



SATURDAY, JUNE 22 2024

**DELHI UPS ITS  
BURGER GAME**

The Capital's burger and sandwich scene has evolved from mayo-laden contraptions to trained chefs adopting an ingredient focused, gourmet approach with sauces, relishes and breads made from scratch.

SEE PAGE 6



**MONSTER FUNDRAISE SWELLS ZEPTO VALUE** | PAGE 16

# SO LONG, NO. 11

FROM A GIFTED YOUNG  
PRODIGY TO A STATESMAN  
OF INDIAN FOOTBALL,  
SUNIL CHHETRI HAS  
WORKED HIS WAY UP



THINK  
'Circles of Freedom' and a  
tale of love and politics

FIRST  
*Why water is more  
precious than ever*

FOCUS  
The 1934 Nanda  
Devi expedition

BUSINESS LOUNGE  
*Meet Shiprocket's  
Saahil Goel*





A NOTE FROM  
THE EDITOR

SHALINI UMACHANDRAN

A world beyond  
the football pitch



Chhetri at the World Cup qualifier against Kuwait in Kolkata.

We've been trying to get Sunil Chhetri in the pages of *Lounge* for some months now, but his playing schedule made it near impossible for him to make the time for an in-depth interview. He retired from international football two weeks ago, on 6 June, and got in touch with us to do the interview the week after. His is a remarkable, record-breaking career—19 years in a sport that isn't kind to most players performing at the highest level. I'd known that Chhetri was a star on and off the field, but it came as a surprise to read that he's scored 94 goals in 151 caps at the international level—that's more than Diego Maradona and Pele; among currently active players, only Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi have more.

Records aside, Chhetri's story is one of learning lessons the hard way—he speaks with incredible frankness to *Lounge* about the mess he made of a stint in the US in 2010, the difficulties he faced in Portugal, his approach to captaining the Indian side, and where Indian football can go. As our writer observes, "Chhetri's contribution to Indian football goes beyond mere statistics and awards. He has made a nation believe." He's done this not just with his consistency on the pitch but also his tireless efforts to raise the profile of the game in India, and leading by example. He uses his social media following to draw fans to stadiums as well as speak about other issues, including the wrestlers' protests and the handling of the covid-19 pandemic. This is a story of a person who represents his sport to the wider world—while showing that wider world a few home truths.

Other stories you mustn't miss this weekend include an interview with tennis player N. Sriram Balaji, who will be making his Olympic debut next month; an essay on the 1934 expedition that explored the hidden sanctuary of India's second highest mountain, Nanda Devi; Raja Sen's column on the cruel irony of the show *Baby Reindeer* becoming the cause of trolling; a story on Delhi's gourmet sandwich scene; and our recommendations for what to watch, buy or read.

Write to the editor at [shalini.umachandran@htlive.com](mailto:shalini.umachandran@htlive.com)  
✉@shalinimb

NEW ON SCREENS

Austin Butler keeps his eyes on the road, Lea Seydoux mesmerizes in 'The Beast', and other titles to watch



THE BEAST

A mesmerising, confounding film by French director Bertrand Bonello. Lea Seydoux and George MacKay play characters who share a strong connection, in 1910, 2014 and 2044. The Lynchian puzzles of the film don't lend themselves to easy explanation, but they're unsettling and strangely resonant. Seydoux reminds us, as she does every year, that she's probably the best actor working in cinema today. (Amazon Prime, rental)

COCAINE BEAR

Seldom has a film delivered so fully what its title promises. *Cocaine Bear* (2023) really is about a bear that's ingested 34kg of cocaine dropped from a plane, part of a shipment belonging to a drug kingpin (Ray Liotta). The film follows the bear's subsequent journey and the fate of the unfortunate humans that cross the creature's path. Directed by Elizabeth Banks (*Pitch Perfect 2*, *Charlie's Angels*), with O'Shea Jackson Jr, Christian Convery, Alden Ehrenreich and Isaiah Whitlock Jr. For fans of the TV series *The Americans*, there's a mini-reunion with Keri Russell, Matthew Rhys and Margo Martindale. (Netflix)



Compiled by Uday Bhatia

BACK TO BLACK

A biopic on singer Amy Winehouse, whose struggles with addiction and early death tend to overshadow her stunning musical achievements. Marisa Abela plays Amy, Jack O'Connell her boyfriend. Directed by Sam Taylor-Johnson. (BookMyShow Stream)



THE BIKERIDERS

This 1960s-set film follows a rowdy Chicago motorcycle club called Vandals MC, led by Johnny (Tom Hardy). Austin Butler plays the club's new recruit, and the cast is full of eccentric character actors. Directed by Jeff Nichols (*Mud*). (In theatres)



PLAN THE WEEK  
AHEAD



AN ITALIAN FILM FIESTA

The Italian Embassy Cultural Centre, New Delhi, is presenting a series of 10 short films as part of the *Fare Cinema: Italian Summer Film Festival*. The selection, featuring works produced in Italy during 2022-23, has been curated by the National Short Film Centre of Turin. Some of the titles include *Impure*, *Il Panda Minore*, *Birdwatching* and *Zum See*. In addition to these, the festival features two full-length features—*Palazzina LAF*, directed by Michele Riandino, and *Cento Domeniche* by Antonio Albanese. The entry to *Fare Cinema* is free and is on a first-come, first-served basis. *The festival is being held at the Italian embassy cultural Centre, Delhi, 6.30pm/7pm till 2 July. Children below the age of 12 are not allowed.*



TRAVELLING BACK IN TIME

Memory, imagination and time come together in a new show, *The Revisiting*, by contemporary artist Avijit Dutta. This time capsule delves deep into the unpredictable rhythms of the human mind. The works are rooted in Dutta's encounter with the life and times of physicist C.V. Raman when he was invited to create a commemorative stamp celebrating the 75th year of the Raman Research Institute in Bengaluru. The art will first be displayed at the 100-year-old heritage home of the Nobel Laureate between 22-23 June, and then will move on to KYNKYN in Bengaluru. *At Malleshwaram over the weekend and then at KYNKYN, Bengaluru, till 19 July, 11am-6pm*  
—Compiled by Avantika Bhuyan

LOUNGE  
ONLINE

YOUR  
FAVOURITE  
WEEKEND READ  
NOW THROUGH  
THE WEEK

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



✉ [lounge@livemint.com](mailto:lounge@livemint.com)  
📺 @mint lounge  
📷 @livemintlounge

PLAY



7 must-have gadgets  
for every gamer

The average Indian spends up to 46 minutes gaming everyday. India has a rich pool of serious gamers and esports players that enjoy console gaming as much as mobile games. The only other online activity on which Indians spend more time is social media, according to a recent report on India's gaming landscape by the non-profit Interactive Entertainment and Innovation Council and gaming platform Winzo. With the rise in the popularity of gaming, the gear too has moved beyond just gaming chairs and juiced-up computers. The **Lounge team** picks seven new must-have gaming gadgets that are perfect to bring more power, light, sound and action to your gaming setup.



DINE



Savoury cocktails  
raise the bar

The resurrection of craft cocktails has revived the interest in old-school cocktails with strong floral tinctures and herbaceous syrups. Bartenders worldwide, however, have moved beyond sugar and syrup to experiment with savoury cocktails, and Indian mixologists have not been left behind. Unusual ingredients such as palate-cleansing brine and vinegar-fronted pickles such as dill, gherkin and jalapeño have made their way to the bar, and result in delicious drinks with a twist. Peppercorns, coriander seeds and dill as well as combinations of ginger and raw mango brine bring loads of flavour to cocktails. **Raul Dias** puts together a list of the best bars to sample these not-so-sweet cocktails.



LIVE



Five trends from  
Milan Fashion Week

Several designers presented a casual take on menswear at the recent Milan Fashion Week Spring-Summer 2025 in Italy. Lightweight tailoring, soft colours and classic tailoring with a modern touch could be seen across all designers' collections, from Tod's and Gucci to Fendi and Moschino. Gucci, for instance, explored a surfwear theme, but the shirts with patch pockets evoked the silhouette of a chore jacket—fringed, beaded and printed. Fendi, meanwhile, marked its 100th anniversary with a new menswear collection that drew from the house's rich archives. **Manish Mishra** picks five trends that emerged from the shows, ranging from camp collar shirts to man bags.



BUY



A time-saving  
travel companion

Xiaomi has a diverse range of products in its portfolio from phones and air purifiers to electric vehicles and sports shoes. The new Xiaomi Handheld Garment Steamer is a compact and foldable product that is shaped like a pistol and looks a lot like a hair dryer. It's only available in white and weighs 775g, making it one of the lightest handheld garment steamers in the market. While it is easy to set up and use, it doesn't work well enough to get wrinkles out of all types of fabric. The 160ml tank makes it good for ironing four to six pieces of clothing. **Sahil Bhalla** concludes that this steamer cannot replace regular irons completely, but its ease of use, portability and affordable price tag will appeal to many people.





# Save water even when we aren't thirsting after it



**A WALK IN THE WOODS**  
**NEHA SINHA**

The year was 2021. Covid had tied us to our homes; naturally, this imbued us with a great thirst to look outside them. The heat was tremendous in May that year. I looked out of my window on a hot afternoon, eyes latching onto the place where drops of water dribbled from the AC. A little Purple sunbird was perched upside-down near the water, grasping the edge of the machine, taking in one drop at a time. Patiently, the sunbird waited to drink his fill. In Maharashtra, a friend reported seeing a Purple-rumped sunbird doing the same. Those silver droplets of water—otherwise wastewater for us—constituted a lifeline for the birds. And during covid's second wave, people too thirsted for reliable sources of water. Those who drank from large canisters of mineral water had spotty delivery. For over two years, people could not get their water filtration systems serviced. I remember a Wi-Fi serviceman passing our gate, complaining that service-people—the men and women who help with plumbing, AC cooling, RO servicing, Wi-Fi maintenance, etc.—were being lured into houses with active infections. Everything was unfair, upside down, crooked. Households scrambled to make do with whatever the little ecosystem of the house could spare—RO waste water was collected, AC water was fed to the plants.

Earlier this month, I was in the forests of Maharashtra and Telangana. The temperature hovered near 40 degrees Celsius. The area was parched for water, rocks radiating heat, and everything seemed to be waiting for the monsoon to arrive. In Tipeshwar Wildlife Sanctuary in Maharashtra, we employed the ecologist's shortcut for spotting wildlife—we waited near a water hole. In the blazing heat of May and June, sources of water are veritable hang-out spots for wildlife. Quite literally. Animals and birds come to drink, and the larger, bolder mammals get right into the water, plonking in, staying half-submerged, their alert heads sticking out, ears flicking like leaves in a breeze.



That day as we waited near the water-hole, we wondered what would come to it. In central India, I have seen tigers lazing inside the water. In northern India, an even more interesting memory is that of birds—Black francolins, a solitary Common woodshrike and a Yellow-eyed babbler standing in something like a queue, waiting their turn for a drink.

In Tipeshwar, the leaves of the forest were unmoving. The stillness—a lack of motion, an inertia almost—was what we associate with high summer. The call of a Common hawk-cuckoo cut through the air—a call that sounds like “Brain fever! Brain fever!”

And suddenly, there was a darting, furtive moment. A streak of brown cut through the undergrowth like a wind, followed by another gust-like movement. Animals that looked like dogs, their mouths wide open, tongues hanging out, shapely black tails looking like fat plumes. It was a pack of dholes, the Indian wild dog. Young pups with big paws jumped straight into the water. An adult dhole watched us intently, its gaze razor-sharp, its eyes crushing us with intensity. As the pups splashed in the water, drinking it,

standing in it, enjoying it, the adult was much more cautious. His sips were measured. He stayed at the shore, taking his responsibility as protector very seriously.

A little while later, the pups gambolled up to him. They pranced around him, begging. He put his head down and then moved away, back to his stance near the lip of the water. The pups put their heads down and began to eat. I realised what we had witnessed was a wonderful natural history moment—an adult dhole regurgitating food for young pack members, giving up his morsels so the young can thrive. Dholes are dogged hunters, attacking prey in a pack. Yet, the work of a pioneering Indian ecologist shed light on dholes as much more than canny hunters. In a paper published in the *Journal of Zoology* in 1982, A.J.T. Johnsingh documented the behaviour of dholes he observed from August 1976 to July 1978 in Bandipur Tiger Reserve.

The picture he drew is a lively one, full of seriousness and play. He wrote how pups beg for food from adults, and jaw-wrestle with other pups. Once they have made their kill, adults will often play with each other. Pack members whistle at each

Nilgai at a water hole; and (right) an Indian roller pants in the heat. PHOTOGRAPHS BY NEHA SINHA



other to stay in touch and they scream with a “ka ka ka keone” when disturbed.

We lost Johnsingh in June, and my thoughts go out for all of the lives—human and non-human—that he touched. His work showed us the power of deep observation—and how the study of nature may often reveal hitherto unknown facets or interactions.

And so much of our history, and natural history is around water sources. In this year's heatwave, water seems more precious than ever. In cities, the quest for water takes different forms. One is RWA (resident welfare association) groups asking each other if supply is low, and when the water will come. The other is water tankers coming to people, with lines of citizens with buckets below. Each summer there is a deficit of water, similar to the scarcity Bengaluru had for five whole months before the rain. And yet we forget this once the monsoon hits and our rivers and wetlands swell. It shouldn't take a heatwave to remind us we need to change our practices around water; that we should want to save it even when we aren't thirsting after it.

From a city planning perspective, tanks and water storage units should have planned water utilisation before the monsoon so rains can replenish them instead of simply overflowing. Streams and channels need desilting to help absorption. More recharge pits should be dug in open areas, and this could also include de-concretising suitable land for recharge. Flyovers need guided water run-offs so rain-

water can funnel into pits, and not fall in huge quantities from gaps.

From a personal-use perspective, we must remember that our cars and roads don't need to be washed with buckets of water. And in our homes, we must recycle water as much as we can, as some of us did during the pandemic. I think we all know this, but forget to do it.

The dholes in the waterbody are a reminder that water, whether in our drinks or our showers, is the stuff of life—creating experiences for bonding and sustenance, and for biophilic interaction and frolic. For the serious work of staying alive, and the work of staying playful. That day, oddly, as the brain fever bird called again, I remembered a grim fever I had one summer as a child. Medicines did not seem to be working, but what eventually worked was my mother pressing my forehead with a ticklish, dampened cloth. Like millions of other ailing kids, it was the simple presence of water in cloth that was the most refreshing, which indicated there were better things beyond the hot stupor of suffering.

As I work through mind-melting temperatures, and simultaneously reach for a glass of water, the dholes' “ka ka ka keone” comes to mind: saving water, both from a policy and personal standpoint, is an alarm call we must heed every day.

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

## Medium Talk

More than small talk

### Feeling lonely at work?

HEART OF THE MATTER

A fortnightly column about emotional well-being

If companies can attend to what employees feel and devise ways to reduce loneliness, it's a win-win for everyone

Sonali Gupta

A 32-year-old female client recently said she feels lonely at work. “I'm swamped with multiple projects and responsibilities. At the same time, I feel disconnected and isolated at work. Before the pandemic, there was a predictability with everyone coming to work, water cooler conversations and fewer meetings online. Now things seem to have shifted, everyone seems to be in a rush. Even when we come to office on the same day, a lot of conversations happen online, everyone has lunch at their own time. This seems to be impacting my engagement and motivation.”

This has been coming up in therapy sessions over the last few years. The hybrid, remote working situation and our dependence on technology for meetings and catchups seem to be associated with the loneliness that employees experience. According to Gallup's *State of The Global Workplace Report 2024*, “Globally, one in five employees report experiencing loneliness a lot of the previous day.” The report points out that loneliness is experienced more by employees below the age of 35.

This research data along with the evidence I see in therapy sessions is a wake-up call for us all of us. While we try and address this, we need to remember that there is research data at a global level that indicates that individuals are feeling lonely in their personal life too, in the context of friendships and community.

When employees experience loneliness at the workplace, it impacts their sense of belonging in the organisation. This in turn affects productivity, attrition and workplace motivation. Feelings of



Many employees under the age of 35 experience loneliness. ISTOCKPHOTO

social isolation can also cast a shadow on people's capacity to trust others as well as their own threshold when it comes to stress tolerance and patience. As a result, collaborative work that hinges on interdependence also suffers.

Many clients have said their real exhaustion comes from a lack of social connections at the workplace and feeling lonely as they navigate difficult work situations. Whether it's challenging situations or moments of celebration, not feeling seen and heard can lead to a feeling of isolation and disconnection.

If companies can mindfully attend to what employees are feeling and devise ways to reduce loneliness, then it's a win-win for everyone. The process would allow for better mental health for the employees and also contribute to organisational health.

The first step is for organisations to take cognisance of the short-term and long-term impact of loneliness on employees. Whether through surveys or individual check-ins, organisations can find ways to get a sense of what employees are experiencing. I believe that managers who are empathetic and invested in employee well-being are generally aware of these signs, some of which are visible.

Training managers when in psychological safety, mindfulness and empathy can help organisations reach out to employees in a timely manner. Research has shown that when employees feel they can ask questions, take interpersonal risks, ask for help and feel supported, they are less likely to feel lonely. Building a culture of psychological safety where reaching out and vulnerability are welcome allows employees to foster deep bonds with one another.

This combined with a company's attempt at creating systems and practices that allow employees to build community on a weekly or a monthly basis also helps. One client talked about a manager who started a reading club and a running circle. This became an opportunity for employees to connect on topics beyond work and opened up scope for fun.

We need to remember that a culture that helps employees feel included and experience social connection allows for greater productivity and engagement.

*Sonali Gupta is a Mumbai-based clinical psychologist. She is the author of the book Anxiety: Overcome It And Live Without Fear and has a YouTube channel, Mental Health with Sonali.*



Sufiya took top spot among the women and finished sixth overall at the Tuffman Shimla Ultra.



### Sufiya's 'ultra' state of mind

Distance runner Sufiya recently set a course record at the Tuffman Shimla Ultra race. This is how she did it

Shail Desai

There was a lot on Sufiya's mind when she lined up at the start of the Tuffman Shimla Ultra on 8 June. In February, the distance runner (who goes by one name) was looking to reclaim the record for the fastest crossing of Qatar on foot, one that she had held in early 2023. About 12 hours into the Qatar crossing, she experienced chest pain and collapsed and was rushed to the hospital. Her medical diagnosis—muscle breakdown—wasn't a cause for concern, but she had a lot to prove to herself during her first big run since that incident.

Her intention for the Shimla Ultra was to simply put in a good effort and get to the finish. But by the end of the 80km ultra marathon, she had clocked 10 hours, 46 minutes to smash the previous course record of 12 hours, 7 minutes. She took top spot among the women and finished sixth overall.

“The medical tests after the Qatar run

were fine. I was just advised to rest before I started training again. Racing demands a very different approach, so I wanted to test my body and was eventually quite satisfied with how I was performing. Training in the mountains really helped during this race,” Sufiya, 38, says.

A few months ago, Sufiya shifted her base from Ajmer in Rajasthan to the hamlet of Majach near Manali in Himachal Pradesh, since a lot of her goals for the year feature races and expeditions in the mountains. Her new home allows her easy access to the trails at altitude.

The Shimla Ultra was the first of a series of races approved by the International Trail Running Association (ITRA) that she planned on running. Gathering enough points through such runs would help her qualify for international trail races and ultra marathons later this year. Her last run, in January, was the Tata Mumbai Marathon, a much shorter distance on a flat course, and she realised that the Shimla Ultra would need a different plan.

“During marathons, I need to stick to a much faster pace to achieve my timing, so there's a lot of speed work involved as part of training. It's a completely different mindset since the distance is much shorter and it demands consistency. Running an ultramarathon is all about patience. The pace is a lot more comfortable and often varies during the race. But

more importantly, you need to sustain the effort for a much longer period of time in order to survive the distance,” she says.

The Shimla Ultra features a total elevation gain of around 2,300m, with a maximum elevation of 2,200m. The race is run over a 40km loop that is a mix of about 40% trails and 60% roads, besides a few tricky sections over stones and boulders.

Sufiya wanted to run a good race to test her abilities. The first couple of kilometres featured a steep uphill. Once she set into her rhythm, she made continual progress to lead the women's field. But as the sun came out and the temperature rose, Sufiya struggled to maintain pace, especially during the last 20km, much of which included steep ascents.

“I had to be patient because it got quite demanding after a point. My energy levels were dipping as it got hotter, but I had a lot on my mind and knew that a good race would do wonders for my confidence,” she says.

With the category win and the course record in her pocket, Sufiya set off for Ladakh where she'll be attempting a 500km run from Galwan Valley to Dras later this month. “The body is sore from the run and the travel, but it feels good to be back at my best again,” she says.

*Shail Desai is a Mumbai-based journalist.*



BOMBAYE

'Bombay Meri Jaan' Indigo Printed Cotton Sari

The vintage spirit of Mumbai comes alive in this soft cotton sari in indigo and red hues with the text block printed in dabu technique. Available on [forsarees.com](https://forsarees.com); ₹3,750



LATER GATOR

House of Masaba The Ghana Gator Corset Set in Red

Striking ensemble in red featuring a corset adorned with gold-plated Ghana gator mascots, a drape skirt and flowing sash. Available on [houseofmasaba.com](https://houseofmasaba.com); ₹1,25,000.



LAKE BLUES

SLGA021 - 5 Day Spring Drive Watch

Grand Seiko stainless steel watch powered by the Calibre 9RA2 Spring Drive 5 days movement with a dial inspired by Japan's Lake Suwa. Available on [grandseikoboutique.in](https://grandseikoboutique.in); ₹8,50,000.



EASY BREEZY

Petroleum Blue and White Printed Linen and Silk Cuban Shirt

Relaxed fit shirt from Brioni's Riviera collection infused with the spirit of Italian summers. Available on [brioni.com](https://brioni.com); ₹1,33,401.

CITY SLICKER

Jean Paul Gaultier X Shayne Oliver The City Skirt

This lined tulle skirt with city print is part of the JPG X Shayne Olivier capsule collection launched this May. Available on [mytheresa.com](https://mytheresa.com); ₹31,335.



DOLCE VITA

'Italian Dream Voyages' Canvas Clutch

Olympia Le-Tan embroidered clutch inspired by artist Madalina Andronic's illustration, *Escape to Amalfi*. Available on [olympialetan.com](https://olympialetan.com); ₹1,98,022.

SAMBA AWAY

Christian Louboutin Sandale du Désert

Strappy shoes in pink & yellow Afternoon-coloured print with a crêpe satin ribbon from the *Sunset in Rio* collection. Available on [us.christianlouboutin.com](https://us.christianlouboutin.com); ₹83,100.



Compiled by Mahalakshmi Prabhakaran

LOUNGE LOVES

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



INDIAN MEN AS TRENDSETTERS

At the Gucci Men's fashion show at the Triennale di Milano in Italy, Paul Mescal was doing what he does well—showing some leg. The Irish actor was dressed in boxer shorts, paired with a blue shirt. He might have just taken a leaf out of the average Indian man's go-to-outfit for running errands—turning up in boxers and tees to buy veggies, milk and sundries. We will give it to them that it's too much of an effort to pull on a pair of shorts over the boxers. In fact, there are other *aam aadmi* looks which can set the red carpet ablaze. Think white vests rolled up over the belly, paired with a *lungi*—a winner of an idea to show your abs, or the lack thereof. Then there is the Bengali man's look: vest-less, *gamcha* knotted around the waist in the morning, and then *lungi* and no-vest look for the rest of the day at home. We are looking at you Pedro Pascal. —Nipa Charagi

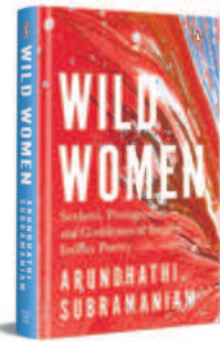
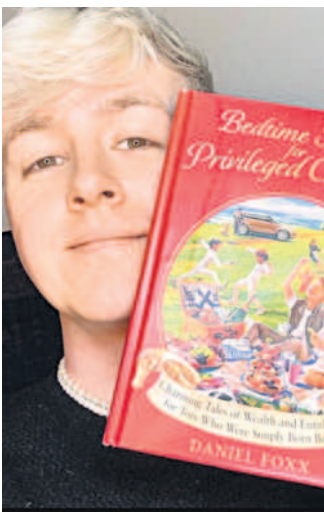


GIFT A SMILE

What do you gift people who seem to have everything, or just don't want more physical objects cluttering their spaces and lives? I found a good solution in Sparkle Gift Cards, which I picked up from their booth at a recent event; you can also buy them online ([sparklegiftcards.com](https://sparklegiftcards.com)). After you gift the card, available in denominations of ₹2,000, ₹5,000 and ₹10,000, the recipient can go to the website and choose an NGO from the list of partner organisations, such as Concern India Foundation, Goonj and CRY, within 21 days of the card being purchased. Even if they fail to do so, the money is distributed equally among the participating NGOs. Here's to more meaningful gifting. —Shrabonti Bagchi

POSH, PRIVILEGED AND HILARIOUS

British stand-up comic Daniel Foxx started a parody series on social media about three years ago titled *Bedtime Stories for Privileged Children*. Each video, uploaded on his Instagram page [@dnlfoxx](https://@dnlfoxx), is a witty and hilarious take on the lives of the rich and entitled. He creates a vivid, imaginary world with children in Jacquemus coats, Amex black cards for pocket money and a private Celine Dion performance for a birthday party. The series got immensely viral, and will be published as a book, *Bedtime Stories for Privileged Children: Charming Tales of Wealth and Entitlement for Tots Who Were Simply Born Better*. The release date is in November and will make a perfect Christmas gift—for someone privileged, or not. —Jahnabee Borah



FEARLESS MYSTIC VOICES

Last Sunday, I swapped an evening of lazy lounging for the *Wild Women*, A *Jugalbandi* performance at the Indian Music Experience museum Bengaluru. Centred on the poetry anthology, *Wild Women: Seekers, Protagonists and Goddesses in Sacred Indian Poetry*, edited by poet Arundhati Subramaniam, the event promised to be a creative dialogue between Subramaniam, Carnatic vocalist Chitra Srikrishna and mridangam player Deepika Srinivasan. A creative and spunky dialogue it certainly was as Subramaniam, an engaging raconteur, introduced us to the fearless lives and poems of India's women mystics—the heroines of her book. What I enjoyed was how Subramaniam and Shrikrishna chose to spotlight less known poet-mystics such as Jana Bai, Rupa Bhavani and Andavan Picchai. —Mahalakshmi Prabhakaran



STREAM OF STORIES

RAJA SEN

The long-nosed Reindeer



A still from 'Baby Reindeer'.

You know *Baby Reindeer*. You've either devoured the Netflix hit already or have been warned to steer clear of it because it may be too triggering, but you're aware of the show itself, and of its part confessional, part true-crime nature. It's got everything a viewer could want: stalking, mental health issues, a deep dive into personal trauma. Comedian Richard Gadd created and starred in the show, baring his experience of being stalked and sexually assaulted with startling candour, making viewers squirm. This show would be the feel-good hit of the summer if your idea of feeling good was to question the safety of your morning jog.

I wrote about *Baby Reindeer* when it came out in April, and while I wasn't entirely enamoured by the show, I recognised the impressiveness of Gadd's confessional feat, and of the show's craft—if not its writing. Most of the narrative issues on the show, however, regarding the behaviour of the characters, could be hidden behind the five words Netflix (now controversially) chose to preface our viewing with: "This is a true story".

In a twist that now feels inevitable, the drama began after the end credits. Armchair detectives descended upon the character-specific details the show offered and chose to unmask the female stalker, named "Martha" in the series, as well as the male television creator who had allegedly sexually assaulted Gadd.

The meticulousness with which these hobbyist investigators pore over social media profiles and public records is staggering, and more than slightly unnerving. This can actually be effective, as shown in the fascinating 2019 documentary *Don't F\*\*k With Cats: Hunting an Internet Killer* (Netflix) where cat-loving internet sleuths around the world stunningly tracked down a murderer after he had posted a video where he had tortured and killed two kittens.

On *Baby Reindeer*, however, the truth was in irresponsibly plain sight. The show is impressively empathetic, showing us Martha the monster but also—arguably even more so—Martha the mentally-disturbed, a fragile and sick person not in control of her actions. At the time of the release, Gadd claimed that he had changed so many details about "the real Martha" that she wouldn't even recognise herself on-screen. This statement turned out to be alarmingly disingenuous. As a *Slate* article recaps, "The woman in question is also Scottish, also has a legal background, looks somewhat like Martha, and had tweeted things at Gadd in the past that are quoted word for word in the series. It's fairly damning, particularly since Netflix put out an Instagram reel stating that each and every email (Gadd's character) Donny receives from Martha in the show is a verbatim message Gadd received from his stalker."

Despite Gadd's protestations that revealing, or kicking off a hunt for, the true identities of his assailants was not the point of his story, the internet unleashed a sadly predictable storm of doxxing and speculation. Now "the real Martha" (whom I refuse to name) has spoken to television and tabloids about the way she has been harassed by the show. She is suing Netflix for \$170 million (around ₹1,400 crore) claiming that, since she has never been convicted, the show has damaged her reputation irreparably.

She may not be wrong. In a cruel irony, a series about the trauma of stalking has, in her view, become an instrument of that very same torment. Gadd has been brave to bare his own trauma, but in doing so, this poor woman's mental health struggles have now become public property, and the internet, being the compassionate place it is, treats her with the same kindness as a piñata at a five-year-old's birthday party. She has been thrown to the lions.

Who, then, are we supposed to feel sorry for? Gadd lived a nightmare and told us about it on screen, but his stalker was clearly mentally ill—and is now rightly feeling harassed by this show. It can be seen as a new form of exploitation. Behind every true-crime story, there are real people whose lives are irrevocably altered by the public's insatiable curiosity. Martha's mental health struggles, once private, are now fodder for social media debates and memes. Her privacy has been shattered in the name of entertainment. She claims to have received death threats from irate viewers.

Gadd should have obfuscated her identity more, but we the viewers have turned out to be the real stalkers in this morbidly fascinating narrative. We have become conditioned to consume something and then immediately choose sides, but this culture of outrage helps nobody. The public outcry was first against Gadd's assailants, then towards those interviewing the real Martha, and then it was revealed that Gadd had himself rather problematically dated a trans woman by suggesting that he would cast her on the show. This reindeer may have a long nose.

*Baby Reindeer* ultimately reveals a sobering truth about our culture. We have become enamoured with true crime not merely as a genre, but as a participatory sport. The boundary between viewer and participant has dissolved; we are no longer passive consumers but active agents in the unfolding drama. Our quest for "truth", unfortunately, often bulldozes over empathy for the people involved. It's like a self-righteous vegan who secretly loves the smell of bacon—there's a cognitive dissonance at play.

If everybody wants to execute, then everybody will someday be executed. To paraphrase Andy Warhol, everyone will be cancelled for 15 minutes.

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

Before *Beverly Hills Cop*: Axel F comes to Netflix on 3 July, familiarise yourself—or revisit—the adventures of Eddie Murphy's wisecracking cop Axel Foley with the first three *Beverly Hills Cop* films (from 1984, 1987 and 1994) on Netflix. Action comedies used to be cool, man.



# In defence of the comfort zone

Comfort zones are often presented as antithetical to growth but these familiar zones are valuable to build self-awareness

Devika Oberai

Eleanor Roosevelt’s “Do one thing every day that scares you” appears ubiquitously across notebooks and calendars, quoted as a clarion call to urge everyone to step out of their comfort zone. Motivational speaker Jack Canfield says that remaining within one’s comfort zone fosters stagnant self-perceptions and perpetuates feelings of guilt and self-doubt, reinforcing the idea that personal growth requires venturing beyond familiarity.

What do we have against comfort zones? At its most fundamental, a comfort zone is a familiar psychological state where one feels like one is in control and at ease, and experiences low levels of anxiety and stress. The insistence that success and achievement hinge on venturing into a territory where life as you know it fades away seems to have become a fundamental prerequisite to goal attainment. Solo trips are often sold as a means to self-awareness and acceptance, Chris Gardner (Will Smith) from *The Pursuit of Happiness* and Andy Sachs (Anne Hathway) from *The Devil Wears Prada* remain fan favourites because of the resilience they display in embracing the unfamiliar.

“In a neoliberal economy, productivity and continual self-improvement are emphasised as key to success,” says Melissa Brown, assistant professor of communications at Santa Clara University, US. “This shift towards a productivity-centered lifestyle, heavily mediated by tech-



nology, is reflected in our cultural narratives too. Consequently, (society at large) celebrates individuals who push beyond their boundaries, promoting a narrative that constant growth and adaptation are essential and something to be lauded.”

Broadly, this school of thought argues that individual success depends on individual willingness and merit, while overlooking the complexities of societal structures and disparities.

## CHASING RAINBOWS

However, this culture perpetuates feelings of inadequacy and restlessness—which have been prevalent in the Indian context too, as Raksha Rajesh, an RCI-licensed clinical psychologist based in Mumbai explains. “Our culture has forced individuals to constantly chase unattainable goals and benchmarks, which has led to a perpetual sense of discontentment. Individuals are conditioned to believe that

Conscious thinking in comfortable zones helps us prioritise our values.

ISTOCKPHOTO

Comfort zones, where anxiety is minimal, can help people build self-confidence and thrive. Instead of hustling, we could pursue goals that align with what we care about

they must always be striving for more in order to achieve personal or professional growth,” she explains.

Sagrika (who goes by one name), a 26-year-old consultant in an accounting firm in the National Capital Region, says she has “pushed myself into the unknown territory” ever since she started working at the age of 22. She was quick to volunteer for extra work assignments even if she wasn’t familiar with what it entailed and went out of her way to meet new people and forge new relationships “because I thought that’s how it works, that’s how you grow.” However, she has just come to the realisation that “there is no prize for doing that day in and day out and ultimately, it’s my personal boundaries I’ve been pushing all the while and exhausting myself.”

Within any culture that thrives on people ignoring their limits, pushing personal boundaries has also become the norm,

explains Kathryn Coduto, assistant professor of media science at Boston University’s College of Communication. “This fast-paced, always-on perception is what leads to boundary erosion in interpersonal relationships as well,” she says. Coduto goes on to explain the role that technology and digital media play in facilitating this process. “There is a feeling that everyone should be available to respond to you right away, mostly because we now know that everyone has their cell phone on or near them all of the time. But, while we expect others to respond right away, we also don’t like feeling that we are constantly accessible.”

Drishti Jaisingh, an RCI-licensed clinical psychologist based in Berlin, Germany, explains that this culture of “push your limits in order to see real results” has led to the distortion of what “progress and growth” mean. “What was growth has now been misconstrued as hustle and is leading to stress. Consequently, what people are aspiring for is not so much maturity and development but an idealised form of growth, that can lead to burn-out.” The original idea behind advising someone to step out of their comfort zone was to help them try new things, but it has now become a source of anxiety and stress, she explains.

The glorification of pushing boundaries has made periods of rest, recovery and ease synonymous with stagnation. “This idea that being comfortable is a sign of stagnation leads to a greater sense of discontent within individuals,” explains Coduto. “This overall discontent translates into feelings of longing within individuals for different things and experiences, because when you are not achieving a goal, you are always in a state of wanting something else,” she says, explaining how social media narratives push people to feel dissatisfied.

## SET NEW GOALS

Instead of constantly trying new things and doing more, what happens when one embraces one’s comfort zone? In a 2018 piece published in *The Guardian*, per-

formance coach Melody Wilding wrote that “when we spend less time grappling with discomfort, we focus more on what matters most.”

Raksha explains that zones of familiarity and security help individuals find different, value-driven goals. “Value-driven goals (such as prioritising health or family) rather than external validation or societal expectations offer an alternative by encouraging us to focus on what truly matters to us, rather than chasing after external markers of success,” she says.

In the current discourse, there’s a strong emphasis on external achievements, like acquiring assets and getting ahead in one’s career at the expense of one’s well-being. Comfort zones, where anxiety is minimal, can actually help people build self-confidence and thrive. “Instead of constantly hustling and burning ourselves out in pursuit of someone else’s idea of success, value-driven goals invite us to slow down, reflect on our values, and pursue goals that align with who we are and what we truly care about,” says Raksha.

British author Dolly Alderton, similarly, writes that “having boundaries enables you to be truthful about how much you can comfortably extend yourself, thereby cultivating deep intimacy with the people you love”, which leads to an improvement in all interpersonal relationships.

Staying within comfort zones, resting and recovering don’t make for as appealing a story as moving beyond them to find success—but must every experience be turned into a motivational narrative? Instead of always thinking about the next goal, the next achievement, the next boundary to push, conscious thinking in comfortable zones helps us prioritise our values and gain a psychological sense of safety and security, which, in the long run, are prerequisites for individuals to become the best versions of themselves.

Devika Oberai is a psychology graduate from Delhi University, now working as a policy professional.

# Tales of friendship, love and politics

T.C.A. Raghavan’s book is a reminder of the price people pay when they choose to live by their beliefs, come what may

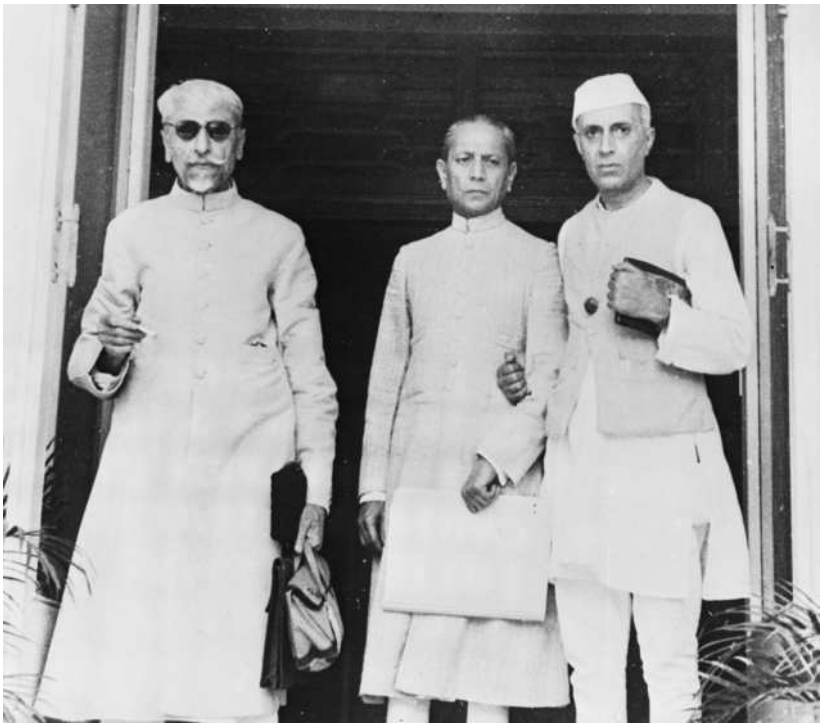
Somak Ghoshal

Diplomat-turned-historian T.C.A. Raghavan’s fourth book, *Circles of Freedom*, is an immersive study of the life and legacy of the lawyer, freedom fighter and, briefly, diplomat, Asaf Ali (1888-1953). But radiating out of this robust core are other lives and other voices that tell a story of “Friendship, Love and Loyalty in the Indian National Struggle,” as the subtitle puts it.

Reading this book over several weeks in the lead up to India’s recently concluded general election was a reminder that big moments in history—be it freedom from British rule or the taming of fascist politics—have always come at a cost. Not only are lives upended, as dissenters are sent to jail for speaking up against governments (as was Asaf Ali in 1942 and as has been student activist Umar Khalid since 2016), but everyday human bonds and affection are also destroyed in the process. In a piece in *The Telegraph* on 7 June, titled *Friends and Unfriends*, journalist R. Rajagopal made a similar point while surveying the many filial and friendly relations that didn’t survive the difference of political opinions in the lead up to the 2024 elections.

Raghavan’s initial intent, he tells me when I meet him in Delhi, was to write a straightforward life of Asaf Ali. But the idea fizzled out due to the paucity of primary sources that could make for “a meaty book”. And yet, as he began to look deeper, Raghavan was arrested by the convergence of a group of brilliant intellectuals around the subject of his interest in the 1930s and 1940s—namely, Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949), M.A. Jinnah (1876-1948), Syed Hossain (1888-1949) and Syed Mahmud (1889-1971), all of whom came together as allies in London during the early decades of the 20th century.

To this constellation were added other stars, like Jawaharlal Nehru and M.K. Gandhi. But the most striking of them all was Aruna Asaf Ali, née Gangulee, who married Asaf Ali, nearly 20 years her senior, against immense personal odds and social criticism at the tender age of 19 in 1928.



## NETWORK OF FRIENDS

Aruna Asaf Ali distinguished herself with her revolutionary zeal, eventually switching camp from the pragmatic politics of the Congress to the much more aggressive variety practised by the Communist Party of India. However, her independent mind and feminist convictions were rivalled by another woman, who had a strong hold on her husband’s, and his friends’, imagination—Sarojini Naidu, poet, orator and politician, also referred to as the Nightingale of India.

“Asaf and his friends were in their early 20s when they met Sarojini in the 1920s,” Raghavan says. “They were all staggered by her.” Naidu was the glue that bound together this alliance of aspiring freedom fighters with differing opinions, strategies, and even politics. She exuded charm and wit, was gregarious, always the heart and soul of the party, and loved having a court around her. In one of Raghavan’s many vivid accounts, Naidu doesn’t pause her social life even as she is admitted to a hospital in London. Visitors troop in and out, as the nurses are left over-

whelmed by the bouquets sent for her.

With time, Naidu’s magnetic impact on Asaf Ali would become tempered, especially as he became embroiled in administrative roles. But the first major inflection point would come with her protégé’s unconventional marriage to a Hindu girl.

In Raghavan’s account, which leans heavily on empirical facts rather than speculative history, there is very little to gauge why two people, nearly 20 years apart in age and from historically fraught religious backgrounds, would decide to get married after knowing each other for a relatively short time. The decision didn’t have the blessings of Aruna’s extended family, less so of Asaf’s friends, and least of all, of society at large.

The fact that Hindu-Muslim marriages had as much charge of a controversy nearly a century ago as today may be a reflection on the democratic ethos of India today. Shockingly, even doyens of the liberal intelligentsia like Naidu were uncomfortable with the idea.

“All her life, she was manifestly keen on Hindu-Muslim friendships,” Raghavan



(clockwise from left) Asaf Ali (centre) with Maulana Abul Kalam Azad and Jawaharlal Nehru in March 1946; poet, orator and politician Sarojini Naidu had a strong hold on the imagination of Asaf Ali and his friends; and Aruna Asaf Ali, née Gangulee, who married Asaf Ali, nearly 20 years her senior, against immense personal odds and social criticism at the age of 19 in 1928.

says, “but not really comfortable with the idea of such a marriage.” Even though, at the time, there were rumbles in some circles about the union being symbolic and politically opportunistic, Raghavan begs to differ. “You can’t explain the marriage between Asaf and Aruna in purely sociological terms,” he says. “We know they lived in a communally supercharged atmosphere, but the explanation behind their marriage has its basis in their personal choices.”

## THE PERSONAL AND THE POLITICAL

One of the abiding themes of *Circles of Freedom*, as it is of any narrative of rebellion and change, is that the personal is always, inevitably, political. Be it ordinary Indians sacrificing their friendships and family relations at the altar of divisive politics in 2024, or Asaf Ali and his circle being at loggerheads over strategic actions, the axiom holds true. The section on the incarceration of the Congress leadership after they passed the Quit India Resolution at Ahmednagar jail (1942-45), for instance, reveals the fissures in relationships between allies and compatriots that had been once forged in the smithy of trust and national interest.

Raghavan gives us a lively snapshot of these tumultuous years when some of the crème-de-la-crème of the Congress, from Nehru to Maulana Azad to Syed Hossain to

Asaf Ali, were imprisoned based on the flimsiest legal scaffolding—like the Bhima Koregaon 16 in 2018. Unlike the relentless State-induced cruelty experienced by the latter, which included the death of Jesuit priest and tribal rights activist Stan Swamy in 2021 due to alleged medical negligence, the former didn’t suffer as many hardships.

Life was rough within the four walls, but there was scope of taking air and exercise, even to seek medical care at most times. Badminton, gardening, birdwatching, and comparing notes on recipes from across India became pastimes for these high-profile political prisoners.

## DIFFERENT LIVES

It wasn’t all hunky-dory, of course. There was as much banter and camaraderie as flaring tempers and interpersonal sparring. Within months, Asaf

lapsed into depression and anxiety as reports of Aruna absconding to avoid arrest and inciting violent revolutionary activities trickled in. All his life, he would be plagued by an enduring sense of inadequacy: as a patriot, husband, envoy to the US, and politician. In sharp contrast was Aruna, with her fearless nonchalance, which led Nehru, at one point, to call her tactics “hysterical”. Hard to browbeat, she came back with an equally cutting riposte: “I could only conclude these Pygmalion-like individuals (that is, Nehru and his bastion of male pol-

iticians) wanted to mould their wives exactly in their image.”

To Gandhi’s criticism of her politics of active resistance by causing damage and disruption, as opposed to following his preferred path of non-violent *satyagraha*, Aruna gave an even plainer response. Ordinary Indians were not interested in the higher ethics of violence and non-violence, she said—they “just want to resist oppression”. At the All India Congress Committee meeting in 1946, Aruna was direct and intrepid. Addressing Gandhi, who was in the audience, she rallied on.

“So long we have followed your advice, now you follow ours,” she said, ignoring the tittering in the gallery, “because you say you can see nothing but darkness, but we can say that we see light.”

Just as the old order maketh way for the new, the tools of politics evolve with time. Nothing screams democracy as loudly as the right to dissent and disagree—whether it is through words, direct action, or the seemingly innocuous gesture of pressing a button on an electronic voting machine.

It was a tough lesson that the founding fathers and mothers of the subcontinent learnt with their lives as friendships ended, most devastatingly between Jinnah and his former friends in the Congress, and so did many other ties. Asaf Ali and Aruna drifted apart as well, even though they chose to remain married.

With its interweaving of social history with personal anecdotes, *Circles of Freedom* is a timely reminder of the price individuals pay when they choose to steadfastly live by their beliefs, come what may.

Somak Ghoshal is a writer based in Delhi.



# On a gourmet burger and sando trail in Delhi

The perfect burgers and sandwiches in Delhi are by chefs who are focusing on meats, breads and sauces that ooze flavour

Jahnabee Borah  
jahnabee.b@livemint.com

Away from the overcrowded Hauz Khas Village, Pete's Deli, started by chef Tushar Alagh a little less than two years ago, is slowly making its mark as one of the best places to enjoy a good sandwich in Delhi. It's easy to miss the sleek red shop sign in this quiet lane of Hauz Khas Market, which also has the microbrewery Fort City and the hole-in-the-wall Vietnamese restaurant Little Saigon with options for pork, chicken and tofu *banh mi*.

A 15-minute drive from Hauz Khas Market is Priya Market that houses the OG burger place Aku's—The Burger Co. and the year-old Chard with burgers chased down by light and refreshing clarified cocktails.

The city's burger and sandwich scene has evolved from mayo-laden contraptions to trained chefs adopting an ingredient focused, gourmet approach with sauces, relishes and breads made from scratch.

Delhi-based independent fashion stylist Mahima S. is a *bona-fide* foodie. She says Aku's has the juiciest patty, Little Saigon's *banh mi* is "bomb" and Chard is excellent. Her go-to delivery kitchens for burgers are Burgerama—"you can customise your toppings and it's so good" and Seoul Mate Korean Burger ("their Korean fried chicken burger is yum").

One of the chefs driving the city's sandwich scene is Alagh of Pete's Deli. He spent more than a decade in New York earning his culinary chops. He graduated as a chef from the Culinary Institute of America, worked at The Metropolitan Museum of Art and opened two cafés for Meta in New York. He returned to India about three years ago and craved the New York experience of a sandwich with a generous meat stuffing, relishes packed with flavour and the perfect bread.

"Pete's Deli started as an experiment in 2022 and it took off through word of mouth. I like to play around with my food and every once in a while I will have a secret menu with stuff that's not on the regular menu," says Alagh, 32. He is a stickler for getting the ingredients right and one of their best-sellers is the pastrami sandwich. Prepping the meat for it takes about six days. Beef meat is slightly hard, so he injects it with brine and lets it rest for about six days. Then it is dried and cooked in the oven for six-eight hours, followed by smoking for close to two hours. The final step is steaming, which gives it the melt-in-the-mouth texture.

This obsession for perfecting ingredients led him to open a small space. Customers can buy all the ingredients needed to make a perfect sandwich—be it meat, cheese or hot sau-



ces—or buy the sandwiches. They also have an online store, Artisan Meats, with small-batch sausages, burger patties and double smoked bacon. Alagh says they ship to Mumbai too.

Aku's Burger is another chef-led brand that upholds this ingredient-focused ethos. It was started by chef Akriti Malhotra in 2018 and her journey is similar to Alagh's—both went to the same culinary school, worked in New York and opened places because they missed the food there. Malhotra was with the Michelin-starred Daniel in New York and after returning to Delhi in 2015, wanted to open a fine dining place, but life had other plans.

"I missed the quintessential New York burger. It was comfort food, not fast food. People who prepared them paid attention to every little detail," she says of why she introduced gourmet burgers. Their most popular burger is the Meister with a succulent lamb patty, topped with bacon, fried eggs and caramel-

(above) Chard's Philly melt burger with tenderloin patty; and double patty tenderloin chilli cheese burger at Dos.



Pete's Deli's club sandwich.

ised onions.

These sandwich shops also offer a sit-down experience. Chard takes it a step further with cocktails. It's helmed by chefs Hanisha Singh and Jamsheed Bhote of the popular premium restaurant Plats in Malviya Nagar. Chard started as a burger delivery brand in 2021 and became a restaurant last year. They wanted to shift the perspective of a fast food item to something more elevated that requires attention—whether preparing or eating it.

Bhote himself likes a big substantial burger: "I noticed that burgers were getting smaller and often I would eat two to feel full. So, I decided that we need to make something wholesome and filling. Most of our burgers have a double chargrilled patty, which is a generous portion." A burger is incomplete without a drink and they introduced light cocktails with the intention of upgrading the overall experience. Their bigger goal is to have a homegrown burger brand similar to international brands such as Chili's.

Apart from standalone burger and sandwich places, there are restaurants which offer an elevated take on burgers such as Tres in Lodhi Colony and Perch in Khan Market. Tres has a fish-based peri peri sandwich with *kachampuli* vinegar sauce stuffed between pillow soft focaccia bread. Last month the founders of Tres, chefs Jatin Mallick and Julia Carmen Desai, opened the casual dining restaurant Dos. It serves a burger with Kashmir's *kalari* cheese, and another in a buttery croissant bun. They look for ingredient substitutes. It isn't the season for fresh jalapenos and they make do with long local chillies that are used to make *bhajias*. It is ingredients like these and chefs with creative flair that make Delhi's dynamic burger and sandwich scene unique.

With inputs from Nitin Sreedhar and Uday Bhatia.



## TEA NANNY A case for CTC and dust teas

Aravinda Anantharaman

Are they saying we are drinking substandard tea?" said Manoj Archibald, a planter from the Nilgiris, last week. He was sharing an ad that promoted whole leaf teas while deriding CTC (crush, tear, and curl) and dust teas. When tea brands promote whole leaf as the better tea, couldn't they do so without putting down other teas, he wanted to know. Not long after that conversation, I read about Assam's Hookmol Tea fetching record prices of ₹1,500 a kilo at the Kolkata tea auction for their CTC tea, achieving speciality status—average prices at auction for Assam CTC is under ₹300/kilo.

This got me thinking about our perception of tea, and the contradictory world of leaf tea and CTC drinkers. It's hardly a great divide. I often seek leafy teas but they just won't do for my first cup, which is milk tea made with CTC. Culturally, we are CTC drinkers. And the numbers don't lie either—over 80% of the tea we make and consume is CTC.

In 2009, Dibrugarh-based Bhaskar Hazarika started Hookmol Tea, making only CTC. His teas have consistently topped the charts at the weekly tea auctions at Guwahati and Kolkata. He lists three attributes as necessary for tea quality—discipline, which is the ability to drive a huge work force to pluck every single tea bush within seven days; knowledge in growing and making tea; and art, for both passion and skill to make a delightful cup of tea.

This is as true for CTC as it is for any other tea. But consider that the CTC machine itself came into the picture in the 1950s and gained wider use by the 1970s. For a price-sensitive new India, cost remained a factor and the CTC production enabled it by facilitating large volume production. "Our per capita income remained very low for many decades after independence," says Hazarika. "Maybe to cater to that need, companies gave up on discipline and art to bring down the cost. The only way to reduce cost was to cut corners. People started associating low quality with commercially produced cheap commodity black CTC tea because that was the only tea we Indians used to drink."

The mass production commoditised black tea and impacted our view of it. And of course, that unfortunate naming of the finest particles as dust grade. It has suffered in reputation, being more prone to adulteration.

Says Archibald, "Dust tea has a higher surface area compared to whole leaf tea, which leads to quicker extraction of caffeine, polyphenols, and other compounds during brewing." It brews quickly, produces a strong flavour and colour—two attributes that many tea drinkers seek in their tea.

It's easy to take the CTC tea for granted—there's so much of it around. We seek it for strength rather than flavour—a tea to knock all sleep out of you. Maybe if we just shift our perception of the CTC tea, we will find so much more to appreciate.

**TEA TAKES**  
Hookmol, Halmari, and Koliabur, Goodricke's Khaas from Assam; Darmona and Homedale from the Nilgiris.

*Tea Nanny is a fortnightly series on the world of tea. Aravinda Anantharaman is a Bengaluru-based tea blogger and writer who reports on the tea industry. She posts @AravindaAnanthl.*

# With olive oil prices soaring, less is more



DOUBLE  
TESTED  
NANDITA  
IYER

We tend to miss small price increases on our regular groceries, but a drastic price rise never fails to give us a sticker shock. I'm talking about some of our favourite foods like wine, cocoa and now olive oil. As per a European Union report, prices of olive oil have doubled in the past two years.

I looked up the reason for the soaring prices of olive oil. No surprises with the answer there—climate change. We often think of climate change as a distant concept that won't affect our everyday lives. But sharply increasing food prices make us realise that climate change is very much affecting our lives.

The specific reasons for the price rise are an unusual warm spell in the Mediterranean region, specifically Spain—which produces nearly half the world's olive oil—in the winter of 2022-23 followed by two years of lowest rainfall that Spain has seen in the past 30 years. There is also a reduced supply from Greece and Turkey. This combined with an increased demand

due to its health benefits means that the prices of olive oil are soaring.

Gone are the days of seeing buy-one-get-one deals on extra virgin olive oils in your local supermarket, which would get us a litre at ₹700-800. The price of one litre of extra virgin olive oil from Spain is now ₹1,300-1,800. I make pure olive oil soaps around this time each year, so they cure for five-six months and are ready by peak winter in December. It seems unlikely that I will be making them this year.

Given the prediction that prices will only go up further, is it wise to stock up on olive oil? In regular times, it is always advised to buy olive oil in smaller batches, and keep it away from heat and light to prevent it from degrading. It is the reason why good brands of extra virgin olive oil come in dark-coloured glass bottles. If you buy a litre of the oil, always decant a small quantity and keep it on the countertop and store the rest of the bottle with a tightly sealed lid in a cool, dark place, inside a cabinet, to prolong its life.

If you consume a healthy quantity of olive oil at home, then it's worthwhile buying a few extra bottles (dark-coloured glass bottles) and storing them correctly. Ideal temperatures are 13-16 Celsius so refrigerating is not a good idea. Keep the bottles in a cooler part of your home inside a cabinet and use within two years or so.

If you are not someone with a hoarding tendency, here are a few tips to



Olive oil and rosemary flatbread; and (right) muhammara.

make a bottle last longer.

- Add a mix of olive oil and butter while making pasta sauces.
- Use tahini or Greek yogurt to replace part of the extra virgin olive oil in salad dressings for a creamy texture. You can also use other cold-pressed oils.
- When making basil pesto, use other cold-pressed oils as the flavour of basil is strong enough to mask the flavour of any other oil.
- Reserve extra virgin olive oil only for cold use, such as in salad dressings or to drizzle on pasta, and use blended



olive oils for cooking.

A good way to truly enjoy the flavour of extra virgin olive oil in a less-is-more avatar is to try the viral food trend—drizzle a spoonful of extra virgin olive oil on good-quality vanilla ice cream along with a pinch of salt and dig in!

**OLIVE OIL AND ROSEMARY FLATBREAD**  
*Makes 6*

**Ingredients**  
One and a half cups refined flour (or a mix of refined flour and wheat flour)

One and a half tsp instant yeast  
1 tsp sugar  
Half tsp salt  
3-4 sprigs rosemary  
Half tsp coarse salt  
2 tbsp extra virgin olive oil

**Method**  
In a bowl, combine the flour, instant yeast, sugar and salt. Using lightly lukewarm water, make a soft dough. Knead for 3-4 minutes until the dough is smooth. Cover the bowl and keep aside for an hour or until the dough doubles in volume.

Preheat the oven at 200 degrees Celsius.

Gently punch down the risen dough and divide it into six pieces. Roll out into ovals—around half-cm thick. Place on a parchment-lined baking tray.

Top with finely chopped rosemary, salt and olive oil, pressing down the salt and rosemary with finger tips so they stick to the dough.

Bake for 5-7 minutes at 200 degrees Celsius until golden spots appear on the surface. The same can also be made on a *tava* on the stove top. Cut into wedges and serve with dips of choice.

**MUHAMMARA**  
*Serves 4*  
(A vibrant dip served as part of a mezza platter)

**Ingredients**  
3 large red bell peppers

8-10 walnut halves  
8-10 almonds, chopped  
Half tsp chilli flakes  
1 tsp smoked paprika (optional)  
Half cup breadcrumbs (freshly made from whole wheat bread)  
1 tbsp extra virgin olive oil  
2 tbsp lemon juice  
One and a half tsp salt  
1-2 tsp extra virgin olive oil (for garnish)

**Method**  
Apply a few drops of refined oil all over the bell peppers. Roast on an open flame until charred all over. Keep in a bowl and cover with a lid for 10 minutes for the skin to loosen. Peel off the skin. Separate the flesh, discarding the core, seeds and stem.

Toast the walnuts and almonds for 2-3 minutes.

In a food processor, combine the chopped bell pepper, walnuts, almonds, smoked paprika, breadcrumbs, olive oil, lemon juice and salt. Process to get a smooth paste. Remove to a shallow bowl and top with some more olive oil as a garnish.

Serve with crackers, crudites or pita bread.

*Double Tested is a fortnightly column on vegetarian cooking, highlighting a single ingredient prepared two ways. Nandita Iyer's latest book is The Great Indian Thali—Seasonal Vegetarian Wholesomeness (Roli Books). She posts @saffrontrail on Twitter and Instagram.*





Fans at the Nassau County International Cricket stadium for the India versus US game earlier this month. GETTY IMAGES

# World Cup spices up T20 in unexpected ways

From bowler-friendly pitches to top teams being humbled, the T20 World Cup keeps throwing up memorable surprises

Sumit Chakraborty

**B**owler-friendly pitches in the T20 World Cup this year have produced interesting results with low scores, close contests and several upsets. The pitches have levelled the playing field in more ways than one, primarily by bringing parity between power-hitters and bowlers.

Only three teams out of 20 crossed 200 in the group stage of the tournament: Australia against England, Sri Lanka against the Netherlands, and finally, the West Indies against Afghanistan. The last two of those matches were inconsequential after the Super 8 spots had already been taken. In fact, a score of 160, which is just 8 runs an over, got breached only 11 times in 40 matches.

Conversely, teams scored at less than a run a ball an astonishing 31 times in the 40 group games. This made for a number of close contests.

**THE NEW YORK HURDLE**

The hastily prepared ground and drop-in pitches in Nassau County on the outskirts of New York were the most challenging of all for batsmen. India, playing three of their four group matches there, were lucky to emerge winners in two of those encounters. After defending 119 by a narrow margin of 6 runs in the marquee clash against Pakistan, India squeaked through to a target of 111 against the US. Five penalty runs awarded late in the game for the US's tardy turnover between overs helped the run chase. It's just as well that India got wins in those two games because their last group match against Canada in Florida got washed out.

India was not the only team to struggle in New York. South Africa escaped with a four-run victory over Bangladesh after scoring only 113. And they won with just 7 balls to spare while chasing the Netherlands' 103.

But it's not as if New York was the only low-scoring venue. Many of the Caribbean pitches were also challenging for batsmen, with uneven bounce and tackiness making it hard to unleash big hits. South Africa had a one-run win over Nepal after scoring just 115 in Kingstown. In fact, each of South Africa's four wins in the group stage was touch-and-go.

**UPSETS FOR THE BIG GUNS**

The biggest upset of the World Cup came in Providence, Guyana, after Afghanistan bowled out New Zealand for 75. New Zealand's subsequent loss to the West Indies in Tarouba, where they failed to chase 150, knocked them out of the World Cup.

The other huge upset came in Dallas, where Pakistan failed to reach a target of 160 and lost in the super over to the US.

Pakistan then lost narrowly to India and watched helplessly as the US-Ireland game was washed out. After failing to qualify for the semi-finals of the ODI World Cup last year, Babar Azam's team now had to suffer the ignominy of not making it to the Super 8 of the T20 World Cup, after finishing third in their group.

The third full ICC member not featuring in the Super 8 is Sri Lanka. The Lankans lost two low-scoring games that went to the wire against South Africa and Bangladesh before their match against Nepal got washed out.

Then again, one team's misfortune is another's opportunity. The qualification of the joint-hosts US to the Super 8 is a huge boost for the ICC's efforts to promote cricket in a larger pool of nations around the world.

**ACCURATE BOWLING**

Pace bowlers have enjoyed the conditions a bit more than spinners. That's because in venues like New York, Kingstown, and Tarouba, what counted the most was landing the ball in the right spot. The unpredictable nature of the pitches did the rest. Some balls shot up, others kept low; some held up on the pitch to trigger false shots, while others shot through defences.

In these conditions, only two spinners figured among the top 10 wicket-takers. It was the same among the 10 most economical bowlers who had sent down 10 or more overs. This went contrary to the ICC T20 bowling ranking which is dominated by spinners.

Some of the world's deadliest fast bowlers, like Mitchell Starc and Jofra Archer, were also missing from the list of top wicket-takers. The third-highest wicket-taker in the IPL, Jasprit Bumrah, got only 5 wickets in the group stage, which was far lower than Fazalhaq Farooqi of Afghanistan who got 12 wickets.

Bowling consistently short of a good length produced the best results. Farooqi

had a decent economy rate of 5.6 too, which would have been better if he had not conceded 36 runs in one disastrous over in Afghanistan's last game against the West Indies.

Even if he wasn't among the top wicket-takers, Bumrah did keep his best performance for India's crunch game against Pakistan, with 3/14. And he had a mean economy rate of around 4 an over. We should also take into consideration that one of India's matches got washed out. But the point is that the conditions allowed bowlers with arguably lesser skills to grab more wickets.

**A STRUGGLE FOR BATSMEN**

As for batsmen, those used to batting-friendly conditions, like in the Indian Premier League (IPL), struggled to adjust. It wasn't as if they could just knock the ball around for singles and twos either, with the odd boundary, because an unplayable ball could get them even if they played safe. Among India's batsmen, only Rishabh Pant appeared to find the right balance between risk-taking and keeping out the difficult ones.

Australia's most impactful batsman was Marcus Stoinis in the middle order. But their ODI World Cup hero, Travis Head, found his measure at the end of the group stage with a match-winning 68 after Scotland's Michael Jones dropped a catch in the deep.

Giant-killers Afghanistan and US made it a memorable tournament. What it has shown is that you don't need 250-plus scores to make T20 cricket engrossing



The larger grounds at most venues, compared to those in India, also made it harder to tonk bowlers for sixes or get away with mishits. As the tournament progresses on Caribbean grounds, one would expect the spinners to come into play more than they did in the initial phase. India's spin quartet will be happy that all their matches are day games to cater to the large TV audience back home. That takes out the dew factor.

**A LEVEL PLAYING FIELD?**

India's biggest Super 8 game will be on 24 June, against Australia at Gros Islet, St Lucia. This was the venue where Australia got the better of Scotland in a relatively high-scoring encounter, chasing down a target of 181 with two balls to spare. But the purchase of the Scottish spinners got from the pitch will enthrall India.

Giant-killers Afghanistan and US made it a memorable tournament by ousting New Zealand and Pakistan. What it has shown is that you don't need 250-plus scores to make T20 cricket engrossing. In fact, the tougher pitches have made the games more unpredictable, and that's not a bad thing for spectators.

A few of the pitches probably fell short of international standards, with the ball scooting through at ankle height or rearing up nastily to strike batsmen on arms and helmets. But, as long as they're not dangerous to batsmen, there's a lot to be said for sporting pitches, unlike those in the IPL that are heavily loaded in favour of batsmen.

Will the 2024 T20 World Cup influence franchise cricket around the world? Will pitches and grounds become more bowler-friendly? Probably not, but something needs to change from the dullness of watching batsmen hit six after six with impunity. The World Cup has spiced up T20 cricket in an unexpected way.

Sumit Chakraborty is a writer based in Bengaluru.

## How N Sriram Balaji worked his way to Paris

Balaji's Olympic debut is a result of consistent performances and a life dedicated to tennis



Sriram Balaji and Andre Begemann at Sardegna Open; (below) Rohan Bopanna.

Deepti Patwardhan

**O**ver the years, and especially after spending a decade on the professional tennis tour, N. Sriram Balaji has learnt to temper his expectations. The year 2023 had come with its own dose of disappointment as he missed out on a spot in the deferred 2022 Asian Games squad, despite being in the world top-100 in doubles. When the talk of golden ticket to the Olympics started swirling in the Indian tennis community, he deliberately blocked it out and focused on his game.

"I didn't want to get my hopes high, especially since I was unlucky not to get selected for the Asian Games last year," Balaji tells *Lounge*. A place in the Indian men's doubles team opened up since Rohan Bopanna is ranked in the top-10 (currently No.4) in the world. As per Paris Olympics qualification rules, this entitled Bopanna, 44, to take an Indian player of his choice to the 2024 Summer Games. And he had a few options as four Indians, apart from Bopanna, are ranked in the top-100 on the ATP men's doubles charts. But Bopanna had zeroed in on his choice by the time clay season had rolled around.

"We had a chat before the French Open where Rohan hinted that he would be suggesting my name (as Bopanna's partner) for Olympics," says Balaji, 34. "I was not sure how it would turn out because I was not sure of playing Roland Garros at the time. Also, the final decision would be made by AITA (All-India Tennis Association)."

As it happened, Balaji and his Mexican partner Miguel Reyes-Varela got into the French Open as alternates. Once there, they dug deep into the competition and made it past the first two rounds. It was the first time that Balaji had posted main draw wins at the Grand Slam. In the third round, Balaji and Reyes-Varela took on second seeds and reigning Australian Open champions Bopanna-Matthew Ebden. Despite the difference in ranking and success, Balaji and Reyes-Varela made a match of it, only losing 10-8 in the third-set tie-breaker. Balaji's movement and explosive power on the red dirt made a strong case for his selection, especially since the tennis competition of the Paris Olympics will take place at Roland Garros.

On 13 June, the AITA officially announced that Balaji would partner Bopanna at the 2024 Summer Games, handing the former an Olympic debut.

"I was overwhelmed when I heard the news," says the 34-year-old. "It was always something of a distant dream but I never thought I would be playing the Olympics. My parents were also overjoyed on hearing this; the first thing my dad told me is that we are coming to watch you. They have applied for the visa already."

It has been a whirlwind few weeks for the Indian tennis player. Not only did he reach the third round of the French Open, a finals finish at the ATP Challenger in Perugia last week also lifted him to a career high ranking of 62. A chance at an Olympic debut has been a result of consistent performances in the last one year, and a life dedicated to his craft.

Coming from Coimbatore, Balaji didn't have the best of tennis facilities at his disposal. His father Narayanaswamy, a volleyball player, was the one who supervised his physical training. Balaji would go to Chennai to train before tournaments, once he started playing tennis seriously at the age of 15, and moved his training base to Germany at 20.

He was the first student of the Alexander Wasse Tennis Academy in Offenbach, Germany. Even though the Tamil Nadu Tennis Association (TNTA) sponsored him briefly, from 18-20 years of age, it is his hustle and craft that has kept him afloat since. Though he doesn't talk about it much, there were times when he was stranded abroad after playing tournaments without any money. Balaji and his then doubles partner, Vishnu Vardhan, also tried to crowdfund their way to 2018 Wimbledon.

"There is no doubt that tennis is tough sport and can be financially straining," he says. "But I don't like to use it as an excuse. Yes, you have to travel either in India or abroad, but tennis gives you a chance to earn money every single week and it is up to you what you make of it. I don't expect someone (sponsors) to spend their money on me just because I am playing tennis."

On the Indian tennis circuit, Balaji is known for his quiet diligence. He hasn't taken giant strides on the tennis tour, but ever since he made doubles a priority, around 2018, he has clawed his way up the rankings. One of the fittest players on the tour, he is adept on clay, a rare quality in an Indian tennis player and one that may have swung the Olympic spot his way.

"I have performed consistently in the last 12 months," he says. "I also think I am more confident in my game now. I have been working on my second-serve returns, my serve, my first volleys. In tennis, there are so many avenues of improvement, you just have to go to work every single day. Playing higher-level tournaments has also taught me to be patient."

What has also helped the Indian players on tour is the launch by the Pune Metropolitan District Tennis Association of the "Doubles Dream of India", in early 2023. The programme helps players with support staff, meaning they now have access to a coach—Balachandran Mannikkath—who travels with them for bigger events. Small measures, big gains for Indian tennis.

Before the Olympics, there is the small matter of Wimbledon and Balaji has already begun his transition to grass. He travelled from Perugia, Italy, to Ilkley, Great Britain via two stopovers—typical for players aboard the tennis travelling caravan—for his first grass event of the season. After Wimbledon, Bopanna and Balaji will play two tournaments—ATP 500 in Hamburg, Germany, and ATP 250 event in Umag, Croatia—together to prepare for Paris. A chance for the hard worker to be the headliner.

Deepti Patwardhan is a sportswriter based in Mumbai.



HINDUSTAN TIMES



# So long, No.11



ALL INDIA FOOTBALL FEDERATION



ALL INDIA FOOTBALL FEDERATION

From a gifted young prodigy to a statesman of Indian football, Sunil Chhetri has worked his way up into the sporting hall of fame

Akhil Sood

Goodbyes are never easy. Overwhelmed by the occasion, Sunil Chhetri is unable to hold back the tears. One of India's greatest sporting sons is walking off the pitch, his captain's armband on proud display, for the very last time. The fans at Kolkata's Salt Lake Stadium on 6 June, where India is hosting Kuwait in a Fifa World Cup qualifier, are roaring as Chhetri passes through an emotional guard of honour formed by his teammates and coaching staff. It's time to pass the baton—and his famous No.11 shirt—on to the next generation, and call time on a remarkable, record-breaking career spanning 19 years. At 39, Sunil Chhetri has retired from international football.

Numbers tell only part of the story, but let's quickly run through how patently ridiculous and extraordinary they are: 94 goals scored in 151 international appearances—that's more than Diego Maradona and Pele; among currently active players, only Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi have more—and a further 158 in club football. (In the list of Indian footballers: I.M. Vijayan racked up 32 while Bhaichung Bhutia finished his international career with 29.) Over 500 appearances in total—from his debut against Pakistan in 2005 to this, his final game. Trophies, individual awards, the prestigious Major Dhyan Chand Khel Ratna award in 2021 (the first footballer to win it)—the many reminders of his sustained brilliance resting with pride on his mantelpiece. But Chhetri's contribution to Indian football goes beyond mere statistics and awards. He has made a nation believe.

A few days after the Kuwait game, which ended in a goalless draw, denting India's hopes for qualification, I speak with Chhetri on a Zoom call. He's still getting used to this new chapter in his life. He has butterflies in his stomach as India is scheduled to play their final World Cup qualifier against a formidable Qatar team (they would go on to lose under controversial circumstances). For now, Chhetri is enjoying the break.

"At that moment, maybe I would feel: 'Ah! I wish I could have done this, I could have done that.' But thinking about it now that I have the time, when I look back, I had an amazing 19 years, man. There aren't many players who've played 10 years for their country, leave aside 19," he says. It is astonishing; seldom do players last at the top level for such a long time. Rarer still as the charismatic talisman of a team. His longevity and consistency make him a *bona-fide* legend of the sport in India. He isn't done with the

game just yet—he will continue as skipper at his club Bengaluru FC in the Indian Super League (ISL) for at least another year.

#### COMPETITIVE STREAK

Chhetri is polite, humble and soft-spoken, a sense of self-assured stillness underlining his words. On the field, he transforms into a warrior: all heart and grace, passion, desire, aggression, a drive to fight and win it all.

"Chhetri, on his bad days, will still run for 90 minutes," says Joe Morrison, a prominent football presenter based in Dubai. "Chhetri will not give it up, he will not give up the ball, he will do his absolute best for 90 minutes," he says. "On his good days, he'll bang in a couple of goals, of course he will. But it's what you do on your bad days; that's the difference."

Right from his childhood, Chhetri has been competitive. In an official documentary, *Captain Fantastic*, made on him by Fifa in 2023, his father describes his desire to play football before he could even walk. His mother speaks of how difficult he could be when he wasn't given the chance to play. By all accounts, he's a famously sore loser. His family's version of the board game *Ludo* is called "Khooni Ludo"—or "Bloody Ludo"—because of how intense it gets.

He grew up in Delhi in his formative years in a family with modest means. His father served in the Indian Army, and his mother had played football for Nepal. Right after school, Chhetri joined Kolkata's famous Mohun Bagan in 2002—a baptism by fire, given the passionate and demanding fanbase the club boasts. His coach at the time was former India player Subrata Bhattacharjee; Chhetri met his wife Sonam, the coach's daughter, there.

Chhetri made his debut in 2005 against Pakistan at Quetta, scoring a goal in a game that ultimately ended in a 1-1 draw (he cites this as one of his more memorable moments). By the time he broke into the national team, the great Bhaichung Bhutia was perhaps the most recognisable Indian footballer around. Another legend of the game, I.M. Vijayan, had just retired from the international scene, while players like Renedy Singh were established names. In fact, Singh, in the Fifa documentary, recalls an amusing incident from Chhetri's early days. Singh would usually end up taking the free kicks and penalty kicks for the national team, under Bhutia's captaincy. But as Chhetri grew into the team, he was eager to take on greater responsibilities on the pitch. Singh recounts the memory: "He would tell me, 'Renedy *bhai*, you take the free kicks or the penalties—you can't take both'... I was like, *Yeh Delhi boy hai, yeh kuch bhi bol sakta hai (he's from Delhi, you never know what he'll say next)*."

He played for a few clubs like East Bengal, JCT and Dempo in India for the next few years, before an opportunity to go abroad arose. In 2009, there was a trial at Coventry City in England's Championship (the second division) that didn't materialise into anything substantial. The same year, he signed with another English club in the Championship, Queens Park Rangers (QPR), but the transfer fell through as he was not given a work permit because of India's low rank in the Fifa ratings. In 2010, he finally crossed international waters, becoming the first Indian to play Major League Soccer in the US and the third Indian player to play in a foreign league. He signed for the club Kansas City Wizards, but it didn't work out, as he barely made it on to the pitch.

"At Kansas, if I can say the word, I screwed it up," says Chhetri. "I felt entitled. I went there, I scored some 13 goals in the first 10 friendly games (including one in a friendly against Manchester United). I thought I deserved to play. And when I wasn't starting, I became very negative. I was too far away from home and I was stupid. I didn't take care of my life, of food, everything." While he may have directed his frustrations and disappointments elsewhere in the past, now Chhetri speaks of failures and setbacks in a circumspect tone, with a self-examining maturity. He has the benefit of experience and hindsight.

Today, he stands tall as a kind of statesman of Indian football. He has also embraced the critical role of raising the profile of the sport here. As John Duerden, author and Asian football correspondent for *The Guardian*, *Associated Press*, and others, tells me over email: "He will go down as one of Asia's legends, at least in the continent. He may not have played at the World Cup (...) but fans of Asian football will always know that this is a player who represented India for almost 20 years and scored lots and lots of goals. Not just that but he was a perfect ambassador for the game off the pitch too."

It took him a while to get there. "When I was younger," he says, "I had this arrogance, this myth that talent alone is enough. And eradicating that was pivotal for me." Chhetri credits two of his early coaches for India, Sukhwinder Singh and Bob Houghton, for coaching that tendency out of him. "They both taught me that... no, talent is not enough. If you want to be in the team, you've got to do the hard work too. Before that, I was just a young kid from Delhi. Without sounding arrogant, I think I was a little better—in terms of skill, touch, scoring—so I thought I'd always play."

Chhetri tells me about a conversation with Houghton—who coached the Indian team between 2006-11—about Spain and Barcelona legend Andrés Iniesta, a man who pretty much won every major trophy on the European and world stage. "He was the best player for Spain and Barcelona," says Chhetri, "and even he doesn't have the ball for more than two-and-a-half minutes! The remaining 87-and-a-half minutes he has to defend, to fight, to track back, to apply himself—that example was a very profound one."

Where it all clicked for him was during a training camp in the UAE in preparation for an upcoming tournament. The manager was going to select a total of four forwards. "Bhaichung *bhai* and Manjit (Singh) will travel because they're the first starters," says Chhetri. "And Abhishek *bhai* (Yadav) was important to us because of his height." That left one slot open, and Chhetri was facing stiff competition from two of his teammates. He was given 45 minutes to impress the manager in a friendly against a club team. He scored twice in a 2-2 draw. "More importantly, I applied myself better. I went for the headers, I fought for the team, I came back and defended. Bob (Houghton) pulled me aside and was like: 'When you can do this, why don't you do it all the time? Why be a cheat?' He told me this is the bare minimum I expect from you in every game." From that point, Chhetri never looked back.

Armando Colaco, Chhetri's coach at Goan club Dempo in 2009 as well as for the national team in 2011—and a celebrated coach in Dempo's history for his progressive style—says he was always an impeccable team man. "He's had a very long journey which other players won't have. Records are there to be broken, but it's going to be quite difficult to replace him in the Indian team."

#### INSPIRING SUPPORT

In 2018, after a game at the Intercontinental Cup in Mumbai, in which he scored a hat-trick against Chinese Taipei, Chhetri posted a video on his X account. Only 2,569 fans had showed up at the stadium. In the video, Chhetri urged fans to come for the next game, to show up and support the Indian team. Abuse us, criticise us, but come. He adds, deadpan, that just being critical online is no fun. They should do it at the ground, in person.

This video travelled far and wide. Cricketer Virat Kohli posted a video urging fans to go. Luminaries of all stripes—from cricketer V.V.S. Laxman to comedian Vir Das—professed their support for Chhetri and Indian football. Morrison says this was a key moment in the development of Indian football. "I think, as Sunil's star rose, it also coincided with the rise of social media. So, the timing was perfect. He was able to get the message across directly to the fans... it was from the heart. That's why it had an impact." For the next game, against Kenya, the stadium was sold out. Thousands showed up. Chhetri (of course) scored twice in a 3-0 win.

This incident helped elevate Chhetri's status to a wider, non-football audience. The diehards, the fanatics and ultras, had been there all along, Chhetri now became a voice: someone who was representing his sport to the outside world.

Commentator and presenter John Dykes, well known for his work with cricket and football in India, says over a text exchange how Chhetri "represented the new kind of icon that Indian football needed. He brought a thoroughly modern-day emphasis on fitness, discipline and the right kind of public persona to the sport." He draws a comparison to Virat Kohli, but adds that Chhetri "chose to build and maintain his career in a sport that didn't always come with guaranteed riches and celebrity."

Chhetri, for his part, took on this new, more prominent profile with the respect and responsibility it demanded. We discuss his multicultural upbringing and fluency in several languages, and how it helped him navigate the role of the national captain. "It helps tremendously. Let's say a young boy from Sikkim comes to the camp, and they're overwhelmed by the atmosphere. If I go to them and talk to them in Nepali, it feels different. Whenever there's a player from Bengal, I speak to him in Bengali. He feels the familiarity, he feels the love. These are small things, like understanding their food habits, not judging everyone by the same metric."

His attention and care for those around him, has led to Chhetri becoming a cult hero in the stands too. Fans of his current club team, Bengaluru FC, adore him for the passion with which he plays. At first, as outlined in the Fifa documentary by members of West Block Blues, a devoted fan club named after a stand in the stadium, there was scepticism around Chhetri. He was the national football star, but watching him instantly buy into the ethos of the club meant that club's fans soon embraced him as one of their own.

"As a captain," he says, "I've made a lot of mistakes too. And that is probably the reason why I now get it right." He says when he

Sunil Chhetri depicted on a mural in Kolkata.



GETTY IMAGES





Sunil Chhetri fights for the ball in a game against Jordan during the 2014 Asian Games in South Korea.

GETTY IMAGES

became captain at 25, he had this desire to speak to everyone, to tell them what to do. “Then one day, I was thinking to myself, did I like the captain coming to me? The answer was a resounding no! Slowly I learnt that it’s not about when to speak, it’s about when not to speak.” After that, he would only voice his concerns only when absolutely necessary. Rather, he chose to set an example to the players, becoming a role model. “Eating the right stuff, coming on time, things like picking up your residue after a game and putting it in the dustbin. It might sound trivial, but the boys see you and they follow. When you lecture somebody, no one likes it.” (Chhetri often speaks of his desire to indulge, something his strict nutritional habits don’t allow—fittingly, this week, on Delhi’s Outer Ring Road, I spotted a Zomato billboard featuring him: “Grew up in Delhi, loved by India...like *chole bhature*.”)

Last year, after Indian wrestlers spoke out in protest against alleged sexual harassment by then federation chief Brij Bhushan Singh, Chhetri tweeted in support. He expressed disappointment at the lack of consideration with which the wrestlers were being dragged around. “This isn’t the way to treat anyone. I really hope this whole situation is assessed the way it should be.” These things often have a ripple effect. Someone of Chhetri’s stature speaking out enables others.

Further back, when the country was reeling under the shock of a devastating covid wave in April and May 2021 with oxygen shortages and scarcity of beds in hospitals, Chhetri announced, on 29 April, that he was handing over his X account to journalists and activists for a wider reach. He has 1.8 million followers at the time of writing. In a video message with the caption “Together, now more than ever”, he professed his appreciation for the “real-life captains” working toward relief efforts. Chhetri urged people: “no matter who you are, help in whichever way possible.”

Prajwal Bhat, an independent journalist, was the first person to take over the account. Bhat was reporting on the crisis in Bengaluru. “The demand was overwhelming and the systems were creaking. The IPL had not yet been cancelled and people were going about things as though it was business as usual. At least in the sports fraternity, I don’t remember anyone highlighting the fact that we’re having a crisis of this scale. (The X takeover) not only helped people access this information but also helped shift the conversation in terms of getting more people to speak up.”

Chhetri credits his team for being on the same wavelength. “We haven’t moved mountains. But whatever we could do, we’ve tried. I have the power now. It’s one thing to have an idea, but then I have a voice people want to hear. Why not use it in a better way?”

SPORTING STINT

Sporting CP, or simply “Sporting”, is a European football institution. The club, in Lisbon, Portugal, has won the Portuguese top flight title 20 times in its history since 1906. They have produced heavy-weight international players of the likes of Luis Figo and Ronaldo. Chhetri, in 2012, signed a contract to play for the club. Coming from a country where football was and remains till date a developing sport, Chhetri would now be testing himself against the elite of European football.

His time in Portugal is pointed out by many as a period that defined the trajectory of the rest of his career. Chhetri didn’t spend a long time in Portugal; one year into a four-year contract, he returned to India, but he values the experience. “I was in one of the biggest clubs in Europe. What I understood when I went there was the level is much higher than what I was used to. In about two weeks, I was sent to the B team. And to my misfortune,” he laughs, “the B team was better than the A team!” He takes the example of England and Tottenham defender Eric Dier, who was at Sporting playing for the B team at the time. In that year, Chhetri only made a handful of

appearances, all of them from the bench. “That too 20 minutes here, 20 minutes there,” he says. “It was a humongous jump. To put it into context, the level the ISL is in right now—and I’m being very honest—I don’t think any player is equipped to go to the top leagues. It has to be a gradual jump. Our league is getting better every year. Our boys should do well in the country, and then aim to go to a second division league elsewhere.”

While the Kansas City stint is something he’s taken in his stride, there’s a lingering sense of “what if...” when Chhetri talks about Sporting. “The one small qualm I have is: If I were 17, 18, 19 years old, like the other B team boys, I would have happily stayed there. I’m not complaining. I was 27 at the time. So I couldn’t stay to learn more, I was getting restless at not playing. At 16 or 17, I would have happily given four years, even if I’m not playing. I’d have been a different player at 20.” It’s an understandable decision—by all conventional wisdom, a footballer hits their peak by the time they reach 27 years of age. Chhetri was too important to the national team—and too gifted—to be spending his prime years on the bench.

DISCIPLINED AND CONSISTENT

On the pitch, Chhetri has scored every kind of goal imaginable. He’s thwacked in long-range bangers and tap-ins from inside the six-yard box. Penalties thumped, free kicks flying past flailing goalies. Delicate, mazy runs giving defenders twisted blood. In his 100th game, in Mumbai, the famous one where he asked fans to show up and be heard, Chhetri scored a penalty that he had won himself. Toward the end, with India comfortably ahead by two, Chhetri scored one of his most delicious goals. A quick counter-attack capped off by Chhetri making a clever run behind the Kenyan defence left him with just the keeper to beat. With a defender on his heels and the goalie fast approaching, Chhetri

decided to impudently dink the ball over his head. It looped agonisingly over the keeper—caught in no man’s land—to nestle gently in the back of the net.

Technically, he’s perhaps one of the most gifted players India has produced. Comfortable shooting off both feet, a skilful dribbler with great balance, power and quick feet, a natural finisher, and—despite being not the tallest at 5ft, 7 inches—an excellent header of the ball.

Beyond his technique, a couple of things stand out about Chhetri’s game, defining him as a player. “He didn’t need much training or guidance,” says Armando Colaco. “He had everything; he could pick up in a moment whatever you tell him. Just one signal. At Dempo, we had a peculiar style of keeping the ball and playing. You don’t run here and there; be calm, cool, run and shoot at precise moments. He adjusted to our style because he had that ear of picking it up, that was the beauty in him.”

John Duerden talks about Chhetri’s intelligence and composure. “To play so long means that you have to adapt, not just to individual coaches and their demands but also to the trends in football. The game has changed a lot in the last 20 years, and he has not just adapted but thrived.”

More than that, however, is his hunger, commitment, and dedication. The gruelling demands of professional sport that the body has to endure make it practically impossible to sustain a long career beyond a point. Chhetri, though, managed to do it for almost two decades. Morrison says the young players at Bengaluru FC would be grateful to have someone like Chhetri (and Gurpreet Singh Sandhu, the national team goalkeeper) around.

“To be so disciplined and consistent in their nutrition, the way they train to the maximum every day, how they don’t step off the gas... Whether it’s the national team or at club level—Chhetri has shown a lot of youngsters that this is what’s required. Not only to get to the top but to stay there. I think that’ll be his legacy.” Chhetri tells me there were days he just wanted to eat *samosas*, watch Netflix. “I’ll tell you one thing: why I was so hellbent on my routine is because on the days when you don’t want to do it, muscle memory will take over.”

We speak of what lies ahead for Chhetri. In the short-term, there’s the club pre-season to look forward to, but he’s still figuring his path after that. “I don’t have anything concrete right now. My plan is to take a sabbatical for as long as it takes, and to find out exactly what I want to do. It’ll definitely be something with Indian football. But I want to take my time and see where I can add value.”

Morrison feels Chhetri should not get involved in coaching and that he would be most useful in the upper echelons of football—at the Fifa headquarters in Switzerland or the Asian Football Headquarters in Kuala Lumpur. “He knows, because he’s seen it at grass-roots level, what India requires. When it comes to global football and helping your country, everything comes from the top.”

Despite the bitter disappointment of falling at yet another World Cup qualification hurdle, there remain persistent reasons for optimism for India. The game is getting increasing attention in the mainstream thanks to a vocal fanbase as well as the ISL improving the fan experience. But there have been several setbacks too. Currently, India’s global Fifa ranking is at 121 which, let’s be honest, is no great shakes. Chhetri points out that we’re not suddenly going to produce a Lionel Messi; there has to be a step-by-step improvement in India’s fortunes.

“First of all,” he says, “understanding that we have made substantial gains in the last 10 years is important.” Right now, he says, India is hovering around the 16-20th place in terms of quality in Asia. Chhetri feels that a realistic goal is to be among the continent’s 10 best teams. “More importantly, we need to identify talent at the right age. We keep saying we’re a nation of 1.5 billion people, but that only holds true when we are choosing (from that pool). We don’t tap the talent at the right age, we don’t give them the right education, the right learning.”

Pointing out that India’s immense diversity is an asset, he says: “We have so much talent. Once we crack that code, very soon we will reach the top 10 of Asia, and we’ll be rubbing our shoulders with the very best.” Chhetri speaks of Indian football’s future with a measured optimism; he understands the significant challenges. But the shoots of progress have been visible too. The game is growing in India—slowly, steadily—and there’s hope for a better tomorrow.

Akhil Sood is a Delhi-based writer.

ALL INDIA FOOTBALL FEDERATION



PTI





# LOOKING FOR NANDA DEVI

90 years ago, climbers Eric Shipton and Bill Tilman found a way to enter the vast and forbidding Nanda Devi Sanctuary

Bibek Bhattacharya  
bibek.b@htlive.com

“We were now actually in the inner sanctuary of the Nanda Devi Basin, and at each step I experienced the subtle thrill which anyone of imagination must feel when treading hitherto unexplored country. Each corner held some thrilling secret to be revealed for the trouble of looking.” So wrote the English mountaineer and explorer Eric Shipton in his classic book *Nanda Devi* in 1936.

The book is an account of one of the most spectacular expeditions of mountain exploration ever undertaken, when, in 1934, Shipton, along with compatriot Bill Tilman and the Nepalese Sherpas Ang Tharkay, Pasang Bhutia and Kusang, became the first people ever to find a way into the inner sanctuary of Nanda Devi, in the Garhwal Himalaya.

### IN NANDA’S GARDEN

Ever since the dawn of mountaineering, a greater premium has been placed on the summitting of peaks, in large part driven by a colonialist narrative of conquest. Nowhere is this truer than in the case of the Himalaya. But if one were to talk about the less heralded—but probably more important—history of exploration, of finding one’s way in an unmapped world, then one has to tell the story of five men who managed to find their way into a vast, forbidding, mountain fastness, 90 years ago.

Nanda Devi is a unique mountain in many ways. India’s highest peak (that, unlike Kangchenjunga, is entirely within the country’s borders) at 7,816m, it has one of the most unmistakable mountain profiles in the world. But apart from its sheer beauty, it is equally important to the people of Garhwal and Kumaon in a religious and cultural paradigm as their patron deity—the “Bliss Giving Goddess”.

Situated in central Uttarakhand, and bound by the Dhaul Ganga river to the west and the Gori Ganga to the east, the twin peaks of Nanda Devi and Nanda Devi East dominate an enclosed sanctuary of glaciers, glacial streams and alpine meadows some 380 sq. km. in area. This sanctuary is closed in by a high circular ring of peaks and ridges that contains some 17 peaks that are on average about 21,000ft high. This gives rise to an outer sanctuary, that is ringed around by a second “curtain” down into the gorge of the Rishi Ganga river.

This river arises from five glaciers within the sanctuary, and the sheer gorge that it carves out of the inner rim as it flows west, forms the only ingress. Mountaineers had been trying to puzzle a way into the sanctuary since the 1880s, and till 1934, even the Bhotia people of the region had not found a way in.

### A NEW APPROACH

In the wake of the 1933 Everest expedition, where he had been disillusioned by the siege-style mountaineering favoured by the Mount Everest Committee, Shipton was looking for a mountaineering challenge that would vindicate his deep belief that a small, mobile group of climbers, living off the land and on a shoestring budget, could achieve more than dozens of climbers supplied by hundreds of porters.

The leader of the Everest expedition, Hugh Ruttledge, suggested Shipton try



Members of the 1933 Everest expedition, including Eric Shipton (far right) and Hugh Ruttledge (second from left).

and find a way to crack the Nanda Devi puzzle, one that had eluded famous mountaineers like W.W. Graham (1883), T.G. Longstaff (1905 and 1907) Ruttledge himself in 1926, 1927 and 1932. Defeated by the Rishi Ganga gorge, Ruttledge wrote in *The Times* in 1932, “Nanda Devi imposes on her votaries an admission test as yet beyond their skill and endurance,” labelling the sanctuary as more inaccessible than the North Pole.

This was, for the hardbitten explorer in Shipton, a challenge he couldn’t refuse, and he drafted in his taciturn friend Tilman, with whom he had climbed in Kenya during their time as planters. Through his

contact with the famed recruiter of Sherpa porters for Everest expeditions, Karma Paul of Darjeeling, Shipton enlisted the services of the greatest Sherpa climber of the time, Ang Tharkay, along with two experienced understudies, Pasang and Kusang.

The five of them, along with their supplies, took the Bombay Mail from Calcutta’s Howrah station to Bareilly, and then a branch line to Kathgodam. From there, a lorry ride to Ranikhet, and after stocking up on food supplies at the local market, another lorry brought them to Baijnath. Days of pleasant trekking through the foothills brought them to the

Eric Shipton and Bill Tilman spent 6 months in 1934 accomplishing stupendous mountaineering feats in Garhwal, with just their joy as their fuel and motivation

## 7 books to learn about the mountain

Nanda Devi is one of the most storied mountains in the world, so it stands to reason that over the years, an extensive amount of literature has been written on it. Although not exhaustive, here are seven books that will enrich your understanding of Nanda Devi, both the mountain and the goddess.

### Nanda Devi (1936)

by Eric Shipton

The earliest and the best book on the mountain is also a classic of travel writing and mountain exploration. Shipton recounts the entire 1934 adventure, including the summer entry and exploration of the Nanda Devi Sanctuary, the group’s monsoon exploration of the Kedarnath-Badrinath watershed and the further explorations and climbs in the sanctuary in the autumn. Shipton’s wide-eyed wonder and romantic fervour lights up the narrative.

### The Ascent Of Nanda Devi (1937)

by Bill Tilman

This is Tilman’s more businesslike account of summitting Nanda Devi, where he led a joint-English-American team and, alongside Noel Odell, successfully completed the ascent of the mountain. Despite Tilman’s wry self-deprecation, it still remains a heartfelt and



important travel narrative.

### Shipton & Tilman: The Great Decade Of Himalayan Exploration (2014)

by Jim Perrin

In the 1930s, Shipton and Tilman were the “dynamic duo” of Himalayan climbing, cocking a snook to the British climbing establishment, and leading small, mobile and thoughtful exploratory expeditions in Garhwal, the Everest region and the Karakoram, among others. The writer and climber Jim Perrin gives a fine account of their partnership despite their very different personalities, and provides a great insight into the 1934 Nanda Devi expedition.

### The Nanda Devi Affair (1994)

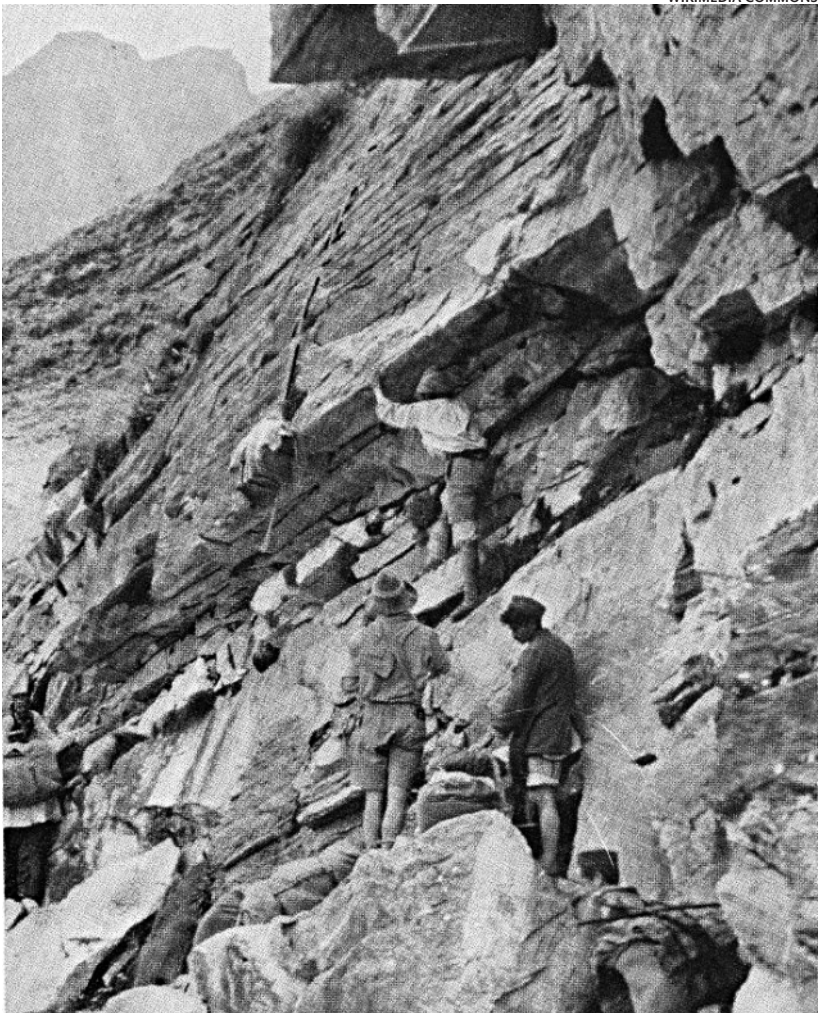
by Bill Aitken

Bill Aitken came to India in the early 1960s to lead the Gandhian life, fell in love with Garhwal (and a Garhwali), and Nanda Devi, and never left. As the title suggests, this book is a love letter to both the hill communities and especially to Nanda, the mountain and the goddess. Aitken has spent decades travelling to the sanctuary, traversing local trails across Uttarakhand and visiting most of the important cultural spots associated with the worship of Nanda Devi. If you want to truly understand the goddess’s cult, as it exists in the liminal space between the sublimity of natural grandeur and personal devotion, this is the book for you.

### Across Peaks & Passes In Kumaun Himalaya (1999)

by Harish Kapadia

One of India’s best mountaineers and mountain writers, the Piolet d’Or winning Kapadia’s *Across Peaks & Passes* is an essential series of mountaineering books covering the great range. A few interesting chapters in the Kumaon book cover Nanda Devi, including Kapadia’s own climbs in the sanctuary as well as a very useful index of the major climbs in the sanctuary since the 1936 ascent.



(Left) The twin peaks of Nanda Devi seen from the northern rim of the Sanctuary, and (above) Shipton, Tilman and their porters navigate the Rishi Ganga gorge.

Kuari Pass, which they crossed to descend to Joshimath on the Alaknanda river on 20 May. Following another round of shopping, they forked up the valley of the Dhaul Ganga, Alaknanda’s main tributary, and thus to the Bhotia village of Reni. Finally, their true quest would begin.

The party would climb up the outer curtain ridge to the high alp of Lata Kharak, and tackle high passes in an attempt to find a way to the Rishi Ganga. The lower gorge of the Rishi Ganga is nigh on impassable, so the way to outflank it and reach the upper Rishi gorge is to cross the high and tricky Dharansi Pass to the hanging valley of Dharansi, and then over the Malathuni Pass down to the alp of Dibru-gheta, and finally to the Rishi Ganga.

After crossing the Rishi Ganga, which is as far as previous expeditions had come, the five explorers tried to find different routes through. Criss-crossing the raging torrent and attempting in vain to negotiate the near vertical rocks of the towering box canyon, it was Tilman and Angtharkay that finally found a way: A series of thin rock faults, overhanging the chasm of the gorge, that almost miraculously ran in an unbroken line across the towering slabs, and, finally, improbably, into the sanctuary. Later climbers would call this the “stairway to heaven”. It had taken them eight arduous days of trial and error since they had set out from Joshimath.

### FOOTLOOSE AND FANCY FREE

Having solved the greatest puzzle of Himalayan mountaineering at the time, the five were struck by the wild beauty of the inner sanctuary, a veritable theatre of the gods. As always, it is difficult to top Shipton’s soulful description. Having finally overcome the Rishi gorge, he writes, “It was glorious country, gentle moorlands grazed by herds of bharal and in places gay with Alpine flowers, small lakes that reflected the surrounding mountains, deep lateral valleys holding glaciers enclosed by a hundred magnificent peaks of clean strong granite or glistening ice and snow. Out of the centre of the basin rose the wonderful spectacle of Nanda Devi, 13,000 ft above its base, peerless among mountains, always changing and ever lovely.”

The five explorers would go on to spend nearly a month in the sanctuary, till the monsoon broke with violent downpours

on 28 June, surveying and mapping the northern side of the sanctuary, climbing peaks and finding new passes. Beating a retreat through the now swollen, and even more fearsome Rishi Ganga, they would return after the monsoon, on 8 September. Over the intervening months, they would attempt a crossing of the Badrinath-Kedarnath-Gangotri watersheds, mapping more glaciers, valleys and traversable routes, having grand adventures on high peaks and in bear-filled bamboo forests.

They would spend 10 days in September surveying the southern reaches of the sanctuary, while also trying to figure out a likely route by which the main Nanda Devi peak may be climbed. These were days suffused with a warm glow of satisfaction for the team, and also sadness that they would soon have to leave Nanda’s abode, before winter set in.

Lying in the open at a high camp on the peak of Maikotli, Tilman would muse, “A more pleasant site...would be hard to find, for it was situated in a meadow of short grass...with a clear stream running past the tents...What a ‘bedroom’ it was! As dawn banished sleep, the opening eyes rested full upon the majestic outline of the ‘Blessed Goddess’ and watched the rosy light steal gently down her east-turned face.”

The party’s exit from the sanctuary too was a remarkable piece of mountaineering, as they negotiated the dangerous, avalanche prone snow fields and hanging glaciers of the Sunderdhunga Col on the southern rim of the sanctuary to descend directly down to the Pindar Valley.

### THE LEGACY OF 1934

Apart from the grand adventure that the expedition was, 90 years later, what is also striking is just how divergent from the prevailing attitudes to climbing Shipton and Tilman’s sentiments were. In a world where ascending the world’s highest peaks sparked a prestige race between the major western powers, these two misfits, and their Sherpa friends who they treated as their equals, had spent six months wandering among the mountains, accomplishing stupendous feats, with just their joy as their fuel.

It’s a spirit of mountaineering that wouldn’t be seen again till the 1970s and 1980s, when anti-establishment climbers like Doug Scott, Reinhold Messner and Jerzy Kukuczka would take Shipton’s dictum of alpine-style climbing to heart and shatter climbing records. Sadly, these days, the tide of mountaineering has turned again towards commercial and egotistical aims, as rich clients pay climbing Sherpas to take them to the world’s highest summits, becoming social media celebrities in the process.

In 1936, when Tilman would climb Nanda Devi, it became the highest peak ever climbed, a record it would hold till 1950. Ang Tharkay would go on to win even greater renown as a climber, while Shipton would go on to map other “blanks on the map”—as he put it—find the current route up Everest from the Nepal side, and mentor a younger generation of climbers like Tenzing Norgay and Edmund Hillary. Tilman kept exploring with Shipton till the outbreak of the Second World War, and after spending the 1950s climbing in the Nepal Himalaya, would take up deep sea sailing in his old age, exploring the Atlantic on small pilot cutters. He was lost to sea in 1977 while sailing to South America.

As for Nanda, she remains the bliss-giving goddess of Uttarakhand, the queen of myths, the ruler of the fates of the Bhotia people. Over the decades, both of Nanda’s twin peaks have been climbed and re-climbed by different routes, while the mountain has shrugged off the attempts by the CIA and Indian intelligence to place a nuclear device on her summit, and has continued to captivate generations of mountain lovers with her regal, remote beauty.



# ‘This is a really small film about a really big guy’

‘Senna’ and ‘Amy’ director Asif Kapadia on the unique challenges of making his new documentary on Roger Federer

Udita Jhunjhunwala

On 15 September 2022, Roger Federer, considered by many to be the greatest tennis player of all time, announced his retirement. Eight days later on 23 September, the 41-year-old played his last professional match—a doubles game in which he partnered with long-time rival and friend Rafael Nadal at the Laver Cup in London. The duo lost that match.

*Federer: Twelve Final Days*, an 88-minute feature-length documentary (Amazon Prime Video), follows Federer through those final days when he drafted his retirement announcement, counting down to its posting on social media, along with reactions from his family, including parents, friends, colleagues and media, up to and right after his final farewell.

The film by Academy Award-winning director Asif Kapadia and co-director Joe Sabia features archival footage (including Federer as a ball boy), interviews and appearances by his arch rivals and friends, including Nadal, Andy Murray and Novak Djokovic. London-based Kapadia, known for his in-depth documentaries on personalities with dramatic life stories (*Senna*, *Amy*), spoke to *Lounge* about crafting this intimate swansong. Edited excerpts from an interview:

**‘Senna’, ‘Amy’, ‘Diego Maradona’ were your three films on child geniuses and their relationship with fame. The Federer documentary is somewhat different.**

I would say the aim of all the films I have done is to always be true to the character. *Diego Maradona* is about Maradona and the chaos and the craziness is him. *Amy* is what her life was like. *Senna* is an action movie, like him.

Federer is quite different. He’s a calmer, more mature person, so the film is true to him. He retires in his own particular way and so it’s obviously going to have a different energy because he’s not a racing driver and he isn’t Amy Winehouse, and he definitely isn’t someone from a favela in Argentina who lived in Naples.

My job as a director isn’t to cut and paste the style onto every story. It has to come from the character. I wasn’t present when this was being filmed. I saw the material later. They put it together and then someone said, this has been created, but we need an experienced director to turn it into a movie. They asked me if I would be interested and I had a look at it. Honestly, I was expecting to say no, but when I watched it, I found myself emotionally



engaged. I’m not the world’s biggest tennis fan, so I thought if I’m feeling something, I believe the audience will feel something too. The film ends up with a bunch of men crying in a room together. That is not very normal in sport, at least not any that I’ve come across or played.

**Did the time limit of 12 days require a different approach?**

The other films I have made take three or four years of my life. This was interesting because it was really about one small period and I haven’t done anything like that. In drama, you can make a film which is about a huge epic story or you can make a film about one event, one day, a love story over a weekend. People think a documentary has to be about everything—the entire career—and I thought no, this is actually just where he is at that moment, building up to the final match, the final time he plays, the final professional moment on the circuit. Because he can’t do it anymore. Because his body is broken, and then the emotion that comes from that.

For me, it was a simpler story and more subtle. The fact that the people around him happened to be the greatest tennis players of the era, all sharing that moment in the locker room—I’ve never seen that kind of intimacy before. They seem to be genuinely ignoring the camera. The camera is kind of intimate, with a slightly hand-held, messy feel. The idea of making a really small film about a really big guy was interesting.

**I know you’ve got a lot of the material postscript. But documentary requires discovery. Where was the space for discovery for you?**

He’s never really given anyone access before. He’s very private. He’s not mas-



(top, from left) Joe Sabia, Roger Federer, and Asif Kapadia at the Tribeca Festival on 10 June; and a still from the documentary.

‘Federer: Twelve Final Days’ features archival footage (including Federer as a ball boy), interviews, appearances by his arch rivals and friends

sively on social media. His wife has never spoken publicly. We’ve never seen his kids. But we were in his house, in the car with him, in the locker room. Somewhere along the way, having been private all of his life, he now felt comfortable letting the camera in, he felt comfortable talking and breaking down on camera.

I’ve made films about people who are not at peace, and you can tell. I’ve met a lot of those people as well. The insecurities are covered up by the entourage or they turn up late or they treat you really badly. Or there’s some other problem. But Federer is the opposite. The contrast between him and a lot of other athletes and famous people I’ve met was interesting. Not many people get through this journey, this much fame, money, success and come out the other side as really good people.

**What was Roger Federer’s reaction when he saw the film?**

He cries every time he sees it. He gets really emotional, kind of relieving it. So does his wife. They are an emotional couple. He is also very clever. When he saw the first cut, he said it’s really good and he was happy but he picked out one shot, this particular backhand. He said I think you’ve used the same shot twice. The editor, Avdhesh Mohla, was with me in the room and I asked him if it’s true. It was like a split-second shot that Avdhesh used twice and thought no one would notice. I didn’t notice. But Roger noticed. He knows every single shot he’s ever played. That was an interesting insight into his brain.

Udita Jhunjhunwala is a writer, film critic and festival programmer. She posts at @Udita.J.



‘NJ9842 #12024’, monotype on archival paper SATELLETI.K, IEPR

## War & bandages as a metaphor

Through his multidisciplinary practice, Baptist Coelho looks at the war and the everyday

Avantika Bhuyan

There is something about the photograph *Bandages-Bullets#1* that makes you keep coming back to it. At first, it seems like an image of a series of rolled bandages arranged in rows. On closer look, the visual of soiled bandages seems to resemble rows of bullets. And that’s exactly the message that multidisciplinary artist Baptist Coelho hopes to convey. “The photograph captures a paradoxical relationship between the bandages as tools of healing, and bullets as instruments of war,” writes Coelho as the description of the work.

This photograph is part of the artist’s ongoing multimedia series, *Bandages-Bullets*, and was developed during his year-long residency at the In Flanders Fields Museum, Ypres, Belgium, starting in 2022. It was shown until last week at Coelho’s solo exhibition, *It still hasn’t ended*, at the Bâtiment IV, Esch-sur-Alzette, Luxembourg. Preparations are afoot to take this travelling show to other cities in Europe.

*Bandages-Bullets* carries forth the artist’s ongoing engagement with the paradox of war and the everyday—its lasting imprint on histories, cultures and personal lives of soldiers. Coelho, born in Mumbai and currently living and working between Ypres and Paris, explores different facets of this idea through installation, photos, sculpture, print, drawing, collage, audio/video and performance.

His exploration of war in everyday life started in 2007 when he returned to India after a Master’s in Arts from the Birmingham Institute of Art and Design, UK. He had been asked to respond to the idea of *The Peace Project* by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Denver, US. “The exhibition, through installations and performance art, explored issues of overpopulation, pollution, war and more, which threatened the idea of peace,” states a 2016-article in *Mint*. As part of that, he created 537, a set of white gauze bandages rolled and assembled together. “Using bandages as a metaphor, Coelho is trying to heal the pain and wounds of the soldiers posted in Siachen,” it further stated.

Siachen has been a constant presence in his work. He started going to Ladakh in 2007 and with each trip, he tried to get closer to the glacier by navigating remote villages in the Nubra Valley. He wanted to broaden his understanding of the conflict that takes place in Siachen, the coldest battlefield on earth located at 5,753m, by speaking to the locals, travellers and officers. This has resulted in a large body of work created over time. While some of it was shown at the *Traces of War* exhibition at the Somerset House, London in 2016, a vast series of both recent and previous multimedia works were exhibited at *It still hasn’t ended*.

Those who want to delve deeper into Coelho’s artistic process, and the connections he makes between war and healing to create critical points of view, can now read a monograph published by the In Flanders Fields Museum in 2023. This publication not only offers an overview of his works from 2006 till today, but also contains 10 essays by academics, curators, historians and a mountaineer. The monograph—the first for Coelho—is available for sale at the museum’s webshop.

It features 56 works, including those based on exchanges of letters between soldiers and families. “For the Siachen Glacier project, I had various conversations with former army officers. At the British Library in London, I started looking at Indian soldiers’ presence in the World Wars based on reports of letters exchanged between them and their families. Various artworks look at how thoughts and day-to-day conversations were recorded in these letters,” says Coelho. He feels that an artist needs to constantly reflect on past and present happenings while hoping for the future.

# Fall under the spell of Powell and Pressburger

## WORLD VIEW

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

A Scorsese-fronted documentary pays warm tribute to the directors of ‘The Red Shoes’ and ‘Black Narcissus’

Uday Bhatia  
uday.b@htlvtv.com

I love *Brief Encounter*, I really do. But if it came down to that or the other black-and-white British romance from 1945, I’d choose Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger’s *I Know Where I’m Going* every time. There’s nothing in David Lean’s film—not even the famous scene at the train station—that can match the sheer life force of the low-angle shot of an open door, through which bound five noisy dogs followed by Pamela Brown, hunting rifle in one hand, her hair wet and eyes shining, tossing a rabbit aside and embracing a delighted Roger Livesey. It’s one of my favourite character introductions in all of cinema.

Powell and Pressburger were well-known in their time, though not on the level of their countrymen Alfred Hitch-

cock and David Lean. Their star rose across several cycles of reassessment. The initial wave came via the young Americans who’d seen their work on TV growing up and were now making movies in 1970s Hollywood: Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, Brian De Palma (George Romero, director of *Night of the Living Dead*, tells a story of how, in their student days, he and Scorsese would be the only ones renting a lone 16mm print of *Tales of Hoffman*). Subsequent generations found their work more easily on DVD, blu-ray and streaming, with the Criterion Collection—which has released most of their filmography—proving particularly consistent champions.

Scorsese’s enthusiasm for The Archers (Powell and Pressburger’s production company) is well known; his Film Foundation has restored some of their stunning colour works, and he never misses an opportunity to talk up their influence. It is, therefore, unsurprising to see Scorsese front and centre in David Hinton’s new documentary, *Made in England: The Films of Powell & Pressburger*. What I didn’t expect was for him to be the only talking head. The film is, for all practical purposes, a Scorsese masterclass on Powell & Pressburger, the director seated in a chair and addressing the camera. We hear his feelings on all the major works, interspersed with scenes from the films, still photographs and archival clips of the makers.

This might not sound like much, unless



Michael Powell (left) and Emeric Pressburger.

you’re already under the spell of The Archers, in which case it’s a blissful two hours revisiting their greatest hits with their biggest fan. Scorsese has narrated documentaries about cinema before (*A Personal Journey with Martin Scorsese Through American Film*, *A Letter to Elia*), but he talks about Powell & Pressburger with a missionary zeal. *Black Narcissus* has the “vividness and intensity of a hallucination”. *I Know Where I’m Going* is “a film

you show to someone you care about”.

Scorsese quotes instances of their influence on his films: the elaborate preparation for a duel which we barely see in *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* sparking an idea for *Raging Bull*, or how shades of the demanding dance impresario Lermon-tov in *The Red Shoes* made their way into the character of Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver* (“They’re both characters on the edge of things, listening, observing peo-

ple, always on the verge of exploding”). About Pressburger, a Hungarian Jew who worked at leading German studio UFA before emigrating to England, he says, “He’s also seeking to complicate your sympathies”—something that can be said about Scorsese’s work too.

My own journey through Powell & Pressburger began a few years after I became utterly consumed by cinema. Their films weren’t part of the world cinema or classic cinema starter kits then (perhaps that has changed in the two decades since). I came to them initially through Criterion, and the raves of my friend, critic Jai Arjun Singh. I found a VCD of *The Red Shoes* in a Delhi music store; even in that cursed format it looked stunning. The 1945 Technicolor film is a charged look at the cost of true artistry, with dancer Victoria Page (ballerina Moira Shearer) torn between her love, Julian Craster (Marius Goring), and her demanding mentor, Boris Lermontov (Anton Walbrook). The ballet sequences are fluid, baroque and startling, yet even the quieter scenes have a mesmerizing quality, like when Victoria and Julian are in a horse carriage by the sea in the dead of night, sensuously dozy after their wedding, the driver nodding off, Julian murmuring about a future scenario where he’ll think back on this moment and say, “We were, I remember, very much in love.”

I followed this with a film even more feverish than *The Red Shoes* (Jack Cardiff shot both in thrilling Technicolor). *Black*

*Narcissus* was adapted from a novel by Rumer Godden about a group of nuns in the Himalaya struggling with various earthy impulses. Most memorable is Kathleen Byron as Sister Ruth, whose descent into psychosis was as unsettling as Hitchcock had put on screen till then. I then watched *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp*, and was amazed by how moving Anton Walbrook—Lermontov in *The Red Shoes*—was as the German officer whose friendship with Englishman Clive Candy (Roger Livesey) spans decades and geographies. It’s a singular film, a wistful wartime paean to peace, to fair play, and to not being able to get enough of Deborah Kerr.

I moved on to the black-and-white films: the Canada-set propaganda thriller *The 49th Parallel*, the sweepingly romantic *I Know Where I’m Going*, and the strange and wonderful *A Canterbury Tale*. I loved their loose, eccentric rhythms, their mystical leanings, and their love of the countryside and country folk. Powell & Pressburger only had about 10 vital years of partnership. But everything they touched in that time turned to gold. Powell tells a story in the film about the first time he met Pressburger. The writer handed him a neatly rolled-up chit of paper. He’d taken apart the script Powell was working on and put it together, simply, perfectly. “I was spellbound,” Powell says. More than 70 years later, so are we.

Made in England will stream on MUBI from 28 June.



Saahil Goel

## THE DELIVERY GUY

The MD and CEO of Shiprocket on creating tech solutions for small merchants, getting back to reading, and how AI could change the business of e-commerce

Illustration by Priya Kuriyan

Nitin Sreedhar  
nitin.s@htlive.com

The year was 2008, and Saahil Goel was in the middle of his master of business administration (MBA) degree at Pittsburgh University's Katz Graduate School of Business. Looking for some management books, he logged on to a new Indian e-commerce website to order a cheaper reprint that could be delivered to his home in Delhi. But he accidentally placed the order twice. "I wrote to the website's customer care saying please cancel one order. A guy responded to my email saying they would do the needful. His email ID was binny@flipkart.com," recalls Goel, 40, managing director and CEO of Shiprocket, one of the largest e-commerce enablers in the country that offers logistics and shipping software solutions.

In the early days of Indian e-commerce pioneer Flipkart, it was not unusual for co-founder Binny Bansal to be on customer care duty. Goel still has the email archived and enthusiastically shows it to me at Shiprocket's Gurugram office. After a bonding session with the company's "chief happiness officer" Bruno, a Labrador, I sit down with Goel for this chat in a room named "Big Bang".

"He was my dog. But he's now Shiprocket's dog and Akshay (Ghulati, CEO of international shipping at Shiprocket) is sort of a foster parent," says Goel.

Shiprocket has carved a stable position in the direct-to-consumer e-commerce space, delivering more than 300,000 shipments daily

Shiprocket provides shipping solutions across more than 24,000 serviceable pin codes within India and more than 220 countries and territories across the world. It has slowly carved a stable position in the direct-to-consumer e-commerce space in India. In FY23, it powered deliveries to more than 45 million consumers, recording a 78% revenue growth to ₹1,089 crore in FY23 from ₹611 crore in FY22. The unicorn aims to achieve multifold growth on its current gross merchandise value (total value of merchandise sold) of \$3 billion (₹24,900 crore), potentially increasing it by three-four times, in the next five years.

Goel says he was keen on working with technology right from his school days at St Columba's in Delhi, learning how to write code at the school's computer lab. "By the 2000s, I was already building websites and hacking the school computer," he recalls.

After completing his graduation in computer science in the US at Drexel University College of Engineering, Pennsylvania, his first job was at Max New York Life Insurance Company (now known as Max Life Insurance), where he worked on product development. After getting an MBA degree, he worked with Kasper Consulting, which focused on information technology (IT) and business process consulting. His last professional role before starting his own company was in the US with the health insurance company Highmark in 2011. "It's not that I was not a good worker. But I got bored very quickly, staying true to my nature," he says.

Shiprocket's story started around 2011-12. Both Goel and co-founder/COO Gautam Kapoor, whom Goel had met during his undergraduate years, came from families that ran small businesses—technically, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). While Kapoor's family dealt in automobile parts, Goel's family business involved steel manufacturing. "Both Gautam and I were in touch and exchanging ideas. We always wanted to do something around SMEs," says Goel. "I was into tech, while Gautam is a great commercial thinker. SMEs are the backbone of the country, and no one was giving them tech. We were clear that connecting SMEs to technology was going to be our theme."

Shiprocket began life in 2012 as SmartStore with brands like Da Milano, Globalite Sport and Tiekart as some of the first customers. "We had a vision: we were going to help merchants run their stores in a smart way. We would connect shipping, payments and marketing on one platform, with smart delivery for shipping, smart remit for payments and so on," says Goel.

They looked at the growing e-commerce market in India, finding inspira-

tion in the likes of Shopify and BigShoe-Bazaar (which later became Yebhi). The fact that a website was selling shoes online indicated that there was demand and interest in e-commerce. Customers were warming up to online transactions through a host of travel-related platforms such as MakeMyTrip, Cleartrip, Yatra.com and IRCTC.

"(But) startups were not glamorous back then. We didn't even know we were a startup," says Goel. They changed the company's name to KartRocket in 2013 "to sound more like a startup". "Our angel investor Pearl Uppal, who was running FashionandYou.com and was a marketing guru at Yahoo!, helped us," Goel adds.

But it wasn't scaling fast enough. "It was a tough time. We had to convince businesses to sell online," Goel says. "After three years, we had some 800-1000 merchants." However, digital adoption was picking pace and data was becoming cheaper, along with affordable smartphones. "We realised that a lot of micro businesses were available on the mobile," Goel says, as they studied other models and examples—everything from Facebook Pages to Quikr and OLX.

KartRocket was among the first Indian services enabling businesses to set up and manage online stores through an app-based platform called KartRocket Studio. "Most people thought we were crazy... But we were already using image AI to pull keywords and categories from images that merchants were uploading. We offered baked-in payment gateways and shipping.

You could be online in 30 seconds. That was the tagline: Get your online store in 30 seconds."

It was a masterclass in how Indians use the internet. "We used only the mobile medium and made the tech free, charging 10% commission on sales. The idea was, rather than me charging you a monthly subscription, let's look at the platform approach... Let the users come and then we make money when they make money. We realised that *Indiakoye models samajh main aata hai* (India understands this model)," explains Goel. "While it didn't fully work, we were able to distribute at scale and get 5,000-10,000 users who did everything by themselves: signing up and building their own websites. If you give them a simple, consumer-style interface, it does work. That was our 'big bang moment' (referring to the name of the room where we are conversing)."

In 2015, the company launched their direct-to-consumer marketplace Kraftly, selling lifestyle and fashion goods from artisans, small vendors and homepreneurs. A year later, Ghulati and Vishesh Khurana joined as the two other co-founders.

While there were many learnings through these different pivots, the one constant challenge that Goel faced was shipping. "It would break at every step," he says. Issues with cash on delivery, high costs, and complex logistics were plaguing many small businesses. Moreover, the big couriers did not want to work with the small guys. Noticing a clear gap, Goel and

## Currently reading

'The Tao of Charlie Munger' by David Clark, and 'The Outsiders' by William N. Thorndike Jr.

## Favourite travel destination

I'm not a vacationer. But I like Goa

## An entrepreneur he admires

There are many: Deepinder Goyal (Zomato), Peyush Bansal (Lenskart), Nitin Kamath (Zerodha)

his team started Shiprocket in 2017 almost as a side hustle: a technology-driven platform that would aggregate multiple courier partners and offer shipping solutions that were both cost-effective and reliable.

Today, shipping is Shiprocket's largest revenue stream, accounting for about 80% of total earnings and the company delivers more than 300,000 shipments daily. "Our understanding of this market is rock solid... We have always looked at ourselves as an e-commerce enabler and astool makers," says Goel. "The way Amazon is obsessed with consumers, we are obsessed with merchants, businesses, brands, retailers. I think that allows for lots of interesting opportunities in terms of problem solving."

Leveraging technology to build micro innovations along the way has been key to Shiprocket's success in streamlining and simplifying logistics and shipping for e-commerce businesses—be it a B2B wallet system or a courier recommendation engine for sellers or a checkout engine.

Towards the end of our conversation, we turn our attention to AI. MSMEs and small businesses also want to delve into it—according to the GoDaddy 2024 Global Entrepreneurship survey released in May, Indian small businesses see AI as a major game changer for their business operations. The survey showed that 94% of Indian small business owners believe implementing AI would result in tangible positive outcomes.

Goel agrees and says AI could change the business of e-commerce and help



We've always been an e-commerce enabler. The way Amazon is obsessed with consumers, we are obsessed with merchants.

merchants in several ways—for marketing tech, consumer support (especially for businesses with a large consumer base) or simply adding AI into their products. "If you ask me: it's as big as the internet," says Goel.

He is still curious to learn and experiment. "I still love to code and whip out some projects on the weekend. I am constantly using chatGPT to write code now. It's like having an assistant," he says.

In a previous interview with *Mint*, he had spoken about playing the guitar. "I used to be in a band. There was a time when I wanted to study music engineering. But now I teach my 11-year-old daughter. She and I play together and jam every now and then," says Goel, who also has a six-year-old son.

The 40-year-old says he is slowly getting back to reading. He shows me a couple of books, including one on a compilation of quotes from Berkshire Hathaway's vice-chairman Warren Buffet, that he has been reading. He also runs every morning without fail. "It helps me structure my thoughts," he says. "I don't do to-do lists. I ruthlessly prioritise (tasks). Because ultimately, there's only this much time. So, you must learn to pick."

Most of his schedule is about optimising time between family and work. While he's not a fan of overworking, Goel says work-life balance is a myth. "If you hate your job, then you should balance it, but if you like it then what is there to balance? But I don't think you can work non-stop. No matter how much you love your work."









Irfan Razack, chairman and MD, Prestige Estates.

MINT

## Prestige Estates to raise ₹5,000 crore through QIP

Madhurima Nandy  
madhurima.n@htlive.com  
BENGALURU

**P**restige Estates Projects Ltd plans to raise up to ₹5,000 crore through a qualified institutional placement (QIP) of shares, the real estate developer said in a regulatory filing on Friday.

The Bengaluru-based company said its board has approved a plan to monetize assets of its hospitality subsidiary, Prestige Hospitality Ventures Ltd, by issuing shares through the primary or secondary route, or both.

The decisions will be subject to shareholders' approval, market conditions and receipt of applicable approvals, the company said.

A sub-committee has been constituted to oversee and structure the process.

Prestige's board has given its consent for an initial public offer of the hospitality business, chairman and managing director Irfan Razack had said earlier this year.

Prestige Estates in March signed an agreement with global hospitality giant Marriott International to develop six hotel projects in India in

2-5 years.

Prestige's current operational hospitality portfolio comprises 10 hotels with 1,489 rooms for guests.

The company has another eight hotels in the pipeline, including under-construction and upcoming projects.

India's hotels sector grew at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 8.4% between 2007 and 2023, according to data by HVS Anarock.

The consultancy firm's recent analysis of India's top 23 listed hotel companies by market capitalization shows these companies experienced a significant turnaround in 2022-23, with year-on-year growth rates doubling on average in a post-pandemic recovery.

Prestige Estates clocked ₹21,040 crore worth of residential sales in 2023-24, its highest ever, amid an ongoing housing boom in the country.

In May, the company rejigged its senior management team following the resignation of chief executive Venkat K. Narayana.

Shares of Prestige Estates closed at ₹1,995.00 each on NSE on 21 June, down 0.93%.

# Google suspends online gaming trial on Play Store

Company cites lack of a 'central licensing framework'; extends a 'grace period' for India

Shouvik Das  
shouvik.das@livemint.com  
NEW DELHI

**G**oogle on Friday suspended its ongoing pilot programme that allowed fantasy sports and rummy games to list on its mobile applications marketplace, the Google Play Store, but extended a "grace period" for India.

With this, Google will not be expanding open access for a wider set of real-money games on the Play Store, which it had intended to do in January. Apps that are already live on the Play Store will remain on it for the time being.

The pilot, which was initiated in July last year and extended in January across India, Brazil and Mexico, was suspended by Google citing a lack of a "central licensing framework"—regulations that define the legality of such games in respective countries.

"Expanding our support of real-money gaming apps in markets without a central licensing framework has proven more difficult than expected, and we need additional time to get it right for our developer partners and the safety of our users," a Google spokesperson said in a statement.

The move comes as a blow to the online gaming sector in India, which remains contentious in terms of whether they qualify as 'games of skill' or 'games of chance'. Lawsuits against a ban of online gaming titles across Tamil Nadu and Karnataka remain subjudice at the Supreme Court.

Google said that it is working on its own framework to define permissible applications in this sector. "In the meantime, in India, we are extending the grace period of the pilot program so existing apps offering fantasy sports and rummy games in India can remain



The move comes as a blow to the online gaming sector in India, which remains contentious in terms of whether they qualify as 'games of skill' or 'games of chance.'

MINT

on Play Store," the spokesperson said. A senior Google executive further told *Mint* on condition of anonymity that while the company does intend to come up with a framework, discussions on the matter are currently ongoing, and as of now, there is no "specific

ties (Dream11), Gameskraft and Games24x7—were all listed on Play Store. At the time of publishing, apps that remained listed and live on the Store include Dream11, RummyCulture, RummyCircle and My11Circle, among others.

to materialize.

A senior government official told *Mint* in March that the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY), which oversees the sector, was likely to take charge of regulating the sector itself. However, the same remains under discussion at the Centre—and no decision has yet been taken.

Stakeholders of the online gaming industry expressed disappointment.

Roland Landers, chief executive of industry body All India Gaming Federation, called the move "arbitrary and anticompetitive".

"Not having an inclusive policy and discriminating is a form of gatekeeping and market distortion... limiting user choice. We will continue to engage with Google," Landers said.

Dream11 and Games24x7 declined to comment on the matter.

Google's decision to withdraw its pilot comes as the Centre's proposed plan to establish self-regulatory bodies (SRBs) to certify permissible apps failed

### HOW THE GAME PLAYED OUT

**GOOGLE'S** pilot allowed fantasy sports and rummy games to list on its app marketplace.

**SOON** after, many fantasy and rummy apps by many firms had listed on Google's Play Store.

**GOOGLE** said that it is working on its own framework to define permissible applications

**THERE** is no "specific timeline" to when might these apps be allowed to operate again.

timeline" to when might these apps be allowed to operate again.

Since the introduction of Google's pilot programme, fantasy and rummy apps by India's largest online gaming firms by revenue—Sporta Technolo-

gy (Dream11), Gameskraft and Games24x7—declined to comment on the matter.

Google's decision to withdraw its pilot comes as the Centre's proposed plan to establish self-regulatory bodies (SRBs) to certify permissible apps failed

## Insurance company eyes \$150 million fundraise

Priyamvada C  
Priyamvada.c@livemint.com  
BENGALURU

**I**nsurtech startup InsuranceDekho is in early-stage discussions to raise \$100-150 million through a mix of primary and secondary transactions.

The company has appointed investment bank Avendus Capital to facilitate this process, two people familiar with the matter told *Mint*.

"This could become one of their largest rounds... the company is seeing a lot of demand and may get their first term-sheet in the next 30-45 days," said one of the people cited above.

The company has started receiving initial commitments and may see a much higher valuation than the previous round, the second person said.

While a large part of the funding will be primary, a small portion will come from secondary transactions, this person added.

Avendus declined to comment, and InsuranceDekho did not immediately respond to *Mint*'s request for comment.

This development comes less than a year after InsuranceDekho raised \$60 million in its Series B round in October at a valuation of \$630 million. The round was led by Japan's Mitsubishi UFJ Financial Group (MUFG), BNP Paribas Cardif through its insurtech fund managed by European investment major Eurazeo, Beams Fintech Fund and Yogesh Mahansaria Family Office.

## 'Digital camera mkt too small for local manufacturing'

Shouvik Das  
shouvik.das@livemint.com  
NEW DELHI

**L**ocal manufacturing remains out of the question for camera and imaging equipment maker Nikon India, even though it expects to expand its domestic presence and cross ₹1,000 crore in annual revenue by the end of this fiscal.

In an interview with *Mint*, Sajjan Kumar, managing director of Nikon India, said despite the firm's growth, the market is not large enough for its parent company, Tokyo-headquartered Nikon Corporation, to set up factories and supply chains in India. "All our cameras remain fully imported from other manufacturing hubs," Kumar added.

Keizo Fujii, managing director and chief regional officer for Nikon in South-East Asia, Oceania, Africa and the Middle East, added that only



Sajjan Kumar, managing director of Nikon India.

two out of every 100 smartphone users in India also buy a dedicated digital camera. "India is an important market because of its population, but the installed base for digital cameras is not as high as it could be. That is where we see potential for growth," Fujii added.

Nikon India reported net revenue of ₹965 crore for FY24, Kumar said, adding that the company expects to increase this to ₹1,060 crore in FY25, a 9.8% increase.

"We expect the Indian camera market to add 15 million units annually in FY25, which will lead to a 6% annual increase in shipments. We also expect to grow 10% annually by volume. At present, we account for 32% of India's camera market. Since we expect to grow at a faster pace than the rest of the industry, we expect our market share to grow, too," Kumar said.

According to Nikon's internal estimates, 250,000 digital cameras were sold in India in

FY24. Kumar added that the market could hit 265,000 units by FY25. In comparison, about 150 million smartphones are expected to be sold in FY25; so the size of the digital camera market will be just 0.2% of the smartphone market by volume. By revenue, the digital camera market performs slightly better. Kumar said the net revenue of the digital camera market was around \$375 million in FY24, or around 1% of the smartphone market's net revenue of \$39 billion.

Though they maintained that manufacturing in India was not viable, Kumar and Fujii added that the country was strategically important for Nikon in terms of sales. "India is a unique market in comparison to Nikon's other global markets due to its vast wedding industry. Excluding

**Excluding Japan and China, India accounts for 40% of Nikon Corporation's revenue in Asia and Africa**

Japan and China, India accounts for 40% of Nikon Corporation's revenue in Asia and Africa," Fujii said.

Kumar added that the size of the market and the average selling price (ASP) of digital cameras has grown steadily since the end of the pandemic. Nikon's ASP for a camera was ₹100,000 (\$1,200) in FY21, he said. "Today our ASP is ₹140,000 (nearly \$1,700), and it has been growing every year. Most of the demand is for mid- to high-end cameras,

driven by the need for content creators to make professional videos with cameras that have smart connectivity features. The rising ASP has meant that the value of the market has grown steadily, too, even when volume growth has not come through," he said.

## Accenture sees \$2 bn GenAI bookings

Varun Sood  
varun.sood@livemint.com  
NEW DELHI

**A**ccenture Plc, the world's largest technology services firm, reported securing \$900 million in generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) project bookings for the three months through May. This brings the total to approximately \$2 billion in GenAI deals for the first nine months of the current financial year, underscoring its robust growth in a rapidly evolving technological landscape.

The company, operating on a September-August financial calendar, had won \$100 million in pure-play GenAI projects in the year-ago period after it first quantified the deal value of the new technology in June last year.

In the current financial year, Accenture had recorded \$650 million and \$400 million in GenAI projects during the second and first quarters, respectively.

The third quarter saw

Accenture's total order bookings hit \$2.1 billion, with GenAI deals accounting for 4.3% of this total, a significant increase from the 0.6% share in the year-ago period.

"With over \$900 million in new GenAI bookings this quarter, we now have \$2 billion in GenAI sales year to date, and we have also achieved \$500 million in revenue year to date. This compares to approximately \$300 million in sales and roughly \$100 million in revenue from GenAI in FY23," Accenture's chair and chief executive Julie Sweet said in a post-earnings discussion with analysts on Thursday.

"GenAI is acting as a catalyst for companies to more aggressively go after cost, build digital core and truly change the ways they work, which creates significant opportunity for us," Sweet added.

GenAI, which includes technology-driving innovations like ChatGPT, spans a broad array of capabilities, including creating content forms such as text, audio and video.

**Accenture's total order bookings in Q3 hit \$2.1 billion, with GenAI deals accounting for 4.3% of this total**

## Indian households spending 18% more: Kantar

Suneera Tandon  
suneera.t@htlive.com  
NEW DELHI

**I**ndian households spent 18% more in the March quarter of 2024 than in the June quarter of 2022, on account of rising inflation, market research firm Kantar said in a note on Friday.

June 2022 was the last quarter in which Kantar did the last round of this survey. Kantar follows a calendar year.

An average household spent ₹49,418 in the first quarter of 2024. Urban households, in general, spent 1.6 times more

than rural households.

Less affluent households spent just about ₹38,000 quarterly, showed the Kantar tracker that covers spending on groceries, fruits and vegetables, utilities, education, commuting, fashion, rent, etc.

Groceries are the biggest household expense, accounting for over 24% of all quarterly expenses in a household. Overall, expenditure on the category increased 19% since Kantar's last round. The jump in household expenditure translates to a quarterly increase of ₹2,000.

The average monthly per

capita household expenditure stood at ₹3,773 in rural India and ₹6,459 in urban India in 2022-23.

At an all-India level, monthly per capita household expenditure in urban areas is 71% more than that of rural areas, according to the Consumer Expenditure Survey 2022-23 by the ministry of statistics and programme implementation.

Indian households have

been bearing the brunt of high inflation since the outbreak of covid-19 as prices of daily essentials and packaged goods

surged due to the pandemic-induced supply-chain disturbances. For instance, average inflation climbed to 6.7% in 2022, up from 5.13% in 2021. It was 6.62% in 2020. The inflation moderated to 5.49% in 2023. A total of 16% of households surveyed in the March quarter of 2024 said they were

comfortable with their financial situation.

However, 34% households reported that they were finding it difficult to manage their expenses—indicating a third of India is still reeling under severe financial stress.

Kantar pointed out that struggling households are present across socio-economic classes. While in the upper New Consumer Classification System (NCCS) A and B, the percentage of those struggling decreased from 32% to 28%, in the lower NCCS, i.e., C, D, and E, the percentage increased from 35% to 40%.

**An average Indian household spent ₹49,418 in the first quarter of 2024, Kantar study notes**







Saturday, June 22, 2024

mint

livemint.com



Nikon's Kumar says market too small to make in India ▶P14



Centre slaps stock limits on pulses to cool prices ▶P15

# Monster fundraise swells Zepto value

Valuation jumps from \$1.4 bn to \$3.6 bn after \$665mn fundraise

Sowmya Ramasubramanian & Suneera Tandon

BENGALURU/MUMBAI

Quick commerce platform Zepto has raced its way to the biggest fundraise so far this year, as it reshapes India's e-commerce sector and forces giants including Walmart Inc.-backed Flipkart and Reliance Group's JioMart to venture into instant deliveries.

The digital platform, which promises to deliver anything from groceries to cosmetics within about 10 minutes, on Friday announced it had raised \$665 million in a pre-IPO round at a valuation of \$3.6 billion.

Zepto, which is gearing up for a stock market listing next year, had gained its coveted unicorn status just nine months earlier, when it raised \$200 million at a valuation of \$1.4 billion. The latest fundraise comes at a time India's startup sector is emerging from a long funding winter.

Zepto plans to use the capital from its latest fundraise to double the number of its dark stores, or warehouses, to 700 by March 2025.

It will also use the money to scale up Zepto Cafe, its quick delivery snack and meal service, throwing the gauntlet at Zomato and Swiggy, orig-

QUICK CASH

India's quick commerce market grew 77% in 2023 to reach \$2.8 billion in GMV, accounting for 5% of India's overall e-commerce market.

Quick commerce GMV growth (in \$ billion)

Zepto's funding rounds (in \$ million)

Zepto's FY23 financial performance (in ₹ crore)

Revenue 1,272

Loss 2,024

GROWTH SPURT

ZEPTO had gained its unicorn status just nine months earlier

NEARLY 75% of Zepto's 350 stores are Ebitda-positive

IT has introduced new steps to diversify its revenue streams

inally food delivery platforms that are investing heavily in their quick-commerce businesses.

Zomato's instant delivery platform Blinkit, the market leader, aims to double its network of dark stores to 1,000 by the end of this fiscal year.

Zepto's ability to raise funds in quick succession is indicative of investors regaining confidence in India's quick commerce space, which they were once sceptical about owing to its cash-guzzling proposition.

India's quick commerce market grew 77% in 2023 to reach \$2.8 billion in gross merchandise value (GMV), accounting for 5% of India's overall e-commerce market, according to consulting firm Redseer. GMV, a key metric in e-commerce, tracks the total value of all the goods

# Will tight policy hit growth? MPC members stay divided

Gopika Gopakumar  
gopika.g@htlive.com  
MUMBAI

For long, concerns over inflation have dominated proceedings of the central bank's rate-setting panel. Now, growth is finding a place at the table.

Keeping real interest rates high for too long will hurt growth, two members of the Reserve Bank of India's monetary policy committee (MPC) said, before the six-member panel voted to keep rates and policy stance unchanged a fortnight ago. The meeting's minutes were released on Friday.

Jayanth Varma, who has consistently demanded a rate cut, warned that keeping the policy restrictive for too long will hurt growth over the next two years.

"Professional forecasters surveyed by the RBI are projecting growth both in 2025-26 and in 2024-25 to be lower than in 2023-24 by more than 0.75%, and lower than the potential growth rate (of say 8%) by more than 1%. This is an unacceptably high growth sacrifice considering that headline inflation is projected to be only about 0.5% above target, and core inflation is extremely benign," said Varma.

"Expected growth is around 7% in 2024-25 below the 8% achieved in 2023-24. Status quoism is praised as being cau-

MPC revised the growth projection for FY25 upwards to 7.2% from 7% earlier, but it is lower than the actual FY24 growth of 8%. MINT

tious. But if doing nothing distorts real variables, it aggravates shocks instead of smoothing them and raises risk," Goyal added.

Both Varma and Goyal had voted for cutting interest rate and changing monetary policy stance at the June meeting.

Other MPC members were sanguine about growth prospects. Governor Shaktikanta Das said growth is strong enough to create space for policy to focus on inflation, which persists above its 4% target.

"The growth-inflation balance is moving favourably in line with our projections," Das said. "With persistently high food inflation, it would be in order to continue with the disinflationary policy stance that we have adopted. Any hasty action in a different direction

DON'T MISS



Google suspends online gaming trial on Play Store

Google on Friday suspended its ongoing pilot programme that allowed fantasy sports and rummy games to list on Play Store, but extended a "grace period" for India. The company cited a lack of a "central licensing framework" for its decision. >P15



Prestige Estates Projects to raise ₹5,000 crore from institutions

Prestige Estates said its board has approved raising up to ₹5,000 crore through a qualified institutional placement (QIP) of shares. The plan aims to monetize assets of Prestige Hospitality Ventures Ltd, the company's hospitality subsidiary. >P15



Farmers' groups, MSMEs seek higher allocations in budget

Farmers associations and agricultural economists have urged the government to reduce taxes on farm equipment and increase allocations for agricultural research and development and a flagship programme meant to support farmers. >P13



Accenture's GenAI bookings at \$2 bn; \$900 mn in last quarter

Accenture Plc, world's largest technology services firm, reported securing \$900 million in generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) project bookings for the three months through May, bringing the total to approximately \$2 billion in GenAI deals. >P15

Bharat Petroleum Corporation Ltd has appointed SBI Capital Markets as its transaction advisor for the 15 year loan deal. REUTERS

# Banks wary of lending to Vi, but warm up to BPCL

Shayan Ghosh  
shayan.g@livemint.com  
MUMBAI

Two of the largest loan proposals in recent history, worth a combined ₹55,000 crore, have evoked disparate reactions from bankers. While lenders are salivating at Bharat Petroleum Corp. Ltd's (BPCL's) ₹32,000 crore loan proposal, they are circumspect on lending to Vodafone Idea (Vi), which is looking to raise ₹23,000 crore through loans to strengthen and expand its network. The two loans add up to about 2% of the outstanding loans to large industries.

Three bankers who have been involved in discussions with both firms said they were keen on lending to state-owned BPCL, given the strength of its balance sheet and strong sovereign backing. The company, they said, has appointed SBI Capital Markets (SBI Caps) as its transaction advisor for the 15-year loan deal. The public-sector undertaking (PSU) is looking to raise money for capital expenditure at its Bina refinery, and has set the minimum loan by an individual bank at ₹1,600 crore.

"The loan is expected to be benchmarked to State Bank of

India's three-month marginal cost of fund-based lending rate (MCLR), which is currently at 8.3%," said one of the bankers cited above. "Such loans are priced with a 5-10 bps margin over the benchmark, and individual banks will propose their rates to join the deal." A fourth banker, who is only involved in the discussions with BPCL, said all major banks were keen on lending to the PSU.

In May 2023, BPCL announced plans to spend ₹49,000 crore to increase its presence in petrochemicals and renewable energy. In a statement on 17 May 2023, the company said the core component of the expansion plan was its ethylene cracker project, which would drive the production of essential petrochemicals. It said it also planned to expand capacity at its Bina refinery in Madhya Pradesh from 7.8 million metric tonnes per annum (mmtpa) to 11 mmtpa.

The same bankers, however, were circumspect on lending to Vodafone Idea, the weakest among India's private telecom operators. One of them said the primary concern was that Vodafone Idea was still upgrading its 4G networks

# GST Council to tweak alcohol laws, enable dispute settlement

Gireesh Chandra Prasad & Nehal Chaliawala

NEW DELHI

India's spirits industry may have some tax relief in store, with the federal indirect tax council looking to exempt extra neutral alcohol (ENA)—a pure form of alcohol used in liquor production but not for direct consumption—from goods and services tax (GST).

Besides legislative tweaks to facilitate the exemption, the Goods and Services Tax (GST) Council's Saturday meeting may also propose a scheme to allow central and state tax authorities to drop the recovery of past tax dues, benefiting the spirits sector. This move is part of a broader effort to resolve ongoing tax disputes and streamline the taxation process.

The New Delhi meeting will review amendments recommended by a committee of officers, which was tasked with

The clarification is expected to alleviate the tax burden on the alcoholic beverage industry. HT

drafting legislative changes to ensure ENA remains outside the GST regime—a decision first taken at the GST Council's 52nd meeting on 7 October last year, according to two people familiar with the Centre-state discussions. The proposed amendments aim to prevent ambiguity in tax implementation by specifying that ENA is excluded from GST under section 9 of the central and state GST laws. This section currently pro-

vides for GST on goods and services other than liquor for human consumption but does not explicitly mention ENA.

The clarification is expected to prevent the same commodity from being taxed under different taxation streams, easing the tax burden on the alcoholic beverage industry. The Centre will propose amendments to the CGST and IGST Acts in Parliament, while states will amend their respective SGST laws.

ENA, derived from fermenting and distilling molasses or grain, has historically been understood to be outside the GST framework since the indirect tax reform began in 2017. However, discrepancies in its application have caused confusion and hardship for producers. Experts said the proposed changes will streamline the taxation of the liquor industry and provide certainty to producers. "Making sure

TURN TO PAGE 13

# HUL expects rising FMCG sales at mass end this year

Suneera Tandon  
suneera.t@htlive.com  
MUMBAI

Demand for packaged consumer goods has slowed significantly amid rising prices, but Hindustan Unilever Ltd (HUL) anticipates a modest growth in its volumes this financial year, signalling somewhat improved prospects for the rest of the industry.

India's largest fast-moving consumer goods company on Friday said it expects volume growth of mid-to-high single digit in financial year 2024-25. HUL reported underlying volume growth of 2% for FY24, with sales growing 3%.

HUL's performance is viewed as a proxy for the broader Indian consumer goods sector.

The industry has been reeling with tepid demand, especially at the bottom end of the market where households adversely impacted by high

HUL reported an underlying 2% volume growth for FY24. MINT

inflation have been curtailing purchases. This is especially true of consumers in India's villages.

"2024 was the year when we transitioned from a couple of years of very high inflation into a period where commodity costs became benign. In many cases, we had prices coming down and as a consequence, we had to pass on the benefit of these lower prices to our consumers, which meant that the price increases which

have often been a part of our overall growth didn't exist," Nitin Paranjpe, chairman of HUL, said addressing shareholders at the company's 91st annual general meeting.

"We continue to expect the FMCG industry to allow us to get volumes in the mid-to-high single digits, and that's the sort of growth we should start seeing in the medium-to-long term," he said.

HUL's turnover in the financial year ended 31 March increased 2.5% year-on-year to ₹59,579 crore, while profit after tax rose 1.5% to ₹10,114 crore. Volumes grew 2%.

While HUL is focused on expanding its premium products portfolio, Paranjpe is hopeful of a recovery at the mass end of the market.

"It is really the mass end of the business where inflation had squeezed discretionary incomes of people and curtailed demand. That's the

TURN TO PAGE 13

# Inside China's troubled real estate market

Joseph C. Sternberg  
feedback@livemint.com

Xi Jinping's government tried to bring housing prices down. Now it wants to force them up again. It's time to confront the possibility that China's economy has changed permanently in recent years. Is anyone ready for the new reality?

Data released this week by China's National Bureau of Statistics suggest that the country's real-estate deflation—soon to enter its fifth year—accelerated in May. New-home prices in 70 large and medium-size cities fell 4.3% year-over-

year in May, compared with a 3.5% year-over-year drop in April. Existing-home prices fell 7.5%, compared with April's 6.8% drop.

This shouldn't be a surprise, since Xi Jinping's government started engineering a correction in the overheated property market in August 2020. Except that more recently Beijing has gotten cold feet. This spring it tried to correct the correction.

The central bank last month started offering credit subsidies of 300 billion yuan (\$41 billion) to encourage state-owned enterprises to buy residential units worth 500 billion yuan to rent out as affordable housing.

Data released by China's National Bureau of Statistics suggests that the real-estate deflation accelerated in May. REUTERS

This kitty, plus removing the minimum on mortgage interest rates (previously 3.5%) and reducing down-payment requirements for house purchases, was supposed to put a

floor under the market.

Mr. Xi was heeding increasingly desperate calls from within and outside China to do something to arrest the decline of real-estate prices. Many

economists and probably Mr. Xi himself assumed he'd be able to do so. The historical precedent was the enormous credit stimulus plan Beijing rolled out to shield its economy from the worst effects of the 2008 global financial crisis. This led to a mountain of debt but also staved off a recession—and may have indirectly helped pull the West out of the ditch.

When Beijing launched the latest real-estate support plan last month, the main debate among economists was whether it was large enough. But as it becomes clear that the plan may not be working, another worry is coming into view: Chinese households might not care.

The way individual Chinese

TURN TO PAGE 13