthouse titles, indies and restorations might play. There's no culture of physical media. Of all the streaming platforms, only one—MUBI—is dedicated to world cinema. Cinephiles across the country must get their fix at one of the three big film festivals—IFFI, MAMI or IFFK—cramming a year's worth of arthouse titles into a week of frenetic viewing.

One thing is certain: there was a romance to bootleg DVDs that can't be found in the cold advance of downloads. In his 2015 film *Taxi*, Iran's Jafar Panahi paid wry tribute to the cinema pirates of my youth. One of the passengers in Panahi's taxi is a bootleg DVD seller, a smiling, perspiring man who cannily uses the director's fame to seal a sale with a young customer. Later, he tells Panahi: "This is a cultural activity too. They don't show these movies in Iran. How else can students see foreign movies?" In the end, the movies must be seen.

The world in a grain of sand

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Four years ago, in under 100 words, Ranjan Adiga wrote a touching, word-perfect vignette of his life during the pandemic. Titled *Single Dad Lockdown* and published in the *Tiny Love Stories* section of the *New York Times*, the snippet was a masterclass in how much—rhythm, tension, emotion and catharsis—could be packed into barely a paragraph.

Now, in his debut collection *Leech & Other Stories*, Adiga builds on his remarkable skill. In each tightly controlled story, Adiga, a Nepali academic in the US, looks at the experience of people from Nepal—those living in the country, those considering leaving, and those who have already left. The collection brings a relatively fresh gaze to diaspora literature in the way stories set in domestic spaces—like *Dry Blood* or the titular *Leech*—look at cross-class relationships, and those set in professional spaces deal with identity.

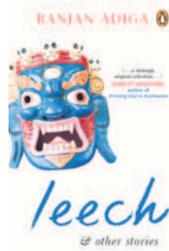
In *High Heels*, Adiga shows how fragile fledgling relationships can be when those involved—in this case Binod the bully and his sincere colleague Sarita—are unsure of their place within larger social structures. Through the story's setting in a workplace in Nepal, he exposes how Nepali (and any South Asian) society manages a woman's complaints about safety in the workplace, without dealing with the aggressor directly.

In contrast, in *The Diversity Committee*, Rakesh, a Nepali professor working at a university in the US is pulled up by the dean despite apologising for making a student uncomfortable with a hug. The interaction, however, takes a turn: the dean's seemingly sympathetic understanding of cultural difference is weaponised against Rakesh when the former asks whether it "might be cultural" that his body language and cues are misunderstood.

What shines in these stories is Adiga's lucid articulation of unfiltered, contradictory emotions. The conflicts may seem simple at first, but his careful prose—warmed by a deep understanding of everyday motivations, insecurities and joys—elevates them. For instance, in *A Short Visit*, the father of Nirmal, a Denver-based divorced Nepali man, flies in from Nepal, concerned about his son's evident loneliness. Adiga affords Nirmal a deep and vast interiority that unfolds into an exploration of the father-son dynamic with its mix of camaraderie, concern and an inability to freely communicate.

Each of the 10 stories contain the complexity of whole novels. While dwelling on aspiration, change and intimacy of various kinds, they reveal, upon any number of readings, new layers and angularities.

As a debut collection, *Leech & Other Stories* is a strong showcase of skill by an author who has deftly mined the delicacy of the short story, using it as it was meant to be—a site of endless possibility.



Leech & Other Stories: By Ranjan Adiga, Penguin Random House India, 256 pages, ₹399

Bhima Koregaon & the prisoners of democracy

Alpa Shah's detailed study records the systematic cruelty inflicted on the 16 activists accused of the Bhima Koregaon violence in 2018

Manoj Mitta

In the early years of the 19th century, it was a big deal for untouchables to be inducted into an army and treated no differently from caste Hindu soldiers. What came as an even greater honour was that the untouchables killed in action were commemorated by their names, alongside the soldiers who had no such social or religious stigma attached to their identity. It was, therefore, natural for B.R. Ambedkar to turn the colonial memorial of a brief but far-reaching battle that had taken place at Bhima Koregaon near Pune on 1 January 1818 into an annual pilgrimage for Dalits.

The Battle of Bhima Koregaon emerged as a symbol of Dalit emancipation because the army that had fled in the face of their valour was of the Peshwa regime, the Brahmin rulers who had acquired notoriety for enforcing barbaric forms of untouchability. The Dalit celebration, however, offended Hindu nationalists who mourned the same battle as the demise of the last Hindu empire. *The Incarcerations: Bhima Koregaon and the Search for Democracy in India* records some of the unimaginable ways in which this pent-up fury burst in collusion with the state in the wake of the 200th anniversary of the battle on 1 January 2018.

Running to over 550 pages, the book, written by Britain-based anthropologist Alpa Shah, reveals the lengths to which the state has gone to frame a group of academics, lawyers, journalists, activists and poets for their alleged role in the 2018 collision. The sordid drama of trumped-up proceedings unfolded over the years under the cover of the draconian Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA). Worse, it all began as a desperate attempt to divert attention from a case booked against local Hindutva leaders under the Prevention of Atrocities Act for orchestrating the violence to disrupt the grander than usual Dalit celebration at the Bhima Koregaon monument in 2018.

The Dalits could be denied justice for the violence suffered by them but, mercifully, given the general political compulsion of genuflecting to Ambedkar, they could not themselves be scapegoated for it. Instead, the state foisted terror charges on a low hanging fruit that has come to be branded as "Urban Naxals"—code word for those championing the interests of marginalised communities in the face of crony capitalism.

This is the first detailed book on the prolonged pre-trial incarcerations of the BK-16, or the 16 activists implicated in batches, on the basis of the belated UAPA case claiming that the riots that erupted at Bhima Koregaon on 1 January 2018 were due to provocative speeches delivered the previous day at a rally in Pune called the Elgar Parishad. Though this cross-caste rally against the growing Hindutva hegemony had been organised by a former Supreme Court judge (now deceased P.B. Sawant) and a former Bombay high court judge (B.G. Kolse Patil), the twist of facts peddled



A mural of B.R. Ambedkar in Tirupati district, Andhra Pradesh. AFP

by the official machinery alleged that Maoists, or left extremists, were behind the Elgar Parishad, and that they were also culpable for the riots the next morning 35km away.

In an elaborate bid to obfuscate the original case of the violence targeting Dalits, the allegations made in the subsequent case morphed into a Maoist conspiracy to overthrow the state and assassinate the Prime Minister. The logic evidently being that the more fantastic the charges flung at the left, the less the likelihood of the attack on Dalits by the right being remembered.

The book brings out this travesty of investigation with telling effect. It is at once scary and inspiring—scary for driving home the repercussions of democratic backsliding, and inspiring for its empathy in conveying the fortitude displayed by each of the BK-16. One takeaway from the book is its meticulous research demonstrating that Hindutva as a state practice is Brahmanism camouflaged as nationalism. This is exemplified by the brazenness with which the political hue of the violence was converted from saffron to red, specially to shield a Hindutva "guruji" named in the original case, Sambhaji Bhide.

Another highlight of the book is its chilling account of the evidence that was found to have been fabricated and remotely planted as letters in the computers of some of the BK-16. This discovery was made, thanks to the reports of an American digital forensic laboratory, which were highlighted by media outlets in India and abroad. In the case of prisoners' rights activist Rona Wilson,

for instance, the letters incriminating him and some of the other BK-16 were found to have been planted in his computer in Delhi over two years, even before the Elgar Parishad was held. The laptop of Father Stan Swamy, the octogenarian who died after his bail pleas on health grounds were repeatedly rejected, was found to have been subjected to a "malware campaign" for nearly five years.

Such complex manipulations of the legal system are presented in the book in a lucid and accessible manner. The author excels in telling the back stories of each of the BK-16. Particularly stirring is her portrayal of Sudha Bharadwaj, an IIT graduate turned lawyer who gave up her US citizenship to fight for the poor in Chattisgarh. But the narrative device of constantly interweaving the front and backstories does affect the book's pace. Given the humongous amount of legwork she had put in, Shah could well have presented these profiles separately after she was done with all the front stories of subversion and complicity.

One of the speakers at the Elgar Parishad, Jignesh Mewani, proved to be prescient for characterising New India as "Nai Peshwai". The book raises serious questions about the integrity and quality of the two law-enforcement agencies that handled the case in succession: the Maharashtra police and the National Investigation Agency. It draws attention to the scathing observations made against the police by Justice D.Y. Chandrachud in September 2018 on the arrest of Bharadwaj, along with four others of the

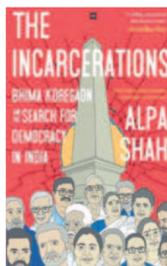
BK-16. Holding on the basis of material on record that the terror allegation against them was "taking liberties with the truth", Chandrachud castigated two senior police officers for "casting aspersions in the public media against persons whose conduct is still under investigation".

Chandrachud's direction to place the entire matter under a Supreme Court-monitored investigation did not, however, prevail as he was in the minority on the bench. His judgement still put the evidence against Bharadwaj in perspective. It noted that though she did not know Marathi, a letter ascribed to Bharadwaj was "an obvious fabrication" as it repeatedly used "Marathi forms of grammar or address". The book could have explored more such legal dimensions.

Ifa Delhi high court bench headed by Justice S. Muralidhar stopped the Pune police around the same time from whisking away human-rights activist Gautam Navlakha, it was because the police were so cavalier that they did not bother to arrive with an English translation of the relevant Marathi documents. All the book says is that his lawyers "somehow managed to get protection from the court to prevent Gautam's imprisonment" for a while. Such cursory treatment, despite the allegations of bias against Muralidhar from right wing voices and the consequent contempt proceedings against some of them.

The book refers to the varying fates of the BK-16 on the contentious issue of bail. But it makes no attempt to deal with those inconsistencies, apparent or real. But such deficiencies don't take away from the immense contribution *The Incarcerations* makes to the literature on democracy and human rights.

Manoj Mitta is an author, most recently of Caste Pride: Battles for Equality in Hindu India.



The Incarcerations: By Alpa Shah, HarperCollins India, 672 pages, ₹699

A study of maritime history that's all at sea

Radhika Seshan's book on maritime history lacks coherence and appeal, either for scholars or common readers

Aashique Iqbal

In *Empires of the Sea*, maritime historian Radhika Seshan attempts the ambitious task of presenting the story of India's engagement with the sea from the era of the Indus Valley civilisation to the 18th century. Despite consulting a shipload of books, Seshan's reach far exceeds her grasp. The final product is a book that, while well researched, is poorly organised and is often unable to forge a meaningful connection with the reader.

Empires of the Sea centres around the Indian peninsula to provide maritime history of the Indian subcontinent in a manner that aims to appeal to a general audience. Seshan claims that the region, which was often politically fragmented, is well worth studying by virtue of being at the centre of the Indian Ocean world, both geographically and economically. The book is largely concerned with trade and the circulation of commodities across India's eastern and western coasts. Seshan's key argument is that Indians have had a close engagement with the seas for millennia, onto colonial histori-

ography that has shown Indians to be unconcerned with maritime affairs.

The book has strengths worth applauding. First, it deploys a highly extensive literature on the Indian Ocean, with which the author is clearly well versed. A variety of works, both classic and cutting edge, from the vast realm that is Indian Ocean studies find mention through the book, including Sanjay Subrahmanyam, K.A.N. Sastri, Ashin Das Gupta, and M.N. Pearson. Second, the book makes excellent use of sculptures, such as those in the Jor Bangla temple in Bishnupur, West Bengal, and paintings, such as those in the Ajanta Caves in Maharashtra, to supplement secondary sources. The Jor Bangla sculptures, which also feature as photographs in the book, offer solid material evidence for Seshan's central claim that Indians were closely involved with shipping and trade in the pre-colonial era. Third, the book offers an engaging narrative of the late medieval and early modern era in its second half. We learn of the sustained contributions of merchant communities such as Armenians, Jews, Parsis and a variety of Arab groups to trade in South Asia.

The section on Indian responses to European trade and conquest, which focus on powerful entrepreneurs such as Malaya Chetti, a Vijayanagar politician who traded with the Dutch, paint a nuanced picture of the complexities of the era. The early history of European trade and violence in the Indian Ocean world is well chronicled. These strengths, however, ultimately fail to make up for the



Maritime engravings at Jor Bangla temple in Bishnupur, West Bengal.

GETTY IMAGES

book's many deficiencies.

The key problem is the lack of organisation of chapters, which makes it difficult to read, even for subject experts. Academic writers are often accused of taking a didactic tone in their writing by providing far too many sub-headings. The author, in this case, might have benefitted from this style of structuring as the writing often comes across as disorganised. The reader is given little indication of what the subject of a chapter or even sub-sections of the chapter might be. In chapter 2, for instance, a discussion on naval warfare in the Shilahara kingdom in 1265 CE pivots

to a discussion of trade between Bahrain and the Harappan civilisation, in the course of a couple of sentences. As such, it comes across as simultaneously well-researched and incoherent. This is particularly the case for the first two chapters, which deal with Indian Ocean geography and the early phases of maritime history.

Many of the book's issues appear to spring from an inability by the author to find a balance between what the book's blurb describes as "scholarly rigour" and "a storyteller's flair". On the one hand, Seshan appears to assume that her readers are experts. So, we are told, for instance,

about how Captain William Hawkins of the East India Company received nothing but ill-will at the Mughal court without being given any reason for why this happened. On the other hand, Seshan does not hesitate to make excessively simplistic statements like "as every age in its own time is modern, so is all technology modern".

Caught between establishing its author's academic credentials and engaging with a wider reading public, the book struggles to maintain a clear, consistent tone, afflicting the reader with a certain amount of whiplash. This need not be the case as can be seen in the works of other magisterial histories of India, which balance academic rigour with excellent storytelling, such as *India: A History* by John Keay and *A History of Modern India* by Ishita Banerjee Dube.

Through the length of the book Seshan is unable to decide whether she is writing for fellow academics or a wider public. The incoherence of the book's narrative means that it is often difficult to get any real sense of historical change. We learn next to nothing about how the ships of the Rashtrakutas might have differed from the Vijayanagar empire and how these, in

turn, might have been different from those of the Marathas. The key focus of the book is trade, with naval warfare a distant second, meaning that we learn next to nothing about other facets of maritime history.

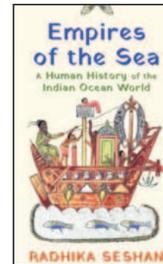
Piracy gets a handful of pages while law, religion and health receive almost none.

We learn, for instance, that Islam and Buddhism used the Indian Ocean as a highway to spread across the Indian Ocean world but find very little by way of mention of how these religions

were changed by their maritime transmission. Furthermore, there is little in the book on the social aspects of maritime history, including caste, class, and gender.

Seshan does succeed in substantiating her claim to rescue Indian maritime history from colonial historiography through the deployment of a substantial body of secondary literature from the field of Indian Ocean studies. Despite, or perhaps because of, this the final product is a poorly organised work that will appeal neither to dedicated academics nor to a wider public.

Aashique Iqbal is a historian of modern South Asia and author of The Aeroplane and the Making of Modern India.



Empires of the Sea: A Human History of the Indian Ocean World: By Radhika Seshan, Pan Macmillan India, 228 pages, ₹550



MINT SHORTS

Rupee rises 17 paise to close at 83.33 against US dollar

Mumbai: Rupee appreciated 17 paise to close at 83.33 (provisional) against the US dollar on Friday, on positive domestic markets and expectations of some fresh foreign inflows. Reports of selling of US dollars by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) also supported the rupee, forex traders said. At the interbank foreign exchange market, the local unit opened at 83.50 and touched an intraday high of 83.32 and a low of 83.50. **PTI**

Indian firms should reduce dependence on China: EAM

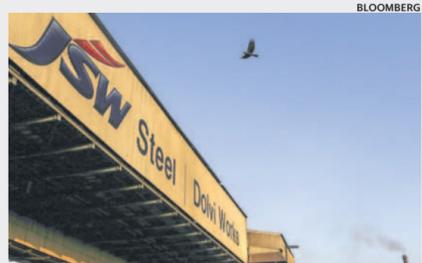


New Delhi: External affairs minister (EAM) S. Jaishankar on Friday emphasized the importance of Indian companies gradually reducing their dependence on Chinese imports and shifting towards local procurement. Speaking at the industry body Confederation of Indian Industry's (CII) annual business summit, Jaishankar highlighted the need for caution in business relations with China, despite ongoing trade. **RHIK KUNDU**

Brookfield plans to invest \$500 mn in Leap Green Energy

Brookfield Asset Management Ltd. is planning to invest about \$500 million for a majority stake in Indian renewable power firm Leap Green Energy Ltd, according to people familiar with the matter. If a deal is completed, Brookfield would likely own a majority stake in Leap Green, with the company's founding family The Rohatyn Group holding the rest, the people said. An investment could boost Leap Green's plans to expand its wind energy capacity in India, the people said. **BLOOMBERG**

JSW Steel's Q4 profit slips 65% as input costs rise



New Delhi: JSW Steel Ltd on Friday reported a 64.54% fall in its consolidated net profit for the March quarter to ₹1,299 crore mainly due to higher coking coal prices. The Sajjan Jindal-led company's consolidated revenue from operations fell 1.5% year-on-year to ₹46,269 crore. A Bloomberg poll of analysts had expected JSW Steel to post a profit of ₹1,661.35 crore for the March quarter on revenue of ₹44,676.34 crore. **NAMAN SURI**

NSE, BSE to conduct special trading session on Saturday

New Delhi: The National Stock Exchange (NSE) and BSE will conduct a special trading session in the equity and equity derivative segments on Saturday to check their preparedness for handling major disruptions at the primary site. The special live trading session will have an intra-day switchover from the primary site (PR) to disaster recovery (DR) site. There will be two sessions—the first from 9:15 am to 10 am from the PR, and the second from 11:30 am to 12:30 pm from the DR site. **PTI**

HC overturns arbitral award in Kalanithi Maran-Spicejet case

New Delhi: The Delhi High Court on Friday set aside a single judge bench order which had upheld an arbitral award asking SpiceJet and its promoter Ajay Singh to refund ₹579 crore plus interest to media baron Kalanithi Maran. A bench of Justices Yashwant Varma and Ravinder Dubeja allowed the appeals filed by Singh and SpiceJet challenging the single judge's 31 July 2023 order. **PTI**

IndianOil signs 2nd LNG deal with Total

FROM PAGE 16

"The gas market is expected to witness a glut starting 2026 with the US and Qatar ramping up their gas liquefaction capacities and that is when most long-term contracts would come into effect. India has a lot of appetite and is still looking for long-term contracts," said Prashant Vasisht, senior vice president & co-group head, corporate rating, Iera Ltd.

The gas market could witness a glut from 2026, with the US and Qatar raising their gas liquefaction capacities

"Gas prices are relatively lower now as demand for both the Europe and China has somewhat declined. Even during the last winter, they did not rise as the winter was warmer than expected," he added. Spot prices of natural gas

now are around \$10 per mmBtu (metric million British thermal unit). Prices had touched \$50-60mmBtu in 2022 at the height of the energy crisis due to the Ukraine war. India is a net importer of natural gas and imports about 55% of its total gas requirement.

According to the Petroleum Planning and Analysis Cell (PPAC), India's LNG imports increased 17.5% year-on-year in FY24 in terms of volume to 30,917 million standard cubic metre (mmscm). That figure equates to about 23.5 mtpa. However, despite rise in import volumes, India's gas import bill fell 22% to \$13.3 billion from \$17.1 billion in FY23 due to global fall in prices.

Guarantors face the heat with high dues, low recovery

FROM PAGE 16

claims of ₹10.46 trillion. The Supreme Court in November ruled that the IBC did not violate constitutional provisions on equality before law and right to life and personal liberty, giving a strong boost to the claims of lenders against personal guarantors. Experts say that although there was no specific stay on the provisions of the law earlier, court orders for maintaining status quo regarding the assets of guarantors had created uncertainty about personal insolvency provisions under the IBC.

Such orders made financial institutions unsure of initiating action against personal guarantors under provisions of the bankruptcy law, they said. In many cases, petitions have been withdrawn by lenders, indicating possible recovery out of court. "Ever since the Supreme Court cleared the air and settled once and for all that the personal guarantors provisions are constitutionally valid, banks and financial institutions are now aggressively invoking provisions pertaining to personal guarantors for corporate debtors," said Anjali Jain, partner, insolvency and restructuring practice, at Areness, a law firm.

More than 380 cases against personal guarantors have been admitted in tribunals since 2019, when IBC provisions on



An SC ruling gave a boost to the claims of lenders against personal guarantors **MINT**

personal guarantors took effect. Often, what businesses have on their books is plant and machinery, while high valued real estate assets may be with the personal guarantors.

Hence, lenders may find it more appropriate in some cases to move against personal guarantors under the IBC so that those high-value assets may also be available for debt resolution.

When compared with the debt resolution process involving companies, insolvency of personal guarantors is a quicker and more ruthless legal remedy directly covering the personal assets of delinquent promoters and personal guarantors, said Jain.

The Supreme Court's ruling favouring lenders can now make the probability of resolution or repayment much higher in the coming few months, she added.

IKS Health, backed by Rare, revives IPO plan

It could be largely an offer for sale by early angel investors, shareholders

Ranjani Raghavan & Dipti Sharma
MUMBAI

Digital health platform IKS Health, which is backed by investors Rakesh and Rekha Jhunjhunwala's Rare Enterprises, is working towards a \$350-million initial public offering (IPO), three people with knowledge of the development said, asking to remain anonymous.

The IPO contours are still being worked out, but it is expected to be largely an offer for sale by early angel investors and other shareholders, including Rare Enterprises. IKS Health has appointed ICICI Securities Ltd, Nomura, Jefferies, JPMorgan, and JM Financial to manage the issue.

The company had explored an IPO in August 2023 and was looking to raise ₹2,500 crore, or about \$300 million, a CNBC report at the time said. IKS Health eventually did not pursue the plan at the time.

The company expects to finalise and file draft papers for the IPO over the next 60 days, one of the people mentioned above said.

Rare Enterprises owns a 54% stake in IKS Health. The company has raised \$14.5 million in funding from angel investors.

IKS Health declined to comment, while the merchant banks did not immediately respond to queries. The last company that Rare Enterprises backed that went public was Concord Biotech in 2023.

Founded in 2006, IKS Health, operated



IKS Health offers backend administrative, clinical and patient documentation, and operational services to hospitals. **MINT**

by Inventurus Knowledge Solutions Ltd, offers backend administrative, clinical and patient documentation, and operational services to hospitals. The company has more than 14,000 employees and said it

Aquity Solutions, a US-based clinical documentation and medical coding provider, for \$200 million. At the time, IKS Health said that both companies together would have a combined revenue of \$330 million following the acquisition.

In 2022, IKS Health acquired a strategic stake in healthcare payments analytics and data science company Sift Health.

Another healthtech company that recently made a debut on the Indian bourses is Indegene. The Carlyle and Nadathur Fareast-backed company caters to various aspects of the pharmaceutical industry, including drug development, clinical trials, and regulatory submissions.

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MARKET DEBUT

THE company had explored an IPO in August 2023 and was looking to raise ₹2,500 crore

IT has more than 14,000 employees and said it serves over 150,000 clinicians

THE firm reported a profit of ₹232.9 crore on consolidated sales of ₹767.8 crore for FY 2021-22

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Following that, IKS Health acquired

Siemens wind biz up for sale

FROM PAGE 16

takes over from Jochen Eickholt. From 1 June, the integration of Siemens Energy and Siemens Gamesa will begin.

Earlier this month, Bruch told analysts that Siemens Gamesa was still working through the resolution of the quality matters and the off-shore ramp-up.

"We will only focus on attractive markets where we have a stable regulatory framework and attractive profit pool, and a value-based customer landscape and where there's a match between the market requirements and our offering," he said, presenting a turnaround plan on 8 May during the company's earnings call.

"We may also serve other markets opportunistically, but only if it makes real commercial sense," he added, noting that Europe and the US fit this criteria and it will ramp up operations in these geographies.

"We will not try to defend markets in which there is no money to be made in the medium term as far as margins are concerned," Bruch told Recharge, an energy-focused news platform on 8 May, refer-



In India, Siemens Gamesa was established in 2009, and has an installed capacity of 9 GW.

ring to Siemens Gamesa.

In India, Siemens Gamesa was established in 2009, and has an installed capacity of 9 GW.

The company has blade factories in Nellore (Andhra Pradesh), a nacelle factory in M a m a n d u r (Chennai, Tamil Nadu), and an operations and maintenance centre in Red Hills (Chennai).

The company is the market leader with a 40% market

share, according to consultancy Wood Mackenzie.

In the Indian market, Gamesa competes with players such as Suzlon Energy, which is listed on the bourses and has seen a surge in its stock price post a restructuring of debt, in which its lenders reportedly took a haircut of 62%.

"The performance of Suzlon on the stock market also gives a lot of comfort to other EPC players such as Gamesa on the lucrative valuation that they can extract," the second person added.

"There has been a rerating in the industry and Gamesa will benefit from it."

Meanwhile, on 14 May, BSE-listed Siemens Ltd said it will demerge and separately list its energy business, on the lines of a global carve-out by its German parent three years ago.

The new company will mirror the shareholding of Siemens Ltd, and shareholders will receive one share of Siemens Energy India Ltd for every share of Siemens Ltd.

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The company is the market leader with a 40% market share, according to consultancy Wood Mackenzie

Small stocks soaring, but beware the risks

FROM PAGE 16

away from the average value.

So, the standard deviation for the smallest group is 107%, which falls to 91% for the next and 26% for the largest group. From an investment perspective, this means while investors may consider taking exposure to small caps, it must be within their risk capacity.

Within small stocks, the shares that have shown the maximum returns are Waaree Renewable Technologies, Filatex Fashions, Pharmaid Pharmaceuticals, and Variman Global Enterprises, among others.

However, not all the stocks have performed well. For the smallest two groups—m-cap below ₹30 crore and m-cap of ₹30 crore to ₹100 crore—out of 864 companies, over 150 have generated negative returns.

Further, 71 companies have seen their m-cap erode by more than half during the period. In terms of sectors, about 100 small companies are active in trading, possibly because this business can be run with a small capital base. The industry's share declines



Of the 864 smallest of small stocks, over 150 have given negative returns. **PEXELS**

as it moves up the m-cap group. The 2,400 companies covered in the analysis had a total m-cap of ₹145 trillion in 2018, which has risen to ₹357 trillion by 2024.

Despite the mouth-watering returns, the share of small stocks in the total m-cap was minuscule at 0.22% in the smallest two groups in 2018. The share has increased to 0.57% due to higher returns generated by the two groups. The top two groups accounted for more than 90% of m-cap share in 2018, which has come down marginally in 2024.

Malayalam films ride universal themes to success

FROM PAGE 16

have garnered widespread acclaim, Bijli added.

Sampat of Cinepolis agreed that Malayalam cinema's traction in states outside Kerala has historically been limited, largely due to the strong regional identity and cultural specificity of its films.

"A significant percentage of Malayalam films is deeply rooted in Kerala's regional culture, which may not always resonate with audiences from other Indian states. Moreover, the industry's focus on distributing films primarily within Kerala has constrained its reach beyond the state borders," Sampat said.

However, a strategic shift towards more universally appealing narratives, better production values, and wider releases, both domestically and internationally has helped the industry tremendously.

Pan India success aside, film critics and entertainment industry experts say the success of recent Malayalam films has to do with makers focusing on native audiences first and the precedence already set in Kerala where viewers enjoy varied themes and sensibilities and are ready to visit cinemas as long as something new is on offer.

Unlike star-driven industries such as Telugu and Hindi, it is the script writer who pitches ideas to lead stars in the Malayalam industry, after which producers and directors come on board, making sure the writing is compelling. In Hindi and Telugu cinema, on the other hand, projects are put together as proposals for top stars who agree to work with producers, after which scripts are hunted for.

Film distributor Akshaye Rathi said the exhibition infrastructure in Kerala also stands strong because top stars churn out films at a consistent pace and often focus on limited showcasing within the state. Taking the film to other markets is seen as a bonus, and promotions are kept at a minimum.

India weighing aircraft boneyard for spares, parking

FROM PAGE 16

ment facility for planes. During the covid years, airlines were left with several planes stranded because there weren't enough passengers to fly, and had to pay hefty sums to park their aircraft at commercial airports.

Merely as a retirement facility, however, aircraft boneyards may not yet make much commercial sense in India. Most Indian airlines lease aircraft from global manufacturers rather than take ownership of planes.

The exception is India's largest carrier, Interglobe Aviation Ltd, or IndiGo, whose management recently stated during a post-earnings call that the airline was looking to invest more in owning aircraft and engines. IndiGo increased its owned fleet to 26 aircraft in December, from 16 in September and 14 in June.

But an aircraft boneyard

would make sense for an airline like Go First, whose 54 leased aircraft have been grounded since the company filed for bankruptcy in May 2023. The Delhi High Court last month ordered the Directorate General of Civil Aviation to deregister the aircraft leased to Go First so its lessors could fly back their planes.

Davinder Sandhu, co-founder and chairperson at consultancy Primus Partners, said it was not clear if there was commercial viability for aircraft boneyards in India.

"India's civil aviation sector is relatively young and growing fast with the acquisition of new aircraft. (But) since obsolescence on the civilian aircraft side is not an issue, it will not be viable to consider the expensive real estate at airports for boneyards," said Sandhu.

"However, one has seen continuing commercial turbulence in the industry post-



The US has at least half a dozen boneyards for aircraft. **PEXELS**

covid, with parked aircraft taking up precious space. In this context, it may be viable to develop parking boneyard facilities away from congested airports," he added. "This will release space at airports for enhanced operations, and lower parking costs for airlines. A good example is the Pinal Airpark in Marana, Arizona."

In India, AAI's preliminary

assessment has indicated that aircraft boneyards can be established at airstrips around special economic zones and at small airports.

The US has at least half a dozen aircraft boneyards, for both civilian and military planes, including some that are popular for their collection of vintage jets. Some of these boneyards are used not only for scrapping parts from retired aircraft, but also for storage, modification and repair. Aircraft boneyards came into being after World War II in 1946. Following the war, the US military needed to store thousands of fighter aircraft and bomber jets such as the B-29s and C-47s.

As these aircraft were part of the US's strategic reserve, the military found a place with low humidity, low rainfall, and high altitude so as to reduce corrosion and prevent rust in the planes.

The US is the world's largest

boneyard market, with seven aircraft graveyards. The largest lies in the Arizona desert inside the Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, where more than 4,000 aircraft can rest. Argentina, Brazil, and Chile too have a large number of boneyards.

"There are almost 30,000 private owners of aircraft in the US. Brazil has over 20,000 general aviation aircraft," said Mark D. Martin MRAeS, chief executive officer of aviation research firm Martin Consulting. "Such concepts work more successfully where there is a higher ownership of aircraft."

India currently has a total fleet of about 3,000 aircraft.

Aircraft boneyards are somewhat similar to ship graveyards, where decommissioned ships are sent to be dismantled. India boasts of the world's largest shipbreaking yard, in Alang, Gujarat, which dismantles about half of the world's sea vessels.



Trent, BEL may join Nifty 50 index: Nomura analysis

Mayur Bhalerao & Ram Sahgal
MUMBAI

Tata Sons-promoted Trent and state-owned Bharat Electronics (BEL) could replace LTI Mindtree and Divi's Laboratories in the Nifty 50 in the bellwether index's upcoming reconstitution in end-September, early analysis by brokerage Nuvama indicates.

The inclusion of Trent and BEL is projected to bring in an inflow of \$429 million and \$361 million, respectively, to the counters. Conversely, the exclusion of LTI Mindtree and Divi's Labs could see outflows of \$186 million and \$213 million, respectively, said Abhilash Pagaria, head of Nuvama Alternative & Quantitative Research.

The reaction of investors will be to front load Trent and BEL and to sell Divi's and LTI Mindtree over the next few weeks, believes Pagaria.

"This rejig will once again demonstrate that only top performers earn a seat in the Nifty 50," he added. Pagaria's analysis highlights LTI Mindtree as the most likely candidate for exclusion due to Trent's superior performance against the inclusion criteria. Divi's Laboratories could potentially retain its spot if it outperforms Bharat Electronics by a substantial margin (25%) and sustains that lead until the end of July. However, this scenario is considered unlikely.

LTI Mindtree and Divi's Labs have gained only 0.5% and 19.6%, respectively, over the past year, while Trent and BEL have soared by an impressive



LTI Mindtree and Divi's Labs may be replaced in the index in end-September. MINT

208% and 129%, respectively. This significant outperformance strengthens Nuvama's prediction of their inclusion.

"Precisely, Trent is the closest inclusion contender, followed by Bharat Electronics. As of now, the only stock which is closer to Bharat Electronics is Hindustan Aeronautics. If Hindustan Aeronautics outperforms Bharat Electronics by more than 20% soon and stays there till the end of July, then it will have a higher chance," Nuvama's report said.

The deadline for determining the final cut-off based on average market capitalization is the end of July. The official announcement regarding the index changes will be made in the latter half of August, with the rejig implemented on 30 September.

An important caveat exists. Over 150 stocks qualify for inclusion based on quantitative factors, but haven't received approval for derivative trading (F&O) from market regulator Sebi. The regulator has not greenlit new F&O inclusions.

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India, Eurasian Economic Union to begin FTA talks

This comes at a time when Russia is facing western sanctions over its invasion of Ukraine.

Rhik Kundu & Dharendra Kumar
NEW DELHI

India plans to begin negotiations for a free trade agreement (FTA) with the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), which is expected to significantly increase trade between the regions, two people aware of the matter said, requesting anonymity.

The EEU, comprising five post-Soviet states—Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan—has exchanged trade data with the Indian side ahead of negotiations, one of the persons mentioned above said.

"Both sides haven't met yet. After the assimilation of data, the EEU and India are expected to meet for negotiations in the next stage to take the process forward," the person added.

There is a willingness from both the Russian and the Indian side to get the trade agreement done, the process for which will now likely kick off after the new government takes over, said the other person mentioned above.

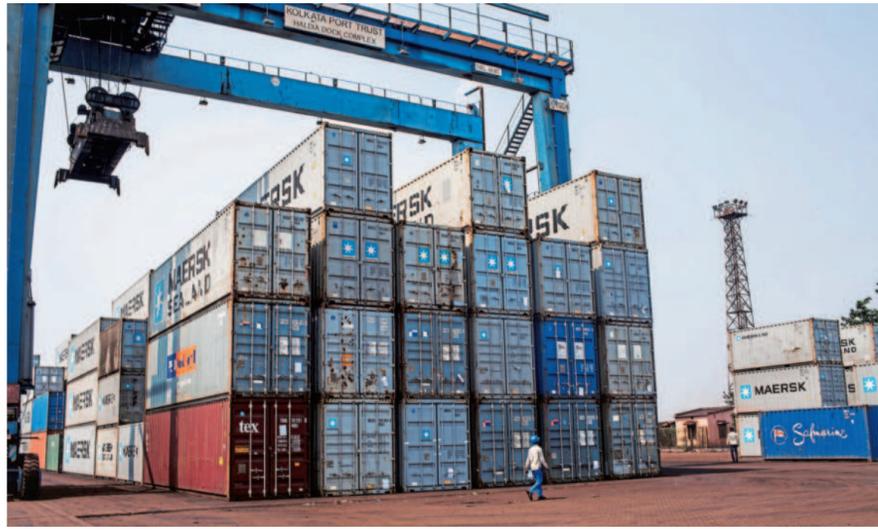
"The FTA will improve trade between the Russian bloc and India," this person added.

Spokespersons of India's commerce ministry and the Russian embassy didn't respond to emailed queries.

Talks for an FTA between EEU and India come at a time when Russia is facing sanctions from major Western economies following its invasion of Ukraine.

These sanctions have impacted trade and subsequently economy of Russia, while cutting off access to prominent Western-backed financial systems.

The SWIFT ban against Russian banks is one of several international sanctions against the Russian



The FTA is expected to improve trade between the Russian bloc and India. BLOOMBERG

regime imposed by the European Union and other western countries aimed at weakening Russia's economy.

The sanctions against have also led to an increase in local currency usage for settlement of trade between Russia and its trading partners, including India.

The trade deal between the EEU and India is also likely to improve Indian exports into Russia. At present, trade is skewed in favour of Russia.

During FY24, India's exports to Russia stood at \$4.26 billion, while imports stood at \$61.42 billion, up from \$3.15 billion exports and \$46.21 billion imports in the previous fiscal. India's top imports from Russia

include crude oil and petroleum products, coal, fertilizers, vegetable oil, pearl, iron & steel and newsprint.

Its top exports to Russia include pharma & drugs, iron & steel, processed minerals, marine products, telecom instruments and electronic machinery.

A recent report by economic think tank Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI) states that FTAs have emerged as the most important trade promotion tool for India.

"India targets of having an FTA with all major world economies in 2024-25. Beginning 2024, it is in the advanced stages of negotiating FTAs with the UK, Oman, USA, the EU, Switzerland, Norway, Russia, Sri Lanka and Peru," the GTRI report also

said. "This means by the end of 2024, India may have completed or nearing completion of an FTA with all major economies except China," it added.

Meanwhile, foreign minister S. Jaishankar on Friday said the rise in trade with Russia should not be seen as a temporary phenomenon as more economic opportunities are emerging between the nations.

"As that country turns eastwards, fresh economic opportunities are presenting themselves... the spike in our trade and new areas of cooperation should not be regarded as a temporary phenomenon," he said at an industry event. rhik.kundu@livemint.com



Delhivery announces drone research plan

Priyamvada C
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BENGALURU

Logistics firm Delhivery reported a rise in fourth-quarter revenue on Friday as it clocked strong volumes in segments such as express parcel, part truckload freight, and truckload services.

Revenue from services grew to ₹2,076 crore in the quarter from ₹1,860 crore a year ago, while loss after tax narrowed to ₹69 crore from ₹159 crore a year ago.

On an annual basis, revenue from services rose 13% to ₹8,142 crore in FY24, while losses narrowed to ₹249 crore from ₹1,008 crore in FY23.

"FY24 has been a crucial year for us. We delivered consistent service levels, significantly improved profitability, completed a large portion of our planned long-term capital investments, and achieved material working-capital improvement", CEO Sahil Barua said in a statement.

Analysts on average estimated the company would report a quarterly revenue of ₹2134.20 crore and a loss of ₹23 crore, according to Bloomberg data.

Shortly before announcing its Q4 results, the company said it has incorporated a wholly owned subsidiary, Delhivery Robotics Pvt Ltd, to conduct research and development in drone technology and manufacturing.

The proposal was approved at the company's board meeting on 17 May. The company has a proposed authorised capital of ₹5 crore.

Govt seeks docs' inputs on over-the-counter drug sale

Somrita Ghosh
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NEW DELHI

The Centre has set a three-month deadline for a doctors committee to come up with suggestions on what drugs can be sold over the counter, according to officials aware of the matter, in an attempt to stop random sale of non-prescription drugs.

The expert committee consists of eight members, including doctors from Lady Harding Medical College (New Delhi), Safdarjung Hospital (New Delhi), Postgraduate Institute of Medical Education and Research (Chandigarh), and SMS Medical College (Jaipur).

The members of the panel will examine matters regarding amendment of the Drugs Rules



The Centre's move is an attempt to stop random sales of non-prescription drugs. MINT

in line with recommendations from the Drugs Technical Advisory Board (DTAB).

Over-the-counter (OTC) drug sales in India are a matter of global concern as they are seen to be a leading cause of anti-microbial resistance of medicines. Most chemists provide medicines, including anti-

biotics, without any prescriptions.

The amendment is expected to put a check on rampant misuse of the OTC system. Only certain drugs will be allowed to be sold without a prescription.

The expert committee will be recommending which drugs can be sold over the counter

without a prescription.

According to the Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation (CDSCO), the apex drug regulatory body, all experts appointed to the sub-committee needs to adhere to the concept of confidentiality and cannot have any conflict of interest.

The Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) stated that various committees have been formed on the OTC issue, and these will provide advice to the sub-committee.

Additionally, the CDSCO has recommended that the sub-committee can co-opt experts.

According to Drugs Controller General India (DCGI), Dr. Rajeev Singh Raghuvanshi, the

development is in response to requests from a few drug for the OTC sale of specific drug formulations including those used in pain relief balms and gels, aspirins, cough lozenges nasal sprays used for asthma, allergic rhinitis and congestion.

Two years ago, the health ministry released a draft notification proposing changes to Schedule K of the Drugs Rules, 1945. These changes would include clauses allowing drugs to be sold over the counter and exempting sales from the need for a prescription from a registered doctor.

According to an official notice from the DCGI, the sub-committee will investigate the amendment request.

Over-the-counter sale is a global concern; it's said to be leading to anti-microbial resistance of medicines

Govt plans online registry of drugs

Priyanka Sharma
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NEW DELHI

The health ministry plans to create a central online registry of drugs to ensure that different drugs are not marketed under the same name, or names that sound similar.

The Directorate General of Health Services has told the Office of the Controller General of Patents, Designs and Trademarks to strictly implement rules on brand names.

Confusion in the names of the drugs is a common cause of medication error among patients and pharmacists.

"There is a plan to restrict the manufacturing and marketing of different drugs with same brand name (including look alike and sound alike). This is being done to ensure patient safety as many times it creates confusion among the patients that two different drugs treating two different conditions are same. The matter will further be discussed in the next Drugs

Consultative Committee being organised by Drugs Controller General of India," said the official.

"The permissions on medicines were given based on generic names considering drug salt, for example—paracetamol tablets IP and manufacture used to develop in whichever name. Therefore, this confusion in drug brand name exists. As of now, there is no central database for drug brand names. For instance,

The health ministry wants to make sure that different drugs are not marketed under the same or similar names

there is no way for state drug controller to verify the brand name of the drug which got permission in the past," said the second official.

"Previously, there have been incidents where drugs used for female health, got permission for acidity control in some other state. This created huge medication errors...," said the second official adding that there is a plan to develop central drug repository in the country.

Queries sent to the health ministry spokesperson remained unanswered till press time.

MakeMyTrip starts refund option for visa rejects

Varuni Khosla
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NEW DELHI

About 10 months ago, a user took to social news website Reddit to complain about how online travel agency MakeMyTrip had not refunded his money for a holiday package to Greece booked with the OTA. Despite concerns about visa delays, the traveller paid in two instalments and submitted his visa documents, verified by the travel agency's visa team.

However, he did not receive a visa in June and promptly wanted a refund. This isn't an isolated case. Many users chimed in to dis-

cuss the same experiences they had with this website and others. The visa cancellation issue is a big problem for holidaymakers. Many have sought a refund when their holiday visa has not come through, even when they have booked non-cancellable tickets and hotels.

Following a spate of cancellations due to visa challenges and lack of availability, the online travel service provider has launched a new third-party insurance product for its travellers called "visa guarantee", which ensures a full refund of the flight fare to the customer in case their tourist visa gets rejected by the embassy, the company's

co-founder and group chief executive Rajesh Magow said.

In the company's recently announced Q4 results earlier this week, Magow said India is one of the top three fastest growing out-

bound tourism markets and is expected to become the fourth largest global spender on travel by 2030. With the country being a key source market and major tourism destination, foreign tourism boards have been trying to lure Indians with incentive campaigns, simplified visa requirements and

new initiatives to attract more Indian outbound travellers.

However, tourist visa rejections remain a huge issue and that is probably why the company decided to introduce this feature. The

Post a spate of cancellations, MMT has launched the insurance product called 'visa guarantee'

add-on feature at an additional cost is a third party insurance product and the insurer offers a 100% refund if the traveller cancels 24 hours prior to departure. This includes regular tourist and e-visas but not visa on arrival. Of course, there has to be a formal rejection letter which needs to be presented.

The option does not provide coverage for the inability to fly resulting from a delay in visa processing by the embassy or delays in the visa application process by the traveller.

Interestingly, there is no standard fee. It can be a few hundred to a few thousand rupees to less popular locales in Europe to several thousands to regions like Australia. In general, while travel agencies are not responsible for any visa issues, the consumer complaints authority or Jago Grahak Jago by the ministry of consumer affairs and consumer courts come down hard on travel agencies when they do not provide these types of refunds.

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CEO Pallia overhauls Wipro top management

Jas Bardia
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BENGALURU

As Srinivas Pallia, chief executive officer and managing director, takes on the mantle of bringing growth back to Wipro Ltd, he is relying on his trusted lieutenants to steer the ship. On 17 May, Amit Choudhary put in his papers as chief operating officer (COO) to pursue opportunities outside the organization, as per Wipro's release to stock exchanges. Choudhary's exit marks the second such departure of former chief executive officer (CEO) Thierry Delaporte's three trusted men in the Bengaluru-based information technology company's executive committee, in less than two months of Pallia taking over as CEO. Chief delivery officer Ajit Mahale is the only executive left in the committee who was brought in from Cagimini by Thierry when he joined as CEO in July 2020. Sanjeev Jain will be the new COO. He joined Wipro as its global head of business operations in August 2023 and has expertise in workforce management, having worked with GE Capital for more than a decade in the capacity of the boss of its business process management services and global servicing division. Over the last year, Sanjeev's expertise in supply chain management has prompted the top management to promote him. Along with being COO, Jain will oversee Global Business Operations, the Chief Information Office, the Chief Information Security Office, and the Enterprise Risk Management function and continue to work with Wipro's leadership teams across the organisation.

Cremica's ₹500 cr fundraise plan will help investor exit

The packaged foods and condiment maker also intends to diversify its product portfolio

Suneera Tandon & Ranjani Raghavan
MUMBAI

Packaged foods and condiment maker Cremica Foods Industries Ltd is in talks to raise ₹500 crore from fresh investors as it plans to enter new categories as well as allow early investors to exit. The ongoing fundraise in Cremica will provide an exit to advisory firm Kroll Inc and several of India Agri Business Fund limited partners, who are largely foreign development finance institutions. Private equity firm Rabo Equity Advisors, which was the investment advisors for India Agri Business Fund II acquired a minority stake in Cremica for \$15 million in June 2016. In 2022, Rabo Equity Advisors—where the Dutch lender Rabo Bank held stake—sold its partnership in India Agri Business Fund to advisory firm Kroll Inc's asset management unit. An email seeking comments from Kroll did not elicit a response. The company has appointed an investment banker to run the mandate, said people familiar with the fundraise. "A few investors are in talks," one person familiar with the deal said, asking to remain anonymous. Cremica Foods Industries is run by Akshay Bector, chairman and managing director. The Bector family also operates Mrs Bectors Food Specialties Ltd, founded by Akshay's mother Rajni Bector. However, in 2013 the family, including the three Bector brothers, agreed on a settlement in which the biscuit and bakery business was demerged from the condiments business. Mrs Bectors Food Specialties Ltd (bakery) is run by Anoop Bector, while Cremica Foods (condiments) is run by Akshay Bector. In December 2020, Mrs Bectors Food Specialties Ltd hit the stock markets. Meanwhile, Cremica Foods has a large business-to-business arm where it supplies ketchups and condiments to



Cremica Foods Industries chairman and managing director Akshay Bector.

fast food chains such as McDonald's and Subway in India. It also has a branded foods business where it sells ketchups, sandwich spreads, salad dressings, chutney and mayonnaise under the Cremica brand, apart from selling to the hotel restaurant and catering (HORECA)

(IABF-II), by selling a minority stake. IABF-II is a \$200 million private equity (PE) fund targeted at expansion and growth of Indian food and agribusiness companies in India by Rabobank along with other investors. Cremica Food was the first investment by the fund.

Bector. The company will also eye a public market listing 12 months post its fund raise, said Bector. The company exited FY24 with a topline of ₹340 crore. The pandemic impacted the company's retail or branded business, which it is now trying to build back by expanding distribution of its Cremica branded products in retail shelves, Bectors said. Its products are retailed in 20,000 outlets. The company already operates a food park in Himachal Pradesh where it plans to double capacity this fiscal. "There's a new capacity being added in the food park this year, and we're expecting to almost double capacity by the end of the current financial year," he said. This will require a capex of ₹20 crore to ₹30 crore to be funded from internal accruals and debt, he said.

EXPANSION PLANS

THE fundraise will provide an exit to Kroll, several of India Agri Business Fund limited partners

CREMICA has a large B2B arm where it supplies ketchups and condiments to fast food chains

THE company will also eye a public market listing 12 months after its fundraise

IN 2015, Cremica Food Industries had raised \$15 million from Rabo Equity Advisors Pvt. Ltd

industry. A few years ago, it also launched Opera branded chips. In 2015, Cremica Food Industries had raised \$15 million from Rabo Equity Advisors Pvt. Ltd, the investment advisors for India Agri Business Fund II

"The total fundraising primary and secondary could be in the range of about ₹500 crore. Business plans are developing around that. Depending on the quality of investors, valuations could touch almost ₹1,800 crore," said Akshay

Earlier this week, the Hinduja group informed lenders that it is waiting for a few more regulatory and legal clearances before it makes the full payment of ₹8,000 crore in cash for the acquisition of Reliance Capital (RCap), according to another person aware of the matter. Both persons spoke on condition of anonymity. As per the orders of the National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT) and Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (Irdai), the implementation of the resolution plan is subject to all neces-



The Hinduja group has said it is waiting for a few more clearances before making full payment of ₹8,000 crore in cash for RCap. MINT

'Hindujas must pay RCap dues in time'

Gopika Gopakumar
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MUMBAI

Lenders have refused to extend the deadline for repayment of Reliance Capital's dues by the Hinduja group, suspecting a deliberate attempt by the group to delay implementation of the resolution plan, according to a person aware of the matter. The lenders have made it clear that the deadline will not be extended beyond 27 May, the person added.

sary approvals from other statutory, regulatory and judicial bodies in connection with this share transfer.

An email sent to the Hinduja group and WhatsApp message to the RCap administrator were unanswered till press time.

The first issue to crop up was that both Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) and Irdai have still to approve the restructured consortium that will now acquire RCap. Earlier this month, the Hinduja group had changed the structure of the consortium bidding for RCap by inducting four new entities led by Aasia Enterprises to meet the foreign direct investment (FDI) ceiling requirement of 74% for the insurance sector.

The lenders have made it clear that the deadline will not be extended beyond 27 May

Then, as the matter is still pending in the Supreme Court following a petition filed by the Torrent Group, which has opposed the second round of the auction for RCap, the payment cannot be made by 27 May, i.e. within three months of the NCLT approval. "We are in no mood to extend the deadline," said the first person cited earlier.



The telco intends to cover 40% of its revenue base with 5G services in the next 24-30 months. MINT

Vodafone Idea to begin 5G services in six months: CEO

Gulveen Aulakh
gulveen.aulakh@livemint.com
NEW DELHI

Vodafone Idea Ltd (Vi) is in advanced discussions with its vendors as it expects to begin offering 5G services within the next six months, chief executive officer (CEO) Akshaya Moondra said, adding that the third largest telecom company had completed the minimum rollout obligations as mandated by the government, in four circles. While it intends to cover 40% of its revenue base with 5G services in the next 24-30 months, Vi's top priority will be to arrest its declining subscriber numbers by raising its 4G coverage to match rivals. "We expect to start rolling out 5G six months from now. The main focus will be on main cities or areas where there is a large concentration of 5G devices. 5G investments will be a bit iterative in terms of timing, we will make investments as the market evolves," he said. "We will be able to effectively utilize the capex by launching 5G now. We have have applied for the Bihar and

Mumbai circles, and are in talks with tech partners for 5G. We are also in advanced stages of trials for OrAN and VRAN," Moondra said in the earnings call. The telco has been in discussions with companies including Nokia and Ericsson for 5G gear. It had done a pilot with open RAN provider Mavenir, which is likely to lead to a commercial deal in the coming months. The capex spends—of about ₹55,000 crore over three years—will mostly be used for setting up 5G in 17 priority circles, and for improving 4G coverage across the country. The top executive said capacity upgrade to address congestion will be done over the next few months, while coverage required to be competitive will be taken care of during the coming 12-15 months. On Thursday, Vi reported a widening of its losses to ₹7,666 crore for the quarter ended 31 March, from ₹6,424 crore a year ago. Average revenue per user, a key metric of profitability, improved to ₹146, up 7.6% on-year primarily aided by change in entry level plan and subscriber upgrades.

Vodafone Idea has been in discussions with companies including Nokia and Ericsson for 5G gear

No. 10/12/2016-NCLT (Pt-IV)/
Govt. of India
NATIONAL COMPANY LAW TRIBUNAL
6th Floor, Block-3, CGO Complex, Lodhi Road,
New Delhi-110003
Dated: 15.04.2024

Notification
Subject: Filling up posts of Deputy Registrar in National Company Law Tribunal Bench on deputation basis.

Applications are invited for filling up the following posts in National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT) for filling up existing/future vacancies in its benches as detailed below:

S/N	Post	Bench	Pay level	No. of posts (Tentative)
1	Deputy Registrar	Mumbai	Level-12 (Rs. 78800-209200)	1

2. The selected candidate will be required to serve at NCLT Bench for which he/she is selected.

3. Last date for receipt of applications will be 60 days from the date of publication of the advertisement in the Employment News/Rozgar Samachar.

4. For Further details please visit www.nclt.gov.in (under "Career")

(Naveen Kumar Kashyap)
Secretary-in-Charge
National Company Law Tribunal
CBC 07118/12/0003/2425

No. 10/12/2016-NCLT (Pt-IV)/
Govt. of India
NATIONAL COMPANY LAW TRIBUNAL
6th Floor, Block-3, CGO Complex, Lodhi Road,
New Delhi-110003
Dated: 01.05.2023

Notification
Subject: Filling up posts of Joint Registrar in National Company Law Tribunal Benches on deputation basis.

Applications are invited for filling up the following posts in National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT) for filling up existing/future vacancies in its benches as detailed below:

Sl. No.	Post	Bench	Pay level	No. of posts (Tentative)
1.	Joint Registrar	New Delhi	Level-13 (Rs. 123100-215900)	1

2. The selected candidate will be required to serve at NCLT Bench for which he/she is selected.

3. Last date for receipt of applications will be 60 days from the date of publication of the advertisement in the Employment News/Rozgar Samachar.

4. For Further details please visit www.nclt.gov.in (under "Career")

(Naveen Kumar Kashyap)
Secretary-in-Charge
National Company Law Tribunal
CBC 07118/12/0007/2425

MADHYA PRADESH PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICES CORPORATION LTD.
(A Government of Madhya Pradesh Undertaking)
Oil Fed Building, 01, Arera Hills, Bhopal
URL : <https://mppscl.mp.gov.in>, Phone : 0755-2578915
Dated : 17.05.2024

TENDER NOTICE

Tenders for following items/services shall be floated on MPPHSC website and portal from 17.05.2024 to next 30 days :-

Tender (s) for

- 1) Tender(s) for Single Energy Linac for Cancer Treatment.
- 2) Tender(s) for CT Simulator.
- 3) Tender(s) for Various Equipment.
- 4) Tender(s) for Various Drugs.
- 5) Tender(s) for Consumables.

All Prospective bidders are requested to visit www.mptenders.gov.in, <https://mppscl.mp.gov.in> for further details.
M.P. Madhyam/114625/2024 CGM (TECHNICAL-II)

CENTRAL RAILWAY
E-TENDER NOTICE

Open Tender Notice No: DRMMWNGP-44-2024 OF 15.05.2024. 1) Name of work: Maramjhiri goods shed : 1. Augmentation of existing half line to full line by provision of goods shed platform. 2. Approach road. 3. Warehouse/Covered shed. 4. High masts. 5. Labour and merchant room, goods office with basic facilities. Approximate Cost: Rs. 12,19,73,456.53. Earnest Money: Rs. 7,59,900.00. 2) Name of work: KRSP goods shed :- 1. Improvement to Goods shed loading/unloading platform surface by concrete. 2. Approach road with proper illumination. 3. Provision of Merchant and labour room, goods office with all basic facilities i.e. toilets and drinking water facility. 4. Warehouse/Covered shed. 5. Provision of 03 High mast and lighting facilities. 6. Boundary wall with security features in Amla-Chhindwara section under ADEN A.M.L.A. Approximate Cost: Rs. 12,99,88,654.23. Earnest Money: Rs. 8,00,000.00. 3) Name of work: Polapatthar Goods Shed- 1. Provision of concrete platform surface adjacent to GL1 line (300'15). 2) Goods Office & Merchant room with storeroom. 3) High Masts. Approximate Cost: Rs. 2,65,40,709.40. Earnest Money: Rs. 2,82,700.00. Date & time of closing of tender: 07.06.2024 at 15:00 hrs. Complete details and instructions for e-tendering and on line participation for the above work is available on Railway's website www.ireps.gov.in

Divisional Railway Manager (Works) C.R., Nagpur
Akar/08/63
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DiGiSPICE
DiGiSPICE Technologies Limited
Regd. Office: JA-122, 1st Floor, DLF Tower A, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi - 110025
CIN No.: L72900DL1986PLC330369
Tel.: +91 11 41251965; Email: complianceofficer@digispice.com Website: www.digispice.com

Extract of Audited Consolidated Financial Results for the Quarter and Year ended March 31, 2024 (Rs. in Lakhs)

Particulars	For the Quarter ended 31.03.2024 (Audited)	For the Year ended 31.03.2024 (Audited)	For the Quarter ended 31.03.2023 (Audited) Restated
Continued Operations			
Total Income from operations	10,608.85	43,942.56	10,726.83
Net Profit/(Loss) for the period (before Tax, Exceptional and/or Extraordinary items)	781.77	3,127.46	99.30
Net Profit/(Loss) for the period before tax (after Exceptional and/or Extraordinary items)	4,552.11	6,002.05	(524.77)
Discontinued Operations			
Net Profit/(Loss) before tax for the period	(295.52)	(2,257.27)	407.85
Net Profit/(Loss) after tax for the period	(434.99)	(3,810.79)	250.83
Net Profit/(Loss) for the period after tax (after Exceptional and/or Extraordinary items and/or Non controlling Interest) (for continuing and discontinued operations)	3,727.77	1,167.46	(138.28)
Total Comprehensive Income/(Loss) for the period (Comprising Profit/(Loss) for the period (after tax) and other Comprehensive Income/(Loss) (after tax) (for continuing and discontinued operations)	3,882.31	1,202.54	20.35
Equity Share Capital (Face value Rs 3/- per share)	6,184.65	6,184.65	6,164.20
Reserves (Excluding Revaluation Reserve as shown in the Audited Balance Sheet of Previous year)	-	-	-
Earnings per share (for continuing and discontinued operations) (of Rs 3/- each)			
Basic:	1.62	0.51	(0.09)
Diluted:	1.62	0.51	(0.09)

Notes:

1. Key Standalone Financial Information (including discontinued operations) is given below: (Rs. in Lakhs)

Particulars	For the Quarter ended 31.03.2024	For the Year ended 31.03.2024	For the Quarter ended 31.03.2023
Net Sales / Income from Operation	927.38	3,761.19	2,230.74
Profit/(Loss) before tax	-	50.12	-
Net Profit/(Loss) after tax	-	-	-

2. The above is an extract of the detailed format of quarterly and year ended audited financial results filed with Stock Exchanges under Regulation 33 of the SEBI (Listing Obligations and Disclosure Requirements) Regulations, 2015 as reviewed by the Audit Committee in its meeting held on May 16, 2024 and approved by the Board of Directors in its meeting held on May 16, 2024. The full quarterly and year ended audited Financial Results are available on the Stock Exchange website(s) www.bseindia.com, www.nseindia.com and on the Company's website www.digispice.com.

For and on behalf of
DiGiSPICE Technologies Limited
Rohit Ahuja
Whole-time Director

Dated: May 16, 2024
Place: Noida

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Saturday, May 18, 2024

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Vi expects to offer 5G services in next six months ▶ P15



Hinduja Group buys time to close RCap buy ▶ P15

SENSEX 73,917.03 ↑ 253.34 NIFTY 22466.1 ↑ 62.25 DOLLAR ₹83.33 ↑ ₹0.16 EURO ₹90.38 ↑ ₹0.39 OIL \$82.97 ↓ \$0.02 POUND ₹105.47 ↑ ₹0.32

Siemens Gamesa's India wind biz put up for sale

The company is looking to cut losses and focus on core markets of US and Europe

Sneha Shah & Ranjani Raghavan
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Looking to cut losses and return its wind turbine business to profitability by 2026, German energy major Siemens Energy AG has put the India wind turbine unit of its subsidiary, Siemens Gamesa Renewable Energy, up for sale, two people aware of the development said.

The India business is said to have annual revenues of \$700 million, and is being valued at \$1 billion for the transaction, the people said.

The Munich-headquartered global manufacturer has appointed investment bank Barclays to find buyers.

The appointment follows the parent's decision to explore either part or full exit of the wind turbine unit from the Indian market.

"Adani is one of the front runners to this asset," the first person said. In addition to Adani Renewable Energy, TPG Rise, Brookfield Energy Transition Funds, Macquarie, and middle eastern energy company Masdar have also been sounded out, the second person said. Both persons spoke on condition of anonymity.

"The deal could swing from a significant minority stake to a con-



SHEDDING WEIGHT

ON TRACK

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rol deal based on investor interest," the second person added.

A Siemens spokesperson did not specifically comment on the deal.

"Siemens Gamesa recently presented a plan on how we can return the company to profitability. Part of this action plan is also the focus on core markets in the

onshore sector, that is, with wind turbines on land. Here, the company will concentrate on the core markets of Europe and the US, but will also serve other markets where profitable business is possible. Further detailed decisions have not yet been made. The Indian market is fundamentally interesting for us, we have service

obligations here that we will of course fulfil," the spokesperson said.

The prospective buyers did not immediately respond to a request for comment. Barclays did not immediately comment on Friday evening.

"The deal was launched last week. Initial teasers have been sent out to infrastructure funds, climate funds and strategic investors," said the second person cited above.

Siemens Gamesa has reported poor results over the past few years and has been working on a turnaround. Siemens projected negative profit of €2 billion for Siemens Gamesa for fiscal 2024, per its Q2FY24 earnings. (For Siemens Energy AG, fiscal calendar 2024 ends in September 2024.)

In November, Siemens Energy chief executive Christian Bruch said Siemens Gamesa was aiming to break even by 2026.

This followed Siemens Energy initiating the process to acquire all the outstanding shares of Siemens Gamesa in May 2022 with a plan to fully integrate the two units over 2024 and 2025.

From 1 August, Siemens Gamesa has appointed Vinod Philip as chief executive officer, who

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Centre weighing aircraft boneyard for spares, parking

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Among the many learnings from the covid-19 pandemic, one was that India's aviation sector could do with a 'boneyard' for aircraft. Not just for aircraft that have been retired and can be stripped for parts, but also as a low-cost parking option for planes not in commission.

The Airports Authority of India (AAI) has concluded after a preliminary assessment of airports, airstrips, and special economic zones that there is indeed potential for development of aircraft boneyards in the country, said two people aware of the government's thinking. The assessment was conducted on the aviation ministry's suggestion.

However, it isn't clear yet if the civil aviation ministry or the airports authority want to actively take this proposal forward, one of them said. "It depends on whether there is any commercial interest in running such establishments in the country, and also on the plans of the government that comes to power next month."

India's parliamentary election concludes this month, and a new government will be sworn in following the poll



AAI has done a preliminary assessment for the plan. PEXELS

results in June. The civil aviation ministry and AAI did not reply to queries till press time.

India currently has only one such facility—a boneyard for defence aircraft at Allahabad.

Globally, aircraft boneyards came to be used during the pandemic as a cheaper option for parking aircraft. In normal times, typically, boneyards are used as a resting space for retired aircraft, but also for storage before resale, scrapping for parts, or for long-term storage of a jet that may be used again.

Aviation authorities first felt the need for aircraft boneyards during the pandemic lockdowns, but as a low-cost parking option and not as a retire-

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DON'T MISS



Rare Enterprises-backed IKS Health revives IPO plans

Digital health platform IKS Health, backed by Rekha and late Rakesh Jhunjhunwala's Rare Enterprises, is working towards a \$350-million initial public offering. The IPO could be largely an offer for sale by early angel investors and shareholders. ▶ P13

Eurasian Economic Union to start trade talks shortly

India plans to begin negotiations for a free trade agreement (FTA) with the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), which is expected to significantly increase trade between the regions, two people aware of the matter said. ▶ P14

Crema's ₹500-crore fundraise plan will help investor exit

Packaged foods and condiment maker Crema Foods Industries is in talks to raise ₹500 crore from fresh investors as it plans to enter new categories as well as allow early investors to exit. The firm has appointed an investment banker to run the mandate. ▶ P15

India plans online drugs registry to prevent medication errors

The health ministry plans to create a central online registry of drugs to ensure that different drugs are not marketed under the same or similar-sounding names. Confusion in the names of the drugs is a common cause of medication errors. ▶ P14

Risk-reward matrix

Companies with m-cap below ₹30 crore have delivered more than thrice the returns of firms with m-cap above ₹50,000 crore.

M-cap range (in ₹ cr)	Number of companies	Aggregate market capitalization (in ₹ cr)		Annualized return (in %)	
		2018	2024	6-year	3-year
<30	418	5,808	66,746	50	111
30-100	446	26,019	1,35,383	32	62
100-250	321	51,976	2,09,691	26	61
250-1,000	439	2,36,360	7,94,265	22	43
1,000-5,000	423	10,10,608	28,08,388	19	36
5,000-50,000	292	45,47,974	1,23,35,325	18	29
>50,000	63	86,06,816	1,93,76,632	14	17
All companies	2,402	1,44,85,561	3,57,26,430	16	23

Note: M-cap is short for market capitalization and it is taken as on the first trading day of May for each year. Unadjusted for dividends, divestments etc. Source: Capitaline, Mint analysis

Small stocks pip large-caps 3X, but are riskier

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Small-cap stocks have cumulatively generated returns of over 50% on an annualized basis over the past six years, despite being prone to manipulation, according to a Mint analysis.

This is more than three times the returns generated by the group with the highest market capitalization (m-cap). The analysis is based on m-cap data of over 2,400 listed companies as on 2 May 2018, which are segregated into seven different groups based on their size.

Note that the six-year period saw a bear phase for the first two years and a bull run for the next four years, which continues till date. The six years have been chosen to allow the investments sufficient time, and also not stretch too long. The analysis does not cover companies listed after 2 May 2018.

Small-caps are stocks that have an m-cap of less than ₹30 crore in the base year, 2018. There are a total of 418 such companies.

The analysis shows a clear pattern of declining returns as the m-cap of companies increases. While the annual returns stand at 50% for the less than ₹30 crore group, it declines to 32% for those with ₹30 crore to ₹100 crore, further to 22% for the next group, and so on (see chart).

The largest group with m-cap of over ₹50,000 crore each, having 63 companies, generated the lowest aggregate return of 14.5%.

Remarkably, returns for three years also show the same pattern, with 111% and 62% for the smallest two groups, coming down to 17% for the largest group.

On the flip side, however, small stocks have shown the highest variation in annual return ranging from -56% in 2020 to 189% in 2021.

In contrast, the variation has ranged between -17% and 56% for the highest m-cap group, which means lower rewards but also lower risk.

The variation is captured in the statistical term, standard deviation, which measures the movement of annual returns

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₹1.88 tn due, ₹103 cr retrieved: personal guarantors face heat

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Personal guarantors who are also major shareholders in defaulting companies are facing increased heat from lenders. Armed with a recent Supreme Court ruling, the lenders are putting pressure on the guarantors to honour their repayment liabilities running into trillions of rupees.

The number of bankruptcy petitions admitted against personal guarantors between January and March 2024 was the highest in seven quarters, at 81 cases, show the latest data from Insolvency and Bankruptcy Board of India (IBBI).

Bankruptcy petitions admitted by IBBI had dropped to eight in the third quarter ended December from 14 in the second and 30 in the first quarter of 2023-24.

The sharp increase in the number of petitions admitted



IBBI admitted 81 bankruptcy pleas against guarantors in January-March 2024. MINT

against personal guarantors in the latest quarter follows a Supreme Court decision in November when it upheld the constitutionality of Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC) provisions dealing with personal guarantors.

More recently, in April, the National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT) admitted Indiabulls Housing Finance's personal-insolvency plea against Subhash Chandra, chairman

emeritus of Zee Entertainment Enterprises Ltd, over guarantees given to a company called Vivek Infracon.

The high-profile case turned the spotlight on other business tycoons including Reliance ADA Group chairman Anil Ambani, Videocon chairman Venugopal Dhoot, and Bhushan Power and Steel promoter Sanjay Singal, who also face personal-insolvency proceedings.

IBBI data show that the total debt involved in petitions against personal guarantors at the end of March was about ₹1.88 trillion. Of this, only ₹103 crore had been recovered by way of repayment plans under the debt resolution process until end-March.

In comparison, creditors have so far recovered ₹3.3 trillion from companies under the IBC, representing a 68% haircut against their admitted

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Indian Oil signs 2nd LNG deal with TotalEnergies

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India is looking to fortify its imports of LNG, a crucial ingredient in industrial applications and partly in transportation, through long-term contracts with overseas exporters.

This week, state-run Indian Oil Corporation Ltd signed a long-term contract with French energy giant TotalEnergies in France for supply of LNG (liquefied natural gas), two people aware of the development said. Under the contract, TotalEnergies would supply 1 million metric tonne per annum (mtpa) of LNG to IOCL for a period of around 10 years.

This is the second contract between the companies in the past one year. Last July, they had signed an agreement for supply of 0.8 mtpa of LNG. Around the same period last



TotalEnergies would supply 1 mtpa of LNG to IOCL for about 10 years. MINT

year, the public sector refining and marketing major had also signed an agreement with Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC) for supply of 1.2 mtpa of LNG starting 2026.

Queries mailed to Indian Oil and TotalEnergies remained unanswered till press time.

The push for long-term contracts has gained momentum after the gas market witnessed

volatility in 2022 due to the Russia-Ukraine war.

Gas prices had soared in 2022 amid the crisis, leading to Gazprom defaulting on its long-term contract with another state-run major GAIL (India) Ltd for about a year starting May 2022.

This happened as Gazprom's German subsidiary found it more lucrative to sell its produce in the spot market rather than fulfilling contractual commitments.

Now, all Indian PSUs dealing in gas, such as IOCL, GAIL, and Petronet LNG have been looking out for long-term contracts to ensure adequate availability of gas and avoid purchases in the volatile spot markets.

On similar lines, Petronet LNG extended its contract with QatarEnergy LNG in February by signing a long-term deal for buying 7.5 million tonnes of LNG per annum.

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Malayalam films ride universal themes to box office success

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With hits such as *Premalu*, *Manjummel Boys*, *Aavesham* and *Aadujeevitham*, Malayalam cinema is back to seeing crowds making a beeline for the theatres, not just in Kerala but across the country. This, when movies of several other languages continue to see flops at the box office.

Manjummel Boys, made on a budget of ₹20 crore, is the third highest grossing film in the January-March quarter across all languages, with collections of ₹173 crore.

Premalu, a romantic comedy made for less than ₹10 crore, has crossed the ₹100-

crore mark. *Aadujeevitham*, a survival thriller, is nearing the ₹100-crore mark (budget: ₹80 crore). And *Fahadh Faasil's Aavesham*, a more recent release, has touched the ₹85-crore mark (budget: ₹30 crore).

According to estimates by media consulting firm Ormax, in the first three months of 2024, Malayalam cinema recorded collections equal to 71% of its entire box office collections of 2023.

Further, Malayalam language films made up 16% of overall gross domestic box office collections between January and March 2024, higher than Tamil (9%), Hollywood (9%) and Kannada (2%).

With 36%, Hindi cinema took the largest share of the



Manjummel Boys, made on a budget of ₹20 crore, is a Malayalam box office hit with collections of ₹173 crore. @AVINTHEHOUSE/IX

pie. Sanjeev Kumar Bijli, executive director, PVR INOX Ltd said that earlier Malayalam movies lacked the diversity of content needed to appeal to audiences beyond Kerala.

"However, the industry seems to have addressed this issue by producing films with universal themes, high-quality storytelling, and relatable characters," he said.

"For Cinepolis, Malayalam cinema has not only found niche audience across southern markets but also in cities such as Delhi, Lucknow, and Kolkata, resulting in houseful shows for films such as *Manjummel Boys*, *Premalu*, *Bramayugam* and *Aadujeevitham*," Devang Sampat, managing director of multiplex chain Cinepolis India said.

Content-based Malayalam cinema has always had to compete with the high budgets and better production values of industries such as Hindi, Tamil, and Telugu. But those working within the industry say this could well be seen as its strength.

Mukesh Mehta, founder of Malayalam film production and distribution company E4

Entertainment said, "People may have gotten over the action films that are continually made in other languages like, say, Telugu, and have liked coming back to subject-based cinema. Plus, in recent times, there have been no other big films competing for eyeballs."

The traction for Malayalam films in states beyond Kerala has seen a steady rise in recent years, which can be attributed to the availability of Malayalam films on streaming platforms with subtitles, the increasing recognition of Malayalam cinema at national and international film festivals, and the emergence of talented film-makers and actors who

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