

MISREADING RSS BY RAM MADHAV THE ART OF WINNING A DEFEAT BY MJ AKBAR PRIYANKA'S ELECTORAL DEBUT  
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THE EXPENDABLES OF THE GULF THE WORLD OF INDIAN POLYCULES FROM THE BEACH TO INFINITY BY CARLO PIZZATI

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# OPEN



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## UNDER HEAT

HOW TO COPE WITH  
EXTREME CLIMATE CHANGE



Jaipur, 46°C, May 30, 2024



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## LETTER OF THE WEEK

Now that the BJP-led NDA has formed a coalition government at the Centre as well as announced portfolios, ministers should focus on specific areas such as infrastructure, reforms and welfare as this is the only way to usher in good governance ('The Message from the Modi Cabinet', June 24, 2024). It seems that overconfidence blinded BJP to addressing issues of economic distress and unemployment, resulting in its failure to achieve a majority of its own. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, however, accepted the verdict with humility and declared that he will continue to fulfil the aspirations of the people. He has taken his alliance partners into confidence, adopting a consensual approach to nurture a strong coalition. This is a good sign that will result in more voices at Cabinet meetings from NDA member parties. The prime minister has also allocated portfolios to his ministers suitably. This time, Dalits moved away from BJP due to widespread fears that the party would change the Constitution and end reservations. BJP has to tread cautiously because a stronger I.N.D.I.A. bloc will be watching its every move and may try to break up the NDA coalition.

Srinivasan Ramaswamy



officer and Patnaik's right-hand man, too, ought to be blamed for BJD's loss. A bureaucrat who got close to the chief minister, Pandian gave fodder to BJP to target the BJD government, which raised issues of misconduct of civil services rules. His decision to quit the civil services and join BJD further proved BJP's point.

Manish Raut

### TERROR IN JAMMU

The recent terrorist attacks in Reasi, Kathua and Doda have shaken the country ('The Arc of Terror', June 24, 2024). These incidents took place in areas which security forces had declared terror-free. The attacks have raised a big question as to whether terror will spread from Jammu to the Valley once again. A Pakistan-sponsored terrorist outfit killed Hindu pilgrims in Reasi and then targeted a police vehicle and a temporary Army base in Doda. It seems that the government underestimated Pakistan-sponsored terrorism and celebrated peace in the Valley a bit prematurely. Our armed forces cannot afford to be complacent along the LoC and the

International Border (IB). They need to strengthen their surveillance.

Bal Govind

### WINNING ODISHA

BJP had long known that it was going to throw out the Naveen Patnaik-led Biju Janata Dal government in Odisha in the recently concluded Assembly polls ('The Majhi Moment', June 24, 2024). This was why the state BJP leadership and workers were not supportive of the party allying with BJD. Patnaik's fate was sealed as BJP continued to raise problems suffered by residents of the state—water scarcity and non-availability of many Central schemes. After all, dynastic politics always comes to an end. VK Pandian, former IAS

### A KILLING ACT

Actor Darshan Srinivas needs to face justice immediately for his alleged involvement in the murder of a pharmacist ('Fallen Star', June 24, 2024). Srinivas acted as he was reportedly upset with the pharmacist abusing his rumoured girlfriend online. Such drastic measures can be acceptable in movies but they are against the law of the land. What is more worrying is that the actor's fans are supporting such a deed and have been protesting to demand his release. Darshan has a chequered history and has previously been accused of abusing his wife. His fans had come out in support of him then as well.

Abhijeet Verma

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By S PRASANNARAJAN

# THE CONSERVATIVE QUESTION

**I**N POLITICS, those who have the creative resources to turn disaffection into anger own the conversation. Increasingly, it's the right that is winning. This is perhaps the third phase in the evolution of freedom after the fall of ideologies that sought the confiscation of conscience. It began with the last days of communism as the Soviet empire cracked under the weight of its own lies. As the liberated came to power, the suddenly unfettered civil society was still not stable enough to sustain the force of hope. It eventually set the stage for the nationalists to reclaim history as well as memory, and who, once in power, would go on to become the mythologists of the nation. Only the degree of power and persuasion separated them from their revolutionary forefathers. The 'populist' strongman, the über patriot with a kitschy resistance to the presumptions of capitalism (usually translated as the idea of America), was born. And what followed only made the right the most convincing reader of resentment. They moved to the far side of the established right to form an exclusive, nativist argument against immigration and cultural corrosion. The right surge has spawned a new age of liberal panic. And the fear of a new order of the 'sovereign us'.

What is not sufficiently noticed is the fact that the rise of the right is matched by the decline of conservatism. As the far right becomes the new right, some believers argue that conservatism itself has gained muscle, Hungary's Viktor Orbán, with devotees like Tucker Carlson, being its mascot. Conservatism as aggressive evangelism may be a repudiation of the familiar traits of an ideological system that prefers stability to subversion; but those who were unmoored by the moral corruption of the old right, once argued to perfection by the likes of William Buckley and Roger Scruton and preserved in power by Reagan and Thatcher, could not—and would not—accept conservatism as politics of grievance.

What is currently unfolding in Britain and America is the best example of the broken political right. In the intellectual home of conservatism, it's now an idea abandoned by the right. On the eve of an election the Conservatives have already lost the will to fight, Britain shows, in the worst possible way, how the essential political habits of a society can be curtailed by a ruling class that could not remain true to its core values. In a fundamentally

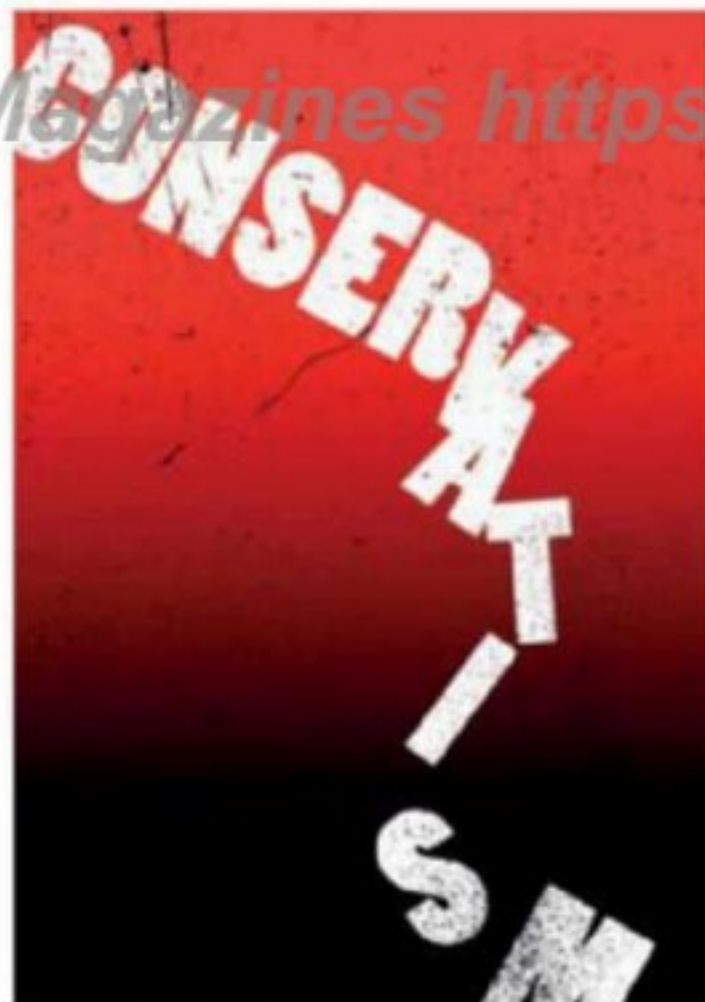
conservative society like Britain, power alone corrupted conservatism. Thatcher brought it to the peak; David Cameron made it a centrist position and tested his own ideological conviction with the Brexit referendum. It has been a story of slow unravelling ever since—from the casual recklessness of Boris Johnson, Britain's most popular Conservative after Thatcher, to the desperate posturing of Rishi Sunak, brought to power by a Westminster coup and today on the verge of losing his debut election as leader. The illness of British conservatism is caused by Conservatives' failure to resist the temptations of radical change. They promised the fantastical and overlooked the familiar. They made home a permanent debate. Across the Atlantic, post-Reagan conservatism, even as it went on to add the

suffix 'neo' and the adjective 'compassionate', could not calm the restless as usurpers of the right rose from below.

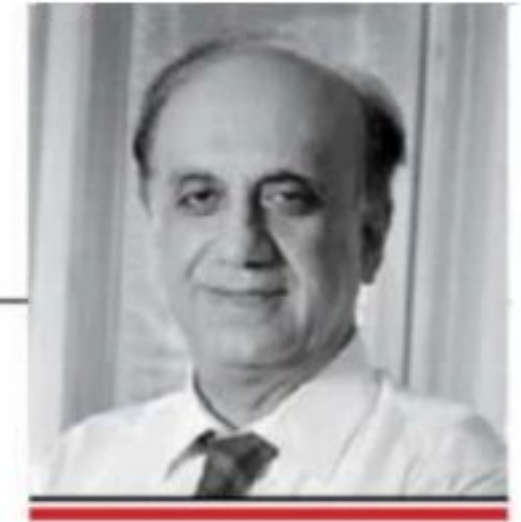
The insurgents have stolen the slogans. As Conservatives struggle for a winning argument for being English in the face of radical social changes and economic stagnation, the subversive right like the Reform Party has acquired the legitimacy of being the people's party, as different from the party of the elite. And in the US, the possibility of Trump's return to the White House shows how badly traditional conservatism has lost the popular touch. A mobilised culture of complaint may be the right's chosen path to the mass mind—and power. It doesn't

restore conservatism because the concept is incompatible with radicalisation.

The quiet confidence of conservatism-as-usual is certain to be challenged by national conservatives, the ideologically supercharged defenders of the faith, and for whom national redemption is impossible without the maximisation of power. What drives national conservatives is not a passive philosophy of social stability but a permanent campaign for power. It is the nationalist's last stand against multiculturalism and other demons in a vanishing home. Sadly, revolutions have a use-by date, and that is not the only reason why conservatism cannot be saved by inverting the order. Against the bad taste of radicalism, conservatism brings to the political space the decencies and responsibilities of being nationalists without rancour. The conservative crack-up is as real as the right resurgence. ■







# The Second Cold War

The US has walked into a trap and brought Russia and China together

IN 1991, THE 41-year Cold War ended with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The US-led West believed it had won the longest war in which not a single weapon had been fired by either superpower.

But had the US really won the Cold War? With the Soviet Union reduced to a rump of the Russian Federation, it appeared so. But appearances can be deceptive. The Russia-Ukraine war shows that the US project of being the world's sole superpower has hit a geopolitical speed bump—two, in fact.

The first is a resurgent Russia under President Vladimir Putin which annexed Crimea in 2014 and invaded Ukraine in 2022. The second is China.

At the end of the Cold War in 1991, China had a GDP of \$0.41 trillion compared to America's GDP of \$6.16 trillion. Its technology was borrowed or stolen from the West. Yet, within three decades, it has emerged as a challenger to the US as the world's unitary superpower.

Washington realised in the early 2000s, when Putin began expanding Russia's arc of influence, that weakening Russia terminally was the unfinished business of the Cold War. It first encircled Russia by enlarging NATO to include East European member-states—all former Soviet satellites. It then staged a regime change in Ukraine in 2014, replacing Russia-friendly President Viktor Yanukovich.

Cornered, Russia annexed Crimea. As fighting between Russian and Ukrainian loyalists in eastern Ukraine began, the gloves came off. Russia's invasion of Ukraine happened exactly as Washington had hoped, trapping Moscow in an unwinnable war. This, Washington believed, would end the Cold War of 1950-91 for good and cripple Russia.

Things haven't gone exactly according to plan. This has led US President Joe Biden to weaponise Ukraine. China though is a complication. The US has itself walked into a trap by bringing together two old communist rivals: Beijing and Moscow.

Instead of terminally weakening Russia in the Ukraine war, the US has helped create a Second Cold War against a new Russia-China axis. China brings its formidable economy and technology to the table. Russia brings its military, war-weary but still reasonably potent.

Biden finds himself in a spot. Ukraine's appetite for weapons to stop Russia is insatiable. If Biden loses the November 5, 2024 presidential election to Donald Trump,

funds for Ukraine will dry up.

Washington is now fighting two battles simultaneously to preserve its global hegemony. The first is the battle to terminally weaken, sanction and isolate Russia—a battle that isn't going well. The second is to bar China from high-tech chips and other technology with dual military-civil use.

Beijing has responded by pouring funds into developing homegrown chips and creating an entire semiconductor ecosystem. It continues to supply Moscow with key military equipment and supplies.

Mortified at the thought that the First Cold War against the Soviet Union was morphing into a Second Cold War against a Russia-China alliance, Biden warned his European audience during his D-Day visit to Normandy in France:

"Putin is not going to stop at Ukraine. All of Europe will be threatened, we are not going to let that happen. The United States is standing strong with Ukraine. We will not, I say it again, walk away."

Taken aback by Russian advances in the Kharkiv region, though recently stalled, Washington threw caution to the wind. It allowed Ukraine to use advanced long-range American weapons inside Russian territory. This signifies a significant escalation of the war.

In the early days of the war, Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelensky was prepared to sign a peace deal with Moscow. A draft agreement by mediators in Istanbul was ready. Biden dispatched then British Prime Minister Boris Johnson to Kyiv to tell Zelensky to fight on. The US project of weakening Russia terminally had not yet been achieved.

Meanwhile, the other two battles the US is fighting in Gaza and the South China Sea are an increasing worry for Washington. The Israel-Hamas war is now in its ninth month. Israel has still been unable to downgrade Hamas' ability to launch attacks on Israeli soil despite US weaponry.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu faces serious corruption charges. The moment the Gaza war ends so will his prime ministership. Peace in Gaza is hostage to Netanyahu's need to prolong the war. But it is the South China Sea, with Beijing looking for the right opportunity to invade Taiwan, that concerns Washington the most. If that happens, the US will find itself deeply immersed in a Second Cold War, more damaging than the First. ■

Washington realised in the early 2000s, when Putin began expanding Russia's arc of influence, that weakening Russia terminally was the unfinished business of the Cold War

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# The Art of Winning a Defeat

Congress has a long way to go before it becomes a natural alternative to BJP

**C**AN YOU WIN a defeat? Possibly. If your sights are set low, you can always rejoice after missing the bull's eye by some distance. This is not advocacy for the cockeyed. It is a recognition of the artful management of expectations, always good politics in that gloomy space called the waiting room. Congress has developed expertise in this art. Statistics tend to be a little less helpful.

The last election which brought Congress to power was in 2009 when it won 206 seats with 28.55 per cent of the vote, while BJP slumped to 116 seats and 18.80 per cent. Fifteen years later, BJP has 240 seats with 36.56 per cent of the vote and Congress has 99 MPs with 21.19 per cent. That should shift the perspective. In 2024, Congress did better

out of allies than the allies did out of Congress because the latter had less to offer. If it took 10 years for Congress to rise from 44 seats to 99, then the party should reach 200 seats in Lok Sabha by 2034 at the present rate of progression. Semantics apart, the question before Congress is whether its brand has yet recovered. It cannot become the natural alternative to BJP as long as it is marginal in the 180-odd seats along the belt from Delhi Yamuna to Diamond Harbour and the Sagar island in Bengal where the Ganga meets the sea; and vulnerable in a big-ticket state like Maharashtra and middle India where it faltered again.

The past can be useful. The first instance of Congress slippage occurred in the 1967 elections when it diminished to a slim majority against a non-existent Opposition. In

1971 Indira Gandhi led Congress to a spectacular recovery in a premature General Election by reinventing her party through a split in 1969 that ripped apart the status quo. Her heirs do not fully appreciate the significance of 1969.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Opposition parties used to ask for votes on the sterile plank that they were not Congress. Congress now asks for votes on the equally fragile plank that it is not BJP. This is a painkiller, not a remedy. A serious political objective needs a compelling positive programme that defines a better future for the electorate and the nation through a policy framework. This is more difficult than holding press conferences.

**E**VEN MIRACLES CAN wither in the winter of time.

One of the outstanding miracles of Indian democracy has been the sudden rise and sustained achievement of Naveen Patnaik, intellectually more a child of the liberal West than the rustic hardships of his state, Odisha. His father Biju Patnaik's legendary life helped, but no inheritance lasts more than one term in the tough playing fields of our electoral system. I knew and admired the charismatic Biju Patnaik and have never really met the son,



Illustrations by SAURABH SINGH



but will assert that history will accord Naveen an equally luminous chapter. Naveen Patnaik's era is an indelible part of Odisha's long march to modernity.

For a quarter century Naveen Patnaik sped along a one-way autobahn, eliminating competing traffic with unsuspected finesse, eventually to discover that fatigue and crawl exhaust just as easily as speed. It is entirely apposite that his splendid success over two decades in power has been complemented by the grace with which Naveen Patnaik has said *au revoir*. No fuss, no moans, no complaints, no pettiness, no entitlement, no bile against the victor. If I can take the liberty of paraphrasing what he might be thinking: Democracy brought me to power; democracy has told me to take a rest.

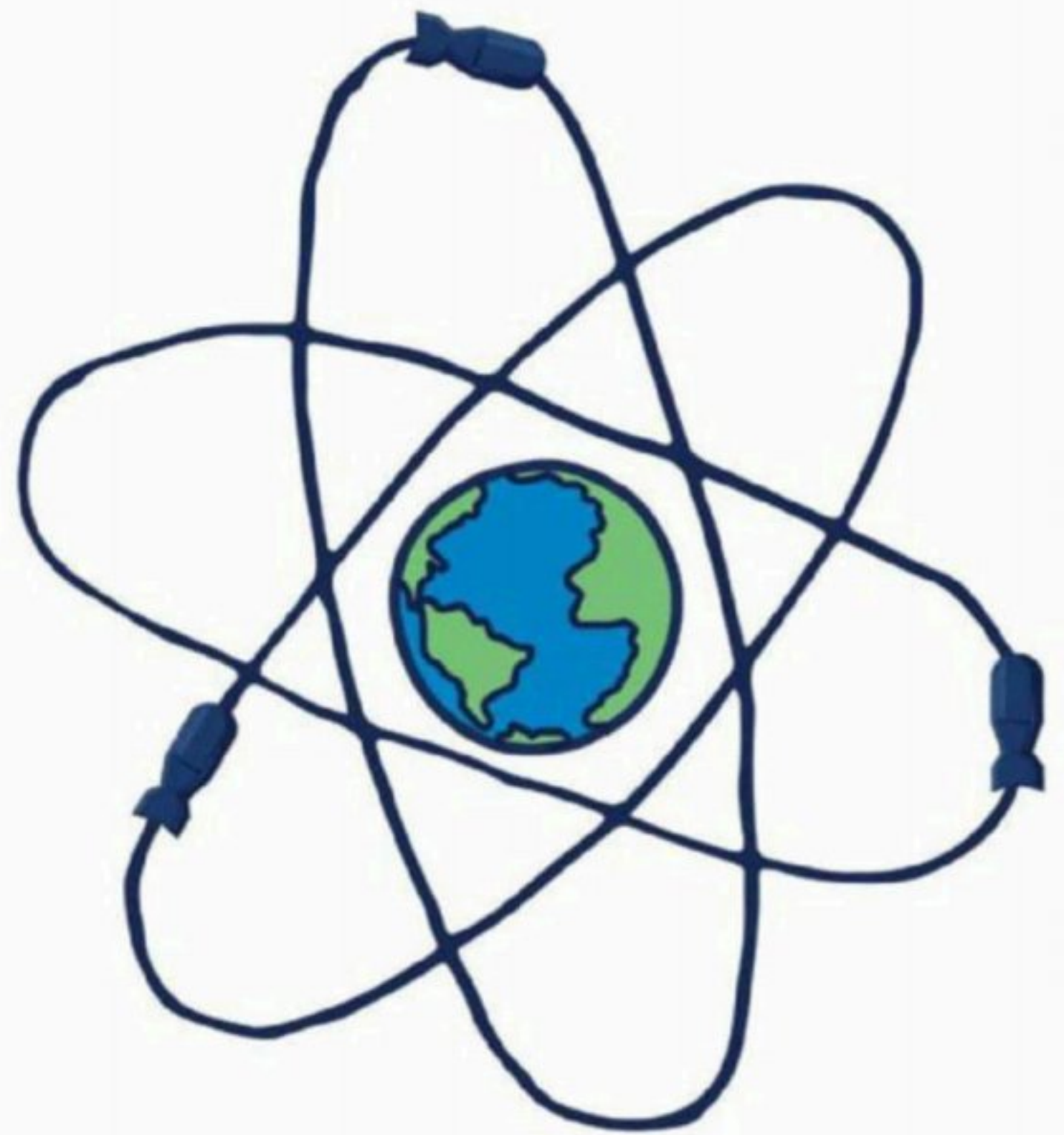
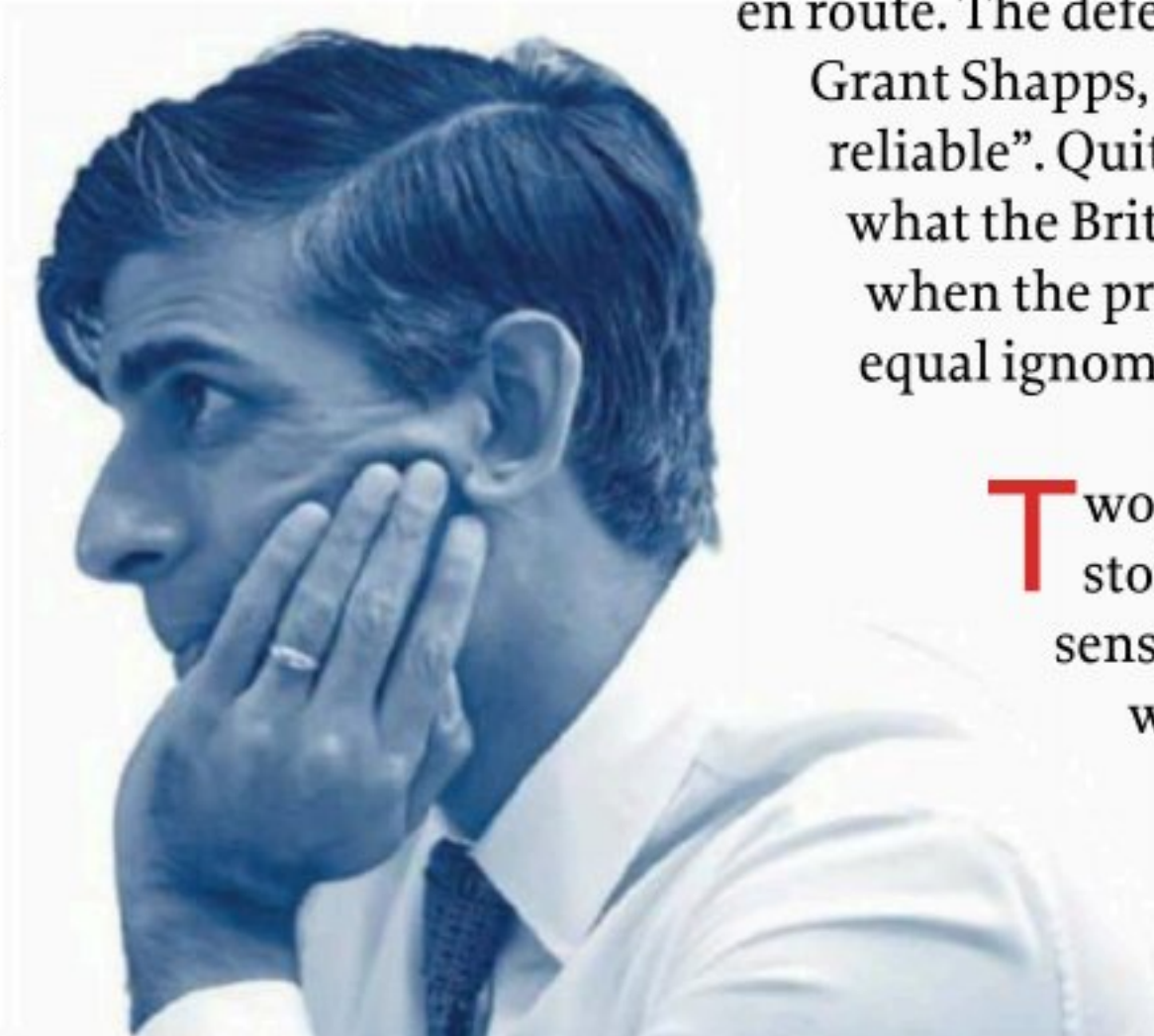
If anyone deserves a Bharat Ratna in 2025 it is Naveen Patnaik.

**N**ORMALLY, THE KNIVES come out after the results. In Britain, which has always claimed the honour of being the mother democracy, the slashing and slaying has begun much before the Conservatives end up in the morgue. Their current leader Rishi Sunak knifed his mentor Boris Johnson on the way to power with a twist that belied his self-promoted image of a do-gooder who had sacrificed a lucrative private-sector career to serve the British people. That did not last long in the arc lights of reality. Sunak entered 10 Downing Street with the slight swagger of an intelligent lottery winner, convinced by events that the right conjunction of stars had found the correct place for his genius. He lost the plot completely when he abruptly left the commemoration of D-Day on June 6, oblivious of what it meant to his country: it marked the onset of the Allied invasion of Europe in 1944 which destroyed Hitler, saved Britain from subjugation and the world from vicious fascism. This prime minister of Britain has never understood the British. He looks naïve and bewildered, an amateur mewling in the big league, now visibly nursing an inner grievance against the multitudes who refuse to vote for his selfless talent.

His *bête noire*, that bruised leopard of professionals Boris Johnson, has just taught Sunak a lesson in whipcraft. On Monday, Sunak admitted, with gritted teeth, that Johnson could "make a difference" to Tory fortunes if he campaigned. Boris waited for the reluctant appeal to flood the news, and then announced that he was off on a holiday.

It can only happen in London.

Guess what is Sunak's theme on the hustings? He is no longer asking for victory. All he says is: Don't give Labour an overwhelming victory. Just a whelming majority, then.



**H**OW MANY NUCLEAR bombs do you need to blow up the world? One would do.

By the time they convened the United Nations Security Council to discuss the crisis, half the world's nuclear arsenal would have been triggered by that self-destructive combination of dread and hate. Such thoughts have been prompted by a new count done by the world's principal think-tank on multinational suicide, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. Russia has 4,380 nuclear warheads, America 3,708, China 500 (up from 410 in early 2023), France 290, Britain 225, India 172, Pakistan 170, Israel 90, and North Korea 50. One is tempted, without prejudice, to discount the British quota. In January this year a Trident fired by the Royal Navy supposed to cross 6,000km into the Atlantic plopped a few yards away into the sea during a test. Don't ask what would have happened if this failure had been a semi-failure, and hit an African country en route. The defence minister during the test, Grant Shapps, described the test as "most reliable". Quite fascinating. There is no record of what the British defence minister in 2016 said when the previous Trident test flopped in equal ignominy.

**T**wo thousand years ago the Roman stoic philosopher Seneca made a sensible suggestion: "End your life whenever you want to. Just make sure you attach a good ending." Seneca, thou shouldst have been alive at this hour. ■



# OPENINGS

NOTEBOOK

## Spare Indian Democracy Please

**T**HE FACTS OF the 2024 General Election are now clear even if interpretations for the results have been muddled, deliberately. This is especially so at the intellectual level where an inability to understand the turn of events since 2014 has been compounded by hostility towards the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). A class of intellectuals—Indian or Indians in the West—have continued to inform the Western press and its representatives on the “truths about India”. Lack of directly gathered information has been compounded by misinterpretation, making India a ‘black box’ for this class of persons: clichés like “authoritarianism,” “democratic backsliding”, and “charisma” have functioned as ‘explanations’ for more than a decade now and they are likely to continue for the foreseeable future. This even as ground realities remain beyond the comprehension of the Western press and intellectuals. The choices made by Indian voters and their reasons don’t really matter in understanding political outcomes.

A comparison with the previous General Elections shows that BJP’s vote share fell from 37.7 per cent in 2019 to 36.56 per cent. This negative swing of 1.14 percentage points led to the party getting 63 fewer seats in 2024. At the instrumental level of explanation, it is the design of the electoral system—first past the post—that leads to such large swings with even a relatively small change in the vote share. At the aggregate level, this can serve as an ‘explanation’ but the core of the story lies in the localised effects that have hit BJP. This is not surprising: After 10 years of continuous run in government, a degree of unhappiness can creep into any political system, and certainly so in a democracy as vibrant and noisy as the Indian one.

None of these localised factors make the cut at the ‘intellectual’ level. There the dominant tropes are how “the aura of invincibility” is gone or how the prime minister has been “cut to size”. These phrases have been used on earlier occasions as well, such as in November 2021 when the

government was forced to roll back the three laws on agricultural reforms. The expression used at that time was “end of omnipotence”. The reality is that in a democracy, and particularly one endowed with multiple veto points such as India, the idea of omnipotence is more a political slur than an actual description of what goes on in the political system.

Where do these ideas and the inability to understand Indian politics come from? Schematically, these ideas are generated from a two-step process followed by a feedback loop between the two levels. The first level is a direct comparison between Western democracies and the Indian one. This is as if the Indian variant has to conform closely to the Western one. The second step is to use this ‘received wisdom’ and give it an Indian garnish. Thereafter, a degree of looping follows between the two steps, a process that leads to some strange conclusions.

When Narendra Modi was elected prime minister in 2014, the dominant explanation was based on the shortcomings and venality of the previous government. Commentary on BJP specifically was about its organisational prowess and, occasionally, worries about its alleged communalism. At that stage (from 2014-17) the expression “authoritarianism” was used rarely. Then came 2016 and Donald Trump’s unexpected victory. This was followed by the emergence of anti-system parties in Europe and their gradual strengthening there. Most Western

commentators, and more so their Indian counterparts, wondered how could India be immune from what transpired in the West. If democracy was under threat everywhere, how would India be an exception?

These ‘fears’ were confirmed when BJP won a second consecutive term on its own in 2019. This sort of single-party majority had not been seen since 1984 and a back-to-back win by a party on its own was last witnessed in the 1970s. Analysts began talking about India’s transition to a “populist and authoritarian” system. It is a different matter that Indian politics was as prosaic as it always had been. BJP continued to win

**In the days up to the declaration of results, commentary obsessively focused on the ‘end of democracy’ in India if BJP were to win a third consecutive term on its own. But once the results poured in, the refrain was that India’s democracy had been saved, for now. All within a span of 24 hours between June 4 and 5, 2024. More than explanation, these wild swings proved to be the stuff of mirth**



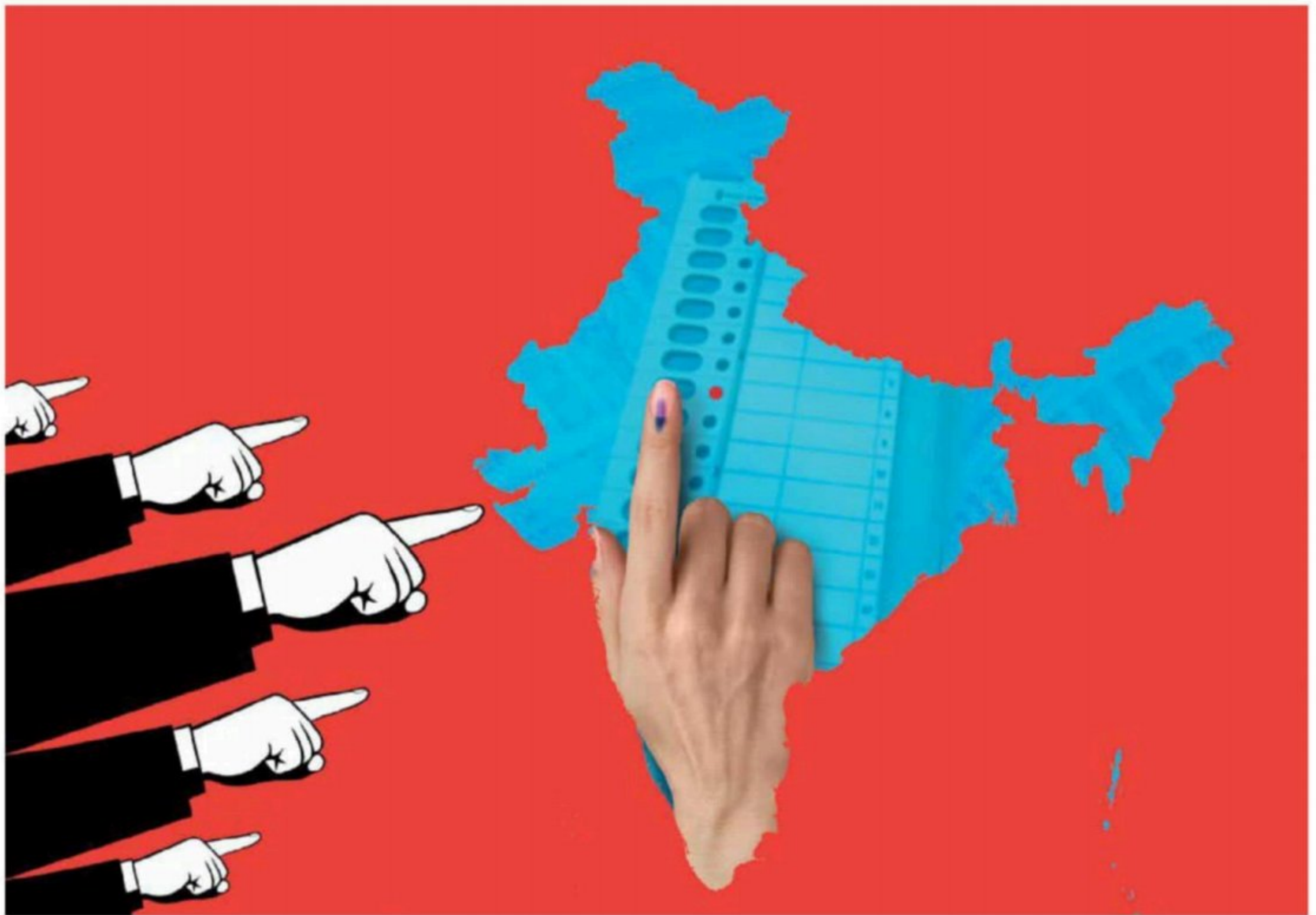


Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

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and lose elections at the state level regularly. It was also a known fact that BJP was more successful when it was a challenger party and less so when it was an incumbent one. At some point, these trends were likely to reach the national level as well. They did, partially, in 2024.

The result is that these claims are just a matter of convenience. In the days up to the declaration of results, commentary obsessively focused on the “end of democracy” in India if BJP were to win a third consecutive term on its own. But once the results poured in, the refrain was that India’s democracy had been saved, for now. All within a span of 24 hours between June 4 and 5, 2024. More than explanation, these wild swings proved to be the stuff of mirth.

Are there markers that distinguish the two Modi governments from the ones before it? At one level, there indeed are many differences. For one, state capacity has gone up manifold in the past 10 years. For another, the delivery of services and goods has been far more effective and efficient than they were under any previous government. For yet another one, many insurgencies have been quelled and a large number of separatist organisations, especially in the North-East, have signed peace agreements.

Yet, for all these differences, the Modi government has conformed to what can be called the iron law of the Indian political economy: “welfare measures”, or more bluntly, economic populism has continued unabated. A significant fraction of budgetary resources continues to be devoted to welfare schemes even if this spending is much less prone to corruption and leakages. Back in 2014, both the opponents and supporters

of the new Modi government had thought this spending would come to an end. Those opposed to Modi thought his government would veer towards “neoliberalism” and reduce welfare spending, while those at the free-markets end, too, thought these expenditures would be drastically curtailed. In the event, none of this came to pass: social sector spending has remained a pillar of the BJP government.

But none of this has cut ice with most intellectuals who latched on to another ground for castigating the BJP government. This was based on the so-called Muslim question where it was argued that Modi would initiate “anti-Muslim measures” and that would boost political support for him. This, too, proved to have no substance. A report issued by the Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister (PM-EAC), ‘A Secular Democracy in Practice: Objective Assessment of Amenities Programs in India’ (April 2023) showed there was no discrimination against minorities in welfare programmes. When one strips away all encrustation, the “Muslim Question” remains the core of ‘explanations’ against Modi and his government. Where does this leave ‘intellectual’ explanations about India’s democracy and its politics? In one word: nowhere. India is a complex and diverse country and this diversity has its costs, but it also has its strengths. What it does not allow is simplistic explanations that are based on Western precepts and conceptual apparatus. 2024 is no different from 2019 or 2014. One is yet to get a reasonable ‘intellectual’ explanation for the Modi phenomenon and BJP’s repeated return to power. ■

**By SIDDHARTH SINGH**



PORTRAIT • NVIDIA

# RIDER OF THE AI WAVE

**The manufacturer of GPUs became the most valuable company in the world by investing in the future**

IT TAKES TIME to become the world's most valuable company. In Nvidia's case, that was about 31 years. It was in 1993 that three men got together at a restaurant in California to make a decision on forming a company. Of those founders, Nvidia is now identified with one name—Jensen Huang, its chief executive officer. From what was just one among numerous startups vying for the same slice of the computer graphics market, Nvidia on June 18 overtook Apple and Microsoft, who had been shuffling each other at the top for the last five years, with a market capitalisation of \$3.34 trillion. No one would have predicted this even a few years ago. Consider what has happened to its stock price: it was \$5 in 2019 and now it is at \$135—twenty-seven times. It has nearly tripled since the beginning of the year.

What changed to make a company making a component inside computers that the general public is not even aware of touch such stratospheric highs? The answer: generative artificial intelligence (AI). With everyone realising AI has arrived, it has also become clear that the chips most relevant to this era, the one that trains the incredible amounts of data that lead to the illusion of intelligence, are GPUs. Nvidia holds a near monopoly in GPUs. What it does is summarised in Huang's LinkedIn profile: "Our invention of the GPU in 1999 sparked the growth of the PC gaming market, redefined modern computer graphics, and revolutionized parallel computing. GPU computing went on to ignite modern AI—the next era of computing—with the GPU acting as the

brain of computers, robots, and self-driving cars that can perceive and understand the world." When they began, however, AI was nowhere in the picture. They were interested in video games. In a 2017 interview to *Fortune*, Huang recounted them realising that video games offered very computationally challenging problems on one hand, but huge sales volume on the other. "Those two conditions don't happen very often. Video games was our killer app—a flywheel to reach large markets funding huge R&D to solve massive computational problems," he said.

It wasn't easy. Within a few years, they had run into existential difficulty when their main product wasn't compatible with a platform that Microsoft was promoting. They had to lay off 60 per cent of the staff and were down to their last dollar when a Japanese gaming company put in \$5 million as investment to give them a breather. They reworked the product and stabilised until by the end of the decade, they were one of the two companies still standing in the GPU market.

The company also realised early that the AI era would begin, and began investing heavily into it a decade ago. The *New York Times* wrote last year, "The onetime industry upstart achieved that dominance by recognizing the A.I. trend early, tailoring its chips to those tasks and then developing key pieces of software that aid in A.I. development." The GPU is used by written code of programmes, and chip manufacturers and programmers work in collaboration. One of Nvidia's moat in AI is that most programmers work with them on their software technology. Any competitor will have to make not just better GPUs, but also get the programming community on board. Nvidia meanwhile invests billions in research and development to maintain its distance from competitors. Elements like these make the market believe the company will remain a backbone of the AI landscape for a long time.

There are however many who think that the company's stock is in bubble territory. No matter how essential it is to generative AI, Apple still makes more in profits than Nvidia's revenues. The *Wall Street Journal* compared Nvidia to Cisco, a similar provider of computing infrastructure, that also briefly became the world's most valuable company at the height of the dotcom bubble—at that time, it was the potential of the internet, now it is AI. Cisco is still at a very good 63rd most valuable company in the world and when the hysteria of AI tempers down, Nvidia might also find it hard to remain at the top. ■

By MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI

GETTY IMAGES





## ANGLE

# BORN TO SURVIVE



**In politics, with the right surname, there is no permanent wilderness**

By **MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI**

**T**HE CORNER THAT Ajit Pawar, leader of the Nationalist Congress Party in Maharashtra, finds himself in shrinks by the day. His allies in the state, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Shiv Sena, see him as a liability after the election results when he couldn't get his own wife to win and brought just one Lok Sabha seat to the coalition. Eknath Shinde, who broke Shiv Sena as Pawar did NCP, at least delivered enough to justify his presence at the high table. Pawar's allies might even think that bringing him on board not only didn't get them additional votes but even led to a decrease because of corruption allegations against him rubbing onto them. A senior leader of his party recently switched sides during a Legislative Council election, another even more senior leader seems to be waiting at the door, and it is quite possibly the beginning of an exodus because there is really no ideology that holds NCP together except the spoils of power.

And yet, Pawar's career will probably be far from over because he carries a surname of the man he betrayed, his uncle Sharad Pawar, himself a proven master of shifting loyalties and alliances and pulling-the-rug-from-under politics. Except that every time the nephew emulates the uncle, it turns out to be the spoof version of the movie. As happened in 2019 when the first time he thought he was taking the party away to form a government and found himself isolated, and swiftly returned to the embrace of the uncle.

It was extraordinary that someone as astute as Sharad Pawar would allow himself to be blindsided twice when his nephew split the party again. Many still wonder whether this was the family hedging their bets because allowing him back made little sense.

Sharad Pawar is wont to often say that he does not let politics come in between family relations, but the vice versa is not true. Family relations easily come into his politics. His nephew had been given the chief operating officer position in the party for decades. And then family came in again when his daughter became part of the equation at the top, the main reason for Ajit Pawar's insecurity and misadventures.

If he was accepted once before then why should it not happen again? For the dynast, family is a primary consideration. It is a little like in olden times with kings and emperors. Their princes would squabble when they came of age and one of them would occasionally mount a rebellion and fail and be then sent into exile and eventually return to favour. Why did the king tolerate it then is why it is tolerated now among politicians with empire—it is what happens with extended families and patriarchs, except that here everything is amplified because of the stakes involved. You might be punished for pushing your luck too far, but never completely disowned. It shouldn't be too surprising to see the two NCPs merging again at some point, maybe with a short term of exile included in it. ■

## IDEAS



## CREATIVITY

A filmmaker wants to make a movie about concerns over AI replacing writers in cinema. He turns to ChatGPT for the script, resulting in the world's first entirely AI-written film. *The Last Screenwriter*, made by Peter Luisi, is about a screenwriter who, going through a creative crisis, collaborates with a new AI programme. Every aspect of the film, according to reports, was made traditionally, except for its screenplay, which ChatGPT churned out based on a prompt. Writers forced London's Prince Charles Cinema, where the premier was to be screened, to cancel the event. "All they hear is 'first film written entirely by AI' and they see the enemy," Luisi told reporters. The arrival of AI is controversial, especially in Hollywood, but this feels like a self-goal. The film doesn't cheat a writer out of work; it in fact exists because it didn't employ one. ■

## WORD'S WORTH

**'Everything 'creative' is a remix of things that happened in the past, plus epsilon and times the quality of the feedback loop and the number of iterations'**

**SAM ALTMAN**  
AMERICAN ENTREPRENEUR



# INSIDER

## MODI'S MESSAGE



Prime Minister Narendra Modi's decision to continue with his core team of ministers without changing major portfolios was read as a signal on how the government will run. It is evident that key ministries connected to reforms, trade and infrastructure will be with BJP nominees and under the close supervision of the PMO. However, the decision not to shuffle the deck, even with regard to BJP ministers, is possibly also linked to a desire to get things moving without delays. A new minister would need time to settle in, irrespective of any handholding, and Modi is keen to get things rolling on the 100-day plan he has spoken of. The prime minister's decision to continue with his team reflects his assessment that the ministers did well during Modi 2.0 and are capable of meeting more ambitious targets likely to be set for them. The first indicator of the post-result vision of the government will be provided by the Budget in July. The initial decisions to increase the number of housing units under the PM Awas Yojana by three crore and to sign off on the next instalment of the PM-Kisan payments are pointers that existing initiatives will be strengthened and possibly fine-tuned in keeping with ongoing reviews. The economic path pursued by the government focused on expanding capital expenditure while adopting a responsible fiscal path, and is seen to have paid dividends with India registering higher than expected growth. While one can expect more of the same in many areas, there is a greater urgency in ensuring rollout of initiatives like jointness in the defence forces, implementation of the revised penal code, closure of trade pacts under discussion, and updating of school syllabi. All the signs so far point to Modi setting even more challenging goals for himself and his team.





## JAGAN'S SELF-GOALS

**Y**SRCP leader Jagan Mohan Reddy banked on a cradle-to-grave welfare system to return to office in Andhra Pradesh but that was not to be. While the state government rolled out schemes, debt snowballed and a lack of investment meant meagre opportunities for the workforce. For some time now, Jagan is learnt to have isolated himself, largely cloistered with officials, rather than meeting even close advisors or political colleagues. It was sometimes months before any non-official aide got to see the then chief minister. Jagan's dislike for TDP chief N Chandrababu Naidu, it is felt, got the better of him and the decision to file a case of alleged corruption that sent his rival to jail was ill-considered. The case was prompted by the assessment that TDP's graph had begun to inch up after a long period of stagnation, with Naidu's rallies attracting crowds and even on occasion resulting in a stampede. But the antidote proved worse than the disease. The decision to arrest Naidu had the opposite of the intended effect and TDP bounced back with a vengeance. TDP's decision to ally with BJP and the charismatic JanaSena Party leader Pawan Kalyan galvanised the anti-Jagan vote and the ruling party was reduced to a paltry 11 seats in a house of 175. The former chief minister's limited interaction with the outside world has been part of grapevine talk for long. He has been in the habit of shutting down official work by evening and spending time largely in his own company. The Andhra result, said an observer, was a "man-made" tragedy.

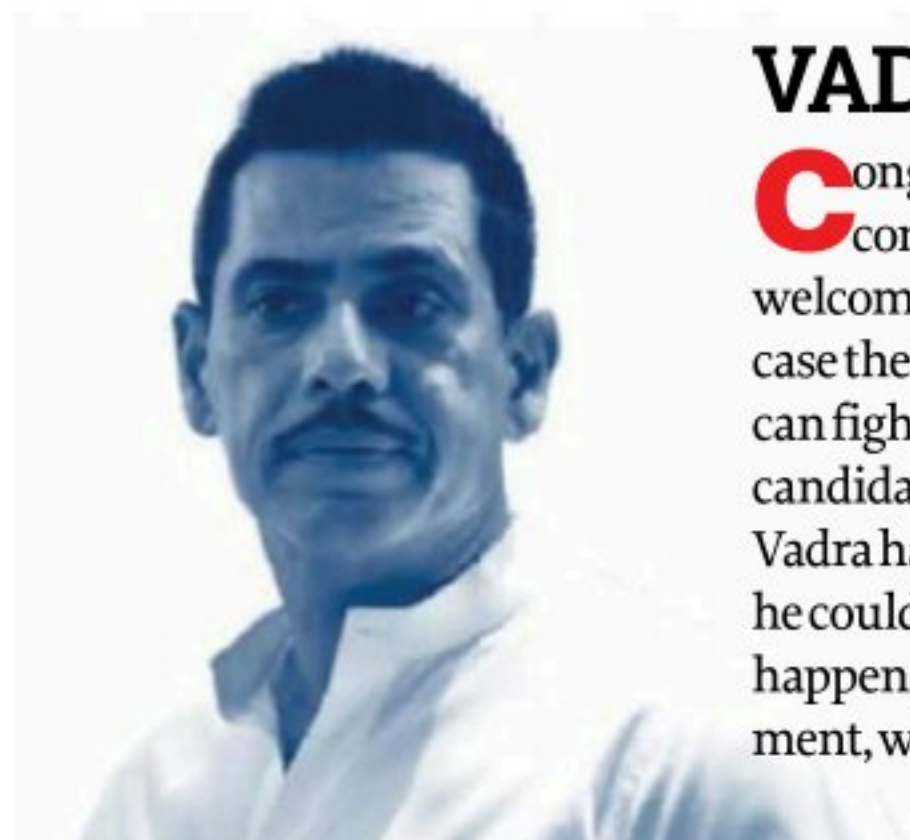
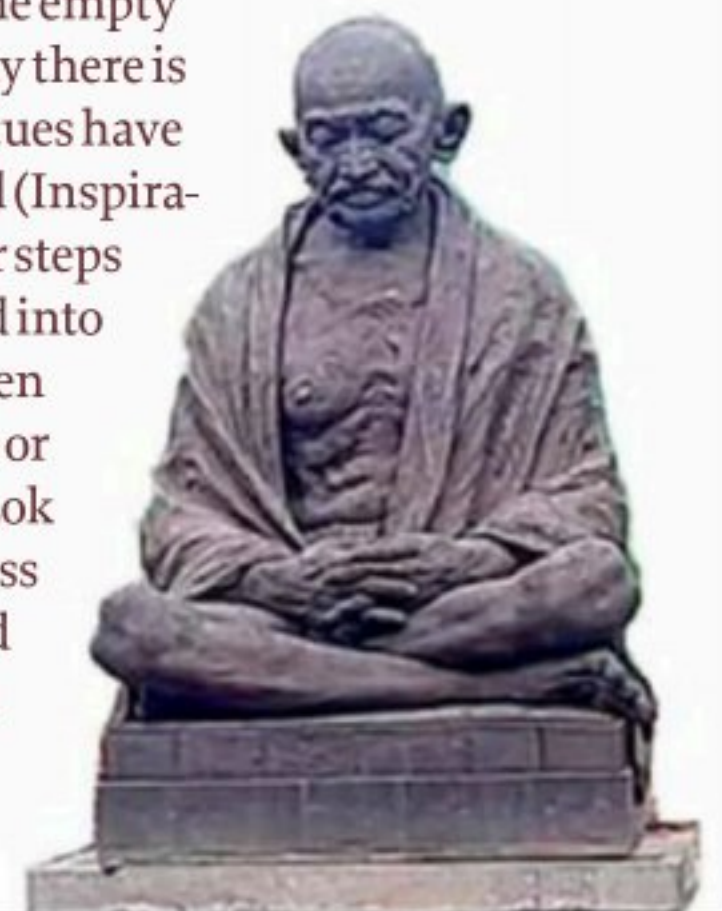
## UDDHAV'S BLUES

**W**hile MVA did much better than NDA in Maharashtra, the gains are not the same for every component of the Aghadi. The Sharad Pawar faction of NCP did well, doubling its tally to eight MPs, and Congress won 13. And while Uddhav Thackeray's Shiv Sena won nine seats, it lost seven of the 13 contests where it was directly opposed to rebel leader Eknath Shinde's Shiv Sena which retains the official symbol. Just as the Uddhav Sena was eyeing to occupy the space once held by Congress, the latter made a strong comeback from the one seat it held in 2019. The three seats the Uddhav faction won in Mumbai have much to do with the alignment of the Muslim vote apart from any sympathy factor for the ousted leader. While the voting pattern indicates the Uddhav Sena will have to all but repudiate its founding principles, it lost the Ratnagiri-Sindhudurg seat in its Konkan bastion by a comfortable margin to BJP's Narayan Rane. The Konkan strongman was seen to be hesitant about contesting but was in no mood to lose a crucial election once nominated by BJP. The results mean the Hindutva and Maratha vote largely remained with BJP and the Shinde Sena, despite gains by MVA. Shinde's position is further strengthened if the Ajit Pawar NCP's poor show is taken into account along with the seven seats the chief minister's party won. And within MVA, Congress has the pole position with the Uddhav Sena in third place, a development that will certainly impact seat-sharing ahead of the Assembly polls due in October.



## PLAYING STATUE

**T**he relocation of statues inside the Parliament complex has led to a lot of heartburn. The statue of Mahatma Gandhi in front of the main entrance to the Old Parliament building, now called Samvidhan Sadan, was the protest site for the Opposition that would stand in front of the image holding placards. The statue was not far from the new Parliament building and provided a prominent venue for protests. Now all statues have been relocated and the empty spot is no longer as attractive. Lok Sabha officials say there is nothing underhand about the relocation as the statues have been placed in a designated area called Prerna Sthal (Inspiration Platform). Moves are afoot to consider whether steps can be taken to prevent placards from being carried into Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha. The practice began when MPs from Andhra Pradesh staged daily protests for or against the creation of Telangana during the 15th Lok Sabha. The MPs, who were largely from the Congress benches, were allowed to continue unhindered and this ended up normalising the use of placards even though the chambers of Parliament are meant for debate rather than placard-waving.



## VADRA'S TURN?

**C**ongress leader Priyanka Gandhi Vadra's decision to contest from the Wayanad Lok Sabha constituency was welcomed by husband Robert Vadra who said she will showcase the "*mein ladki hoon, mein lad sakti hoon* (I am a girl, and I can fight)" slogan and spirit. He also suggested he might be a candidate for Parliament too, even as his wife precedes him. Vadra has previously said there is popular support for him and he could follow when the time was right. If that were to happen, there would be three Gandhis and a Vadra in Parliament, which would almost certainly be a record of some sort.



# INDRAPRASTHA

Virendra Kapoor



IT IS THE immense good fortune of the Congress MPs that they will have not one, not two, but three Gandhis to fawn over in Parliament. Courtiers never had it so good. Even Indira Gandhi at any given time had proffered but one member of her family to the creepy-crawlies for whom Indira was India and India was Indira. Her daughter-in-law has done better. Watching over from Rajya Sabha with a mix of motherly pride and affection, we are certain she will ensure that the designated claimants to the Delhi Sultanate command the phalanx of MPs in Parliament and the other foot soldiers of the Family with becoming authority.

After all, hadn't the outcome of the recent Lok Sabha polls put the stamp of legitimacy on the dynastic project? Should in the not-so-distant future there arise a question of seniority between the siblings, we are confident the doting mother would establish the pecking order and thus relieve us of the painful dilemma of deciding which totem to worship more. You see, we cannot claim agency of our own.

As humble Congressmen, we have a minor problem though. It hurts that Samajwadi Akhilesh Yadav has stolen a march over us insofar as he has more members of his family for public service than does our Grand Old Party of Nehru and Gandhi. Besides Akhilesh and his wife, he has three first cousins flanking him in Lok Sabha while uncle, Ram Gopal Yadav, safeguards *samajwad* in Rajya Sabha. This hurts all the more given that Congress was

the original proponent of *samajwad*, having famously exhorted the poor, toiling Indians to rally around the heady 'Garibi Hatao' slogan way back in 1971.

How can the newbie Samajwadis from UP be allowed to outnumber our great family? Yes, how? Why not get Robert Vadra into Parliament? Remember, he has often expressed a desire to serve the people, telling us how he would take the plunge at the right time. We believe the right time is now. Kishori Lal, the long-time family retainer, will only be too happy to vacate the Amethi seat for the *jamai babu*. Let us get our family fiefdom back from a mere retainer. Vadra in Parliament will be an asset for the party, nay, the nation, imparting firsthand knowledge from his career as a successful businessman on how to get-rich-in-double-quick-time.

Some of the jobless youths who voted for us will really feel inspired by the success story.

It occurs to me if we have to beat Akhilesh at his own game, we can sound out our estranged cousin and his mother, who for the first time in a long while find themselves out of Parliament. Remember, Akhilesh kissed and made up with uncle Shivpal, even getting his son, Aditya,

into Parliament from Badaun in UP in this election. Our aunt Maneka lost this time, while cousin Varun was denied a ticket by Modi. Now that we have established beyond an iota of doubt that our branch of the Nehru-Gandhi family is the real inheritor of its political legacy, let us be magnanimous and extend the hand of friendship in a spirit of by-gones-be-by-gones and facilitate the entry of either Varun or his mother into Parliament.

Such a gesture of goodwill will help put aside the bitterness of over four decades and bring together the immediate families of Indira Gandhi's sons. Besides, both Maneka and Varun no longer have official accommodation to shelter their huge number of stray dogs they care for with some passion. And remember, Varun has been a bitter critic of Modi even while being an MP. He needs no prompting, no scripts to lash out at the government. Let us at least get him into Parliament so that he can continue to do what he was doing while being a BJP MP, that is, abusing Modi.

MEANWHILE, WE siblings have to be prepared for a vicious attack by the ruling party in Parliament. They will rightly read Priyanka's entry into Lok Sabha as an act of defiance, a dare to the ruling party to keep chanting '*naamzade*'. Whatever little chance of orderly parliamentary functioning there was, may have vanished with the double-barrel Gandhi onslaught. Forget reasoned debates, daily bedlam is guaranteed. ■





# The Rise of Hyper Hindus

They don't have the patience of traditional Hindu nationalists

**“H**YPER HINDUS”? The phrase seems suddenly to have become popular, if not ubiquitous. For instance, Vinit Naik, better known as ‘Bhiku Mhatre’

‘@MumbaichaDon’ on his X handle, posted on X on June 17: “Hyper Hindus won’t tell you this as there is nothing to demean & defame CM .@mieknathshinde Ji & Dy CM .@Dev\_Fadnavis Ji, in this news. Maharashtra NDA Govt has shut down slaughterhouse near Shri Kshetra Siddhatek Ganapati temple (one of famous Ashtavinayak temples). Hindus incl. Dalits were protesting profusely against this slaughter house as per their faith & with Environmental Concerns.”

I won’t go into the contents of the post, but there was a quick rejoinder from another popular handle, Koi Sanjay Dixit@Sanjay\_Dixit: “Who are the hyper Hindus, you cringe sycophant? They were the ones who stood by you.” The reference was to Naik’s arrest by the Karnataka police a month back for one of his posts, which has been subsequently deleted. This column is not quite a reply to the first part of Sanjay Dixit’s question, “Who are the hyper Hindus...?” But a reflection on the meaning of the phrase, which I myself used in my last column in this very space (‘End of Appeasement’, June 17, 2024).

I thought it might be worthwhile to explore its provenance too. I could trace one of the earliest reliable and respectable usages to a December 1, 1993 article in *Hinduism Today* ([shorturl.at/CvmMK](https://shorturl.at/CvmMK)). For those who don’t know it, *Hinduism Today* is one of the first international Hindu magazines, founded in 1979 by Sivaya Subramuniaswami, who started an American monastic community in Kauai, Hawaii. The editorial team claims to produce the magazine for “the same reasons that other orders run ashrams, free eye-clinics or orphanages—as a selfless service to the world.”

The article in question, titled ‘1993: Year in Review’ is relevant, especially its opening sentence in which the phrase hyper Hindu is used: “It was a year of Orwellian drama—the simmering Ayodhya affair with promises by hyper-Hindus to reclaim more Hindu temples under Muslim mosques, keeping Hindu-Muslim relations on edge.” The Babri Masjid, we might recall, was brought down on December 6 of the previous year, 1992. The unnamed author of the subsequent

year in review does not take kindly to the aggressive form of Hinduism that not only demolished the mosque but spearheaded the reclamation of Hindu holy sites destroyed or vandalised during Muslim rule in centuries bygone.

A lot has happened since then. Not only did the Ram Janmabhoomi Movement bring the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to power in Uttar Pradesh but also, most would agree, helped vote it to power in Delhi. In another 10 years, under the leadership of Narendra Modi, who became India’s 14th prime minister in 2014, BJP became India’s dominant political party. Its ideology, both stated and assumed, also pivoted from Gandhian socialism to Hindutva. Gandhi was ditched; Savarkar resurrected. Those that *Hinduism Today* referred to in 1993 as “hyper Hindus” became better known as proponents of Hindutva. What is more, a grand Ram Mandir was actually inaugurated in January 2024 on the very site of the demolished Babri Masjid.

If Hindutva has been so mainstreamed and acceptable, who, then, are the hyper Hindus? Let me offer a slightly roundabout way to address this question. As Modi begins his third term as India’s prime minister, a somewhat unusual question is being whispered: Have hyper Hindus spoiled Modi’s party? Such a question might seem counterintuitive but becomes pressing when the ruling BJP has been reduced to 240 seats, 63 less than the last time, in India’s 543-seat Lok Sabha.

But, once more, but who are these hyper Hindus? The source of the term, as I have shown, goes back at least three decades, but its current connotation is much more recent. It describes a breed of Indian ideologues and influencers—well-educated, fluent in English, economically and socially empowered, with a sizeable number even residing overseas. Unlike the traditional supporters of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), who were wont to be dismissed as “Hindutvavadi fascists”, hyper Hindus enjoy a privileged status and considerable professional and monetary clout. All of which makes them harder to ignore.

Hyper Hindus, thus, represent a distinct line of evolution, both ideologically and socially, from the traditional stereotype of Hindu nationalists. Have they augmented Modi’s Hindu-nationalist polemics and, unwittingly, caused a diminution of his appeal? Have they,



in addition, constituted themselves into another pressure or special interest group that needs to be “appeased”? Used to be that the latter word almost exclusively referred to India’s sizeable Muslim minority, which numbers over 200 million. But now, in addition, do hyper Hindus, too, have to be politically propitiated?

Since Modi’s 2014 election, this group’s demands have

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH



## HYPER HINDUS PUSH FARTHER FOR HISTORICAL CORRECTION BY RECLAIMING HINDU TEMPLES AND RELEASING THEM FROM GOVERNMENT CONTROL. THEY RESIST PRIVILEGES GIVEN TO MINORITIES

intensified, shaping a socio-political climate that may have forced Modi’s hand in adopting policies that could have negatively impacted his appeal. Pressing the gas pedal on the more cautious traditional Hindu nationalist agenda, hyper Hindus have been far more impatient and insistent on radical change. What is more, they are marked by their overt and blunt, rather than indirect and subtle, critique of Islam itself. Not just of radical or jihadist Muslims.

Their fervour doesn’t stop at policy. Hyper Hindus push farther for the historical correction by reclaiming Hindu temples and releasing them from government controls. They resist privileges given to minorities, particularly Muslims, advocating staunchly against state-sponsored madrasas and

the Waqf Act. Hyper Hindus, seeing Modi’s interventions as insufficient rectifications of historical grievances, press for a Hindu-centric narrative, overshadowing his development agenda. Critics argue this shift undermines minority rights, resulting in intolerance and a suppression of dissent.

The Modi government’s approach in the past to nationwide protests, the handling of issues related to Muslim minorities, and the framing of Hindu nationalist narratives have been flashpoints testing the resolve and rhetoric of the hyper Hindus. Their approach has sometimes overshadowed Modi’s developmental agenda, prompting concerns that the party’s inclusive development narrative might be eclipsed by the more strident Hindu-first discourse.

The rise of hyper Hindus has undoubtedly solidified BJP’s base but has simultaneously polarised Indian society and raised global concerns. This assertive group’s actions have led to both domestic and international criticism, pointing to a growing divide between sectarian interests and India’s pluralistic constitutional mandate. But RSS, as well as several sections of BJP, are uncomfortable with the rise of hyper Hindus. The latter are a double-edged weapon, which may cut the very hand that wields it.

Why? Because the hyper Hindus are not controlled by RSS and not entirely aligned to BJP’s agenda either. The ongoing debates over their presence and influence underline the tricky path that Modi and BJP must navigate. Modi must manage the fervent sabre-rattling of the hyper Hindus while addressing broader societal needs and trying to maintain harmony in India’s multi-religious social ethos, which RSS wants.

Moving forward, Modi’s challenge will be to leverage the energy of the hyper Hindus without further alienating other demographic segments. The government’s approach appears to focus on selective issue advancement to appease nationalist sentiments, while not losing sight of broader developmental and economic reforms. Because hyper Hindus will show continuing dissatisfaction with the pace of change, whether on the Uniform Civil Code, the abrogation of the Places of Worship Act, the Waqf Board Act, reclamation of more temples, and many other items on their charter of demands.

With the enormous self-assurance and their vaunted expertise, some might call it arrogance and claims to superior intelligence, some hyper Hindus have gone to the extent of dismissing the very Constitution of India as colonial and eminently scrap-worthy. Modi, on the other hand, began his third term by bowing low to the very Constitution that the Opposition said he would amend if he got a 400-plus super majority.

Hyper Hindus have become a potent force in rightwing Indian politics. Their brinkmanship may have enhanced BJP’s Hindu-nationalist agenda and its appeal in a small sub-elite but has also complicated the ruling party’s ability to govern a diverse society. ■





# Misreading Bhagwat

Why it is futile to look for signs of a rift between BJP and RSS

**D**EFINE YOUR WORDS, Jesus appealed to Pontius Pilate, before we engage in an argument. Words carry different meanings for different people. They are understood differently in different contexts too. That's why the great Indian grammarian Panini advises: "*Ekah Shabdah Samyak Jnatah Samprayukah; Loke Swarge cha Kamadhuk Bhavati*"—meaning, "one word, understood correctly and used appropriately, can yield good results in this world and the other".

There is never any dearth of gossip mongers and kite flyers who pass off as political pundits in our country. We live in the world of political wordsmiths who are experts in dissecting and deciphering, if not distorting and misrepresenting, each word spoken by people who matter in public life. 'Political correctness' has become the watchword in this era of pundits. One cannot use words like 'consensus', 'civility', 'humility' or 'arrogance' in any context without running the risk of pundits interpreting it as criticism of some leader or the other.

Something of that sort is happening once again. The pundits are at it again, dissecting and distorting every word uttered by one functionary or the other. "The great man does not think beforehand of his words that they may be sincere, nor of his actions that they may be resolute; he simply speaks and does what is right", said Aristotle, who lived in a totally different world. But you only do that at your own peril today.

Mohan Bhagwat, the statesmanlike chief of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), had said certain very fundamental things in a recent speech in Nagpur. He, and all his predecessors, had said such things so many times in the past as well. Those were essentially lessons in 'virtue-building' for the RSS cadre in particular but extended to society in general. "We must always strive to serve the motherland. But should never arrogate it to oneself claiming that 'I have done it'," Bhagwat told participants in the annual training programme in Nagpur. Similarly, he made a statesmanlike observation that at crucial times like elections, everyone should guard against using language or rhetoric that could be divisive.

He also talked about how democracy should function in the Indian context, emphasising that it should mean consensus-building. This was essentially a philosophical position that Deendayal Upadhyaya, the ideological

anchor-leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its erstwhile avatar, the Jana Sangh, took in his thesis of Integral Humanism, differentiating between the Western concept of democracy as the rule of the majority versus the Indian concept of consensus-building. Elections help determine majority in a democracy, Deendayal averred, but once elected on the basis of a parliamentary majority, the government in India should always strive to build consensus as the basis for governance. Bhagwat was merely reiterating this ideological position and conviction.

Given the nature of the mandate this time, it is possible that commentators tend to read different meanings into these statements. RSS-BJP relations have always been an attractive subject for political kite flyers. Every statement coming from an RSS functionary, written or spoken, is fodder for their rumour mills. Xunzi, the Chinese philosopher of Confucianism, had once quipped that "almost always, the problem with people is that they become fixated on one angle and are deluded about the greater order of things". Something of that sort happens with pundits fixated on their own understanding of the RSS-BJP relationship. They jump to the conclusion that a huge rift is building up between the two.

Some statements, made innocently or incompletely, from both sides, could have led to some misunderstanding. It happened many times in the past. Recall the episode involving LK Advani's noting about Jinnah during a visit to his mausoleum in Pakistan in 2005. It kicked up a storm at that time. A recent statement attributed to the BJP president in an interview about the role of RSS in BJP's scheme of things, too, created a similar storm in a teacup. I vividly recall a visit by George Fernandes to the RSS office at Jhandewalan in Delhi during the controversy about Advani's Jinnah remarks. He candidly told the RSS leadership that politicians make statements in the morning keeping some political objectives in mind. They sometimes become controversial by noon. By evening, the leaders either clarify or disown those statements, or blame the media, trying to put the controversy to rest. Such prompt action helps in mitigating the confusion created occasionally due to statements by leaders. Not doing so may perpetuate that confusion and the statement may remain in history for future generations to derive the wrong conclusions.

That said, those who watch the Sangh Parivar closely,





**ELECTIONS HELP DETERMINE MAJORITY IN A DEMOCRACY, DEENDAYAL AVERRED, BUT ONCE ELECTED ON THE BASIS OF A PARLIAMENTARY MAJORITY, THE GOVERNMENT IN INDIA SHOULD ALWAYS STRIVE TO BUILD CONSENSUS AS THE BASIS FOR GOVERNANCE. BHAGWAT WAS MERELY REITERATING THIS IDEOLOGICAL POSITION AND CONVICTION**

“the greater order of things” as Xunzi called it, understand that it is futile to reach conclusions like a “great rift”, “falling apart”, etc. The Sangh Parivar is a family in its true sense, bonded strongly by an ideological umbilical cord. There is a divergence of roles, as in any family, and there could be occasional divergence of views too. But that doesn’t mean disharmony. Mencius describes five bonds of humanity that require different qualities to maintain harmony: “between sovereign and subject, there should be righteousness; between husband and wife, attention to their separate functions; between old and young, a proper order; between friends, fidelity”. Finally, “between father and son, there should be affection”.

It is this affection that manifests itself in the Sangh Parivar in its occasional cautioning and scolding, which always ensures that ‘harmony’ is never disrupted. There is a famous

story in the Confucian wisdom in ancient China about a prime minister in the Song dynasty, Chang Kung-ni, who lived with nine generations of his family under the same roof. Tang Kao-chung, the emperor, wondered how such a household could maintain harmony and asked his prime minister about the secret. Kung-ni called for a pen and a paper and wrote the word *Jen* hundred times. The word meant ‘patience’ or ‘endurance’. *Po-jen*—‘hundred patience’—became a common idiom in Chinese society since then.

*Po-jen* guided the Sangh Parivar for a century. No marks for predicting otherwise now. ■

*Ram Madhav is a member of the National Executive of RSS and a founding member of the governing council of India Foundation. He is the author of, among other titles, Partitioned Freedom and The Hindutva Paradigm*





By HARSH V PANT

# A GUARANTEE OF CONTINUITY

*Modi's re-election assures India's allies that Delhi will play a leading role in shaping the new world order*

**A**S THE LEADERS of G7 met in Italy last week, most of them were facing daunting domestic political challenges at home. US President Joe Biden is being challenged by Donald Trump and a tough political battle lies ahead. French President Emmanuel Macron had to call snap elections after voters in France dealt his party a humiliating blow in the European parliamentary elections. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz decided not to take any risk though he too performed poorly. Rishi Sunak and his Conservative Party are assured of a rout in next month's British general election if their current polling numbers are anything to go by. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has been trailing in polls by double digits for nearly a year now although he seems to be in no hurry to give up his post despite intraparty rumblings.

Contrast this with Prime Minister Narendra Modi who was attending his fifth consecutive G7 summit this year after winning a historic third term in office. He has given a strong sense of continuity by carrying forward most of his Cabinet members and in particular in the realm of foreign policy and national security. This means New Delhi will continue to search for its rightful place in the comity of nations as a "leading power". With Amit Shah as the home minister responsible for internal security, S Jaishankar at the helm of the Ministry of External Affairs, Ajit Doval as National Security Advisor (NSA), the team that has negotiated the nation's way through a highly tumultuous decade will now be shepherding India again. As much as India has reposed its faith in the leadership of Modi, the prime minister has underlined his faith in the ability of his team to deliver.

At a time when the world is grappling with a range of challenges and global leadership is struggling to respond, this continuity in the context of India is great news for the world as well. It has become a cliché to suggest that the global order is in flux. Global powers are competing much more sharply than at any time in the recent past and new powers are seeking their place under the sun. The consolidation of antagonistic power blocs is taking the world back to the heyday of the Cold War, although of a different kind.

The geopolitical shift from the unipolar moment of the early 1990s dominated by the US to a distinctly multipolar world order is paving the way for emerging powers to assert their influence on global affairs even as the older framework of treaty-based alliances is being renegotiated in favour of ad hoc issue-based coalitions of likeminded partners. This is happening at a time when the geo-economic certainties of the past are being challenged as economic globalisation gives way to inward orientation in precisely those nations which were at one time the biggest votaries of economic integration.

At the same time, the rise of digital economies, powered by advancements in technology, has transformed industries and labour markets globally, thereby increasing economic interdependence on the one hand but also raising concerns about issues like data privacy, cyber warfare, and economic inequality between and within nations. Demographic shifts, including ageing populations in some regions and youthful populations in others, are reshaping consumer markets and labour forces. Social movements advocating for human rights, environmental sustainability, and social justice are gaining momentum, influencing policies and corporate behaviour worldwide. The onslaught of the Covid-19 pandemic ended up accelerating these underlying trends, such as the digitalisation of economies and the re-evaluation of global supply chains, while also highlighting vulnerabilities in global governance and cooperation.





Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

**MODI HAS ENSURED THAT NEW DELHI'S APPROACH TO PARTNERSHIPS IS NOT A PRISONER OF THE PAST. WHERE CLOSE PARTNERSHIPS WERE SEEN AS PART OF THE PROBLEM, TODAY THEY ARE DEEMED AS ENSURING GREATER ROOM FOR MANAGING EVEN CONTENDING RELATIONSHIPS. DELHI PROUDLY PROCLAIMS THAT IT IS NON-WEST, NOT ANTI-WEST, EVEN AS IT IS AN ENTHUSIASTIC MEMBER OF BRICS AND THE SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANISATION**

Today the world is grappling with fundamental transformations brought about by shifting power balance, technological overreach, and institutional decay. The Covid pandemic and the Ukraine conflict widened these faultlines, resulting in global inflationary pressures, food and energy crises, and widespread economic fallout. States are frantically scraping their coffers to provide for their citizens' basic needs, and we are standing farther from achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

At a time when they are most needed, global institutions have proven to be incapable of responding to the needs of our times. Multilateralism is failing and flailing, resulting in growing scepticism about the effectiveness of existing multilateral frameworks and calls for reform. The growing credibility crisis for multilateral institutions is paving the way for various plurilaterals, some of which India itself is part of, such as the Quad and the I2U2 (India, Israel, UAE and the US). From India's perspective, this crisis of multilateralism is accentuated by the lack of broader representation of developing countries and emerging economies in global multilateral institutions. It has thus advocated for 'reformed multilateralism' to ensure that international organisations reflect the current power balances.

At a time of this widespread global turmoil, India stands out as a beacon of hope. It is the fastest growing major economy in the world today with a stable democratic political system that is attracting the world's attention. For long, India's seemingly chaotic domestic politics was seen as a drag on the India story. Today, it is the same institutional fabric that is producing qualitatively different outcomes. The stability engendered by Modi 3.0 will ensure that the spotlight continues to be on New Delhi with all the attendant consequences.

The consequences of China's belligerence, and its own internal vulnerabilities, have certainly created greater space for the democratic world to underscore its primacy; the Chinese model will never be able to match the ability of democracies, despite their weaknesses, to respond to the aspirations of the millions.

At the other end of the spectrum, there is a declining power that has managed to tilt the geopolitical balance in Eurasia. Russia's aggression against Ukraine has forced Europe to reckon with geopolitics once again. The course and the conduct of the war in Ukraine are likely to fundamentally alter European threat perception and have given NATO a new lease of life. Globally, the Russia-China axis has been cemented and global faultlines are



ASHISH SHARMA



S Jaishankar takes his oath of office at Rashtrapati Bhavan, June 9, 2024

**IF INDIA TODAY IS BEING SEEN BY THE WEST AS ITS BRIDGE TO THE GLOBAL SOUTH, MODI AND JAISHANKAR'S DEFT DIPLOMACY HAS MADE SURE THAT INDIA'S ENGAGEMENTS WITH MULTIPLE STAKEHOLDERS CONTINUE UNABATED**

more vivid than they have ever been.

Geopolitics is back in the driving seat as trust becomes an essential factor in shaping economic decisions. As Washington makes policy moves to deny China access to critical technologies and restructure supply chains away from overdependence on China, it recognises the need for new partnerships with likeminded states. But with Washington pushing for supply-chain restructuring in critical industries due to foreign policy and national security concerns, this is certainly ushering in a new phase in globalisation. Forces of untrammelled economic globalisation that were once viewed as the panacea for all global problems are now under retreat. Mutual dependencies are being weaponised, further undercutting the foundations of a globalised world. And if emerging technologies are going to determine the next phase of geopolitics, then the polarisation of supply chains is the new reality that policymakers and market forces will have to contend with.

China, as a consequence, finds itself in a bind and India's stiff resistance to its aggressive pursuit along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) has put paid to the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) narrative that its time has come. India's standing up to China has ignited a process of a broad pushback across the Indo-Pacific and beyond. And with a plethora of domestic challenges being faced by Beijing, there is once again a premium on internal consolidation. India, as a consequence, finds itself in a 'geopolitical sweet spot' that it should make the most of. In the past, New Delhi's inability to exploit the extant balance of power to its advantage cost it dearly. A prudent nation should be able to identify the opportunities in the existing structure of global politics and shape its external engagement

accordingly in the pursuit of its interests. Pursuing unrealistic ideational constructs can often do more damage to a nation's standing. For India today, the most serious challenge is the rise of China and how it has managed to constrain India's options. New Delhi's first priority in the coming years will be to internally consolidate its capabilities so that it can stand up to Beijing's nefarious designs on a more sustained basis. This will have to be supplemented with building serious partnerships that are capable of adding value to India's growth story.

Modi has ensured that New Delhi's approach to partnerships is not a prisoner of the past. Where in the past close partnerships were seen as part of the problem, constraining India's ability to manoeuvre, today they are deemed as ensuring greater room for managing at times even contending relationships. Delhi today proudly proclaims that it is non-West, not anti-West, even as it is an enthusiastic member of BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). It is courted by the Russians and the Ukrainians as well as by the Israelis and the Palestinians. If India today is being seen by the West as its bridge to the Global South, Modi and Jaishankar's deft diplomacy has made sure that India's engagements with multiple stakeholders continue unabated. Despite the China factor, India has managed to enhance its profile in a range of global platforms, be they multilateral or plurilateral. The most high-profile plurilateral—the Quad—gained its salience precisely because of India's serious engagement with it over the last few years. The Modi government has succeeded in altering the very nature of India's partnerships by making them key to enhancing the country's strategic autonomy. Instead of close alignments being viewed as a constraint, there has been an emphasis on building robust partnerships with likeminded partners, increasing India's strategic space to manoeuvre. For India's partners, the continuation of the Modi government would mean a continuation of New Delhi's priorities when it comes to working closely with its partners in forging global governance outcomes and pursuing Indian interests.

Modi's diplomacy on the global stage has managed to give wings to India's aspirations of playing a larger international role. Consequently, Indian foreign policy has made the most of this inflexion point in world affairs. In the last decade, India's image of being a perpetual naysayer in global politics has changed to a nation that is more than willing to contribute to global governance.

Modi has fundamentally altered the way India engages with the world, and that trajectory will continue to unfold over the next five years under his leadership. More than any other major power today, Indians view their future in aspirational terms, and that is shaping their domestic as well as foreign engagements. Modi has been successful not only in tapping into that sentiment effectively but also, in a sense, shaping that aspiration into his own image. This is a critical moment in the global order and India's centrality to the emerging order is now well-established. With the Modi government continuing in office, it offers India's partners and adversaries a new opportunity to assess their ties with New Delhi. ■

*Harsh V Pant is Vice President for Studies and Foreign Policy at the Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi*



COVER STORY

# UNDER

SEVERELY HIGH TEMPERATURES ACROSS NORTH  
HUMAN COST AND REINFORCE THE NEED TO RE

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People shield themselves  
from the sun on the banks  
of the Yamuna in New Delhi,  
May 31, 2024



# HEAT

ERN AND EASTERN INDIA EXTRACT A GREAT  
SET URBAN PLANNING

By RAJEEV DESHPANDE

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CIENTISTS AT THE Ministry of Earth Sciences (MoES) and the India Meteorological Department (IMD) face an increasingly vexed problem at the approach

of the monsoon. In recent years IMD's overall forecast for rainfall over the four-month season has proved fairly accurate, but variations in this timeframe have foxed weather radars and scientists. June is always the hottest month for much of India, but the steep drop in rainfall, with the monsoon curve stubbornly hovering over northern and central Maharashtra since June 10, has left northern and eastern India in the clasp of severe heat waves that extract a daily toll of lives and livelihoods. The rain shortfall from Jammu & Kashmir to Telangana and from Gujarat to West Bengal ranges from 10-25 per cent to as high as 50 per cent. No weather model saw such a sharp deficit which IMD describes as an anomaly coming.

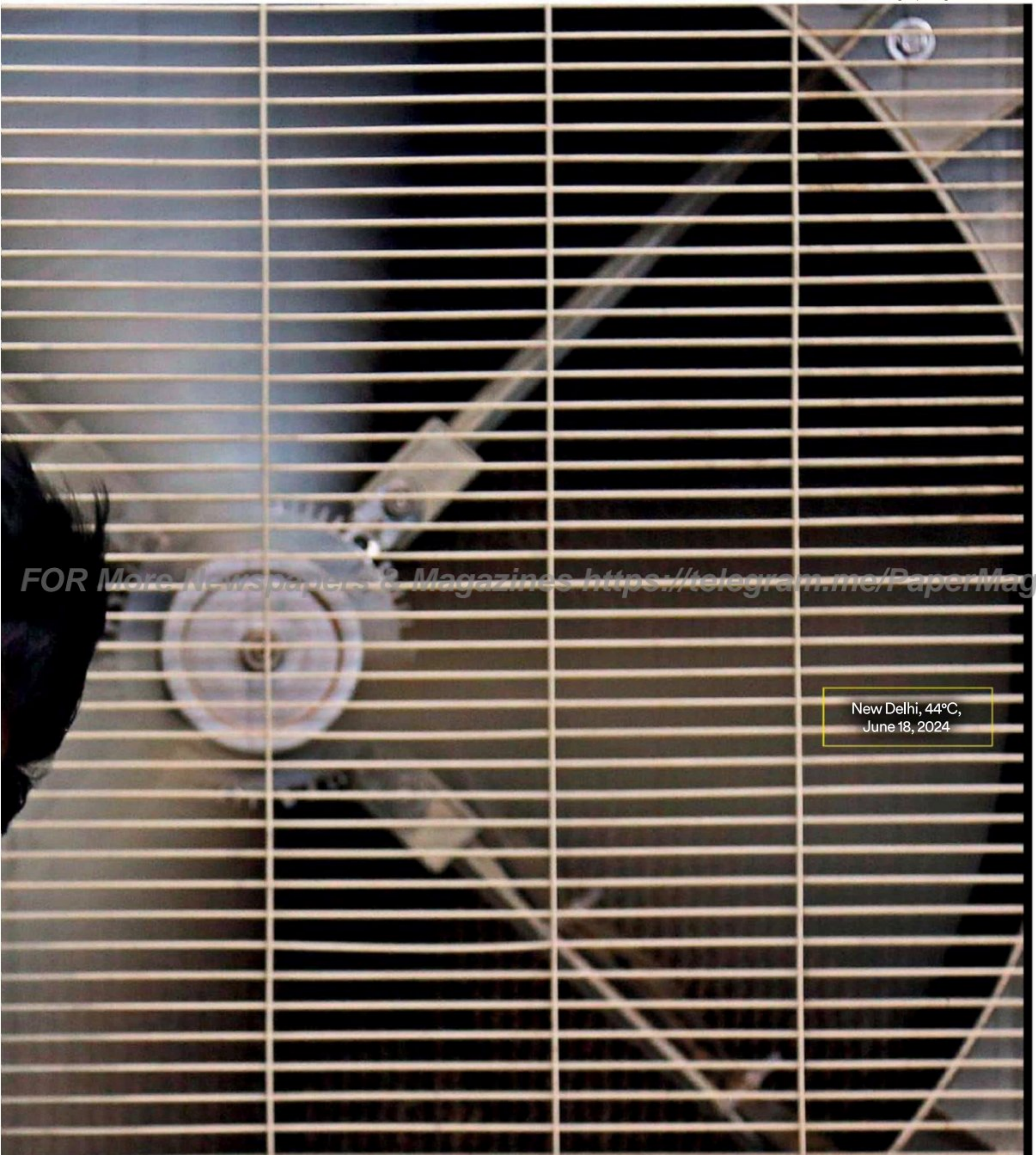
The problem lies in changes in cloud formation with the more typical large water-bearing formations often giving way to smaller clusters that are harder for observation and computing facilities to detect and analyse. The usual scans of a 25 sq km radius do not provide the resolution that can pick up the disaggregated patterns causing highly localised rain, often within the same city or district. "It is possible to recall that earlier monsoon was marked by a high frequency of light and moderate rains in many places. A city like Mumbai had many rain days with some days of very heavy rains. This is changing with more frequent heavy rainfall and more low precipitation or no precipitation days," Earth



**THE IMMEDIATE REASONS FOR THE FROM INCREASING URBANISATION TO A GLOBAL TREND WITH EUROPE**



Photograph by RAUL IRANI



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New Delhi, 44°C,  
June 18, 2024

**SPIKE IN TEMPERATURES THAT ARE EXCEEDING THE NORMAL RANGE TO HIGHER TEMPERATURES IN THE BAY OF BENGAL AND THE ARABIAN SEA, AND THE US ALSO WITNESSING ABNORMAL HEAT CONDITIONS**



## COVER STORY

A municipal water tanker at Sanjay Camp during Delhi's water crisis, June 17, 2024



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**WHILE AROUND 35 PER CENT OF INDIA IS RECOGNISED AS URBANISED, THE DEVELOPMENT OF SEMI-URBAN AREAS AND RURAL REGIONS SEEING HIGH LEVELS OF CONCRETISATION HAVE LED TO THE HEAT ISLAND PHEN**

Sciences Secretary M Ravichandran tells *Open*.

While torrential rains over just a few days overwhelm drainage and civic services, they inflict serious damage in densely populated urban areas and result in widespread erosion in rural and ecologically fragile areas. It is easy to see that if a shortfall of weeks is made up in a matter of days, the result is prolonged droughts or hot days when the monsoon goes into a shell. The immediate reasons for the spike in temperatures that are exceeding the normal by 3-4 per cent range from increasing urbanisation that does not plan adequately for green spaces to higher temperatures in the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea to a global trend with Europe and the US also witnessing abnormal heat conditions. Are heat waves a manifestation of climate change? "Long-term trends across the globe point to higher temperatures and more extreme events. There is a higher incidence of floods and heat waves and even cold phenomenon such as polar blasts in the US and Canada," says Sanjay Gupta, a Goa-based international development expert. The maximum temperatures in many parts of Punjab-Delhi-Haryana-Uttar Pradesh (UP) were in the range of 44-46 degrees with Orai in western UP hitting a high of 46.4 degrees. Temperatures were more than five degrees above normal in several places in UP, many in Haryana and Bihar and, to a lesser extent, in Bihar, Chhattisgarh and Himachal Pradesh, according to IMD's June 19 bulletin. It is

evident hotspots are dotting much of India and are not confined to regions like eastern Rajasthan that usually scores a seasonal high.

Almost half way down to the Antarctic, in the middle of the vast Indian Ocean in an area called the Mascarene High, are RAMA (Research Moored Array) buoys tethered at depths of 3km in the deep waters that reflect iridescent hues during bright summer days. The buoys were first deployed on a pilot scale by India and Japan and now include partnerships with Indonesia, China, the US and the Bay of Bengal Large Marine Ecosystem (BOBLME). In addition to the mid-ocean apparatus, a string of buoys has been placed in a north-south alignment in the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea as well. The RAMA moorings collect vital information on temperature, salinity and currents in the Indian Ocean that has a direct bearing on the monsoon. Intense weather conditions like MISO (Monsoon Inter-Seasonal Oscillation)—which causes wet or dry spells—and the MJO (Madden Julian Oscillation), which results in anomalous rainfall, interact with temperature and salinity of the ocean. The buoys gather vital information needed to improve modelling and measuring of marine heat waves that impact monsoonal activity. The maps of thermal structures and currents for maritime use are not possible without the buoys, states a World Climate Research Programme (WCRP) report. The incidence of marine heat waves is on the rise. "This has increased





An inflated ice bed being prepared at RM Lohia Hospital in New Delhi, May 30, 2024

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## THE REAL EXTENT IS LARGER WITH THE RISE OF URBAN FEATURES. PHENOMENON IN INDIAN CITIES

from around 20-30 days and is predicted to reach as many as 200-220 days a year (by 2100) according to a study on future projections," says Ravichandran. The warming of the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal is evident with temperatures rising from 0.17 degrees Celsius over a decade to 0.3 degrees Celsius. The heating of the ocean waters retards mixing of upper and cooler lower layers of water and disrupts the progress of the monsoons. The lack of mixing can have an adverse impact on marine life too with implications for the fishing industry. "The long-term trends in ocean warming show that the waters of the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal are heating faster than other large oceanic bodies," says Gupta.

Former Earth Sciences secretary and current director of the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru, Shailesh Nayak, says while heat wave conditions may not be uniform each year, the upward trend in temperatures and incidence of heat wave conditions cannot be ignored. "The intensity of heat conditions is increasing as we have a situation where the difference between night and day temperatures has declined, resulting in greater risk to human health," he says. There is no proximate weather event that fully explains the heat waves with the withdrawal of the El Niño phenomenon, which retards rainfall, on course and the Indian Ocean Dipole and ENSO (El Niño Southern Oscillation) being neutral. The limits of the currently

“

We need to see the costs of improving our abilities in terms of the costs that extreme weather and gaps in our understanding can impose on national life. We need to plan adaptation strategies on a bigger scale. There is a great cost if we ignore the impact of climate change”

**SHAILESH NAYAK** director,  
National Institute of Advanced Studies





available instrumentation do not allow for a finer or more forward-looking analysis and MoES is preparing proposals to bring about a quantum jump in observation and the high performing computers at the Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology in Pune and in Noida. At present the computers in Pune have a 7.1 petaflop capacity while the one in Noida has a 2.8 petaflop configuration. The ministry seeks to increase these capacities to 66 petaflops in Pune and 94 petaflops in Noida by 2026-27 and a bigger jump to 400 petaflops and 600 petaflops for the two centres respectively by 2032. The move to step up computing power is intended to ensure India's weather forecasting and modelling remain well ahead of the curve as the challenge of climate change and associated phenomenon increases in a manner that is not entirely predictable. At present IMD sends up weather balloons to track changes in the atmosphere but due to the more scattered nature of formations like clouds there is a need to cover more quadrants. The calamitous Mumbai rains of 2005 when 944mm of precipitation was recorded on July 26, led to a ₹900 crore modernisation programme for IMD with the induction of Doppler radars that can pick up a storm formation at short notice and a big increase in the use of automatic weather

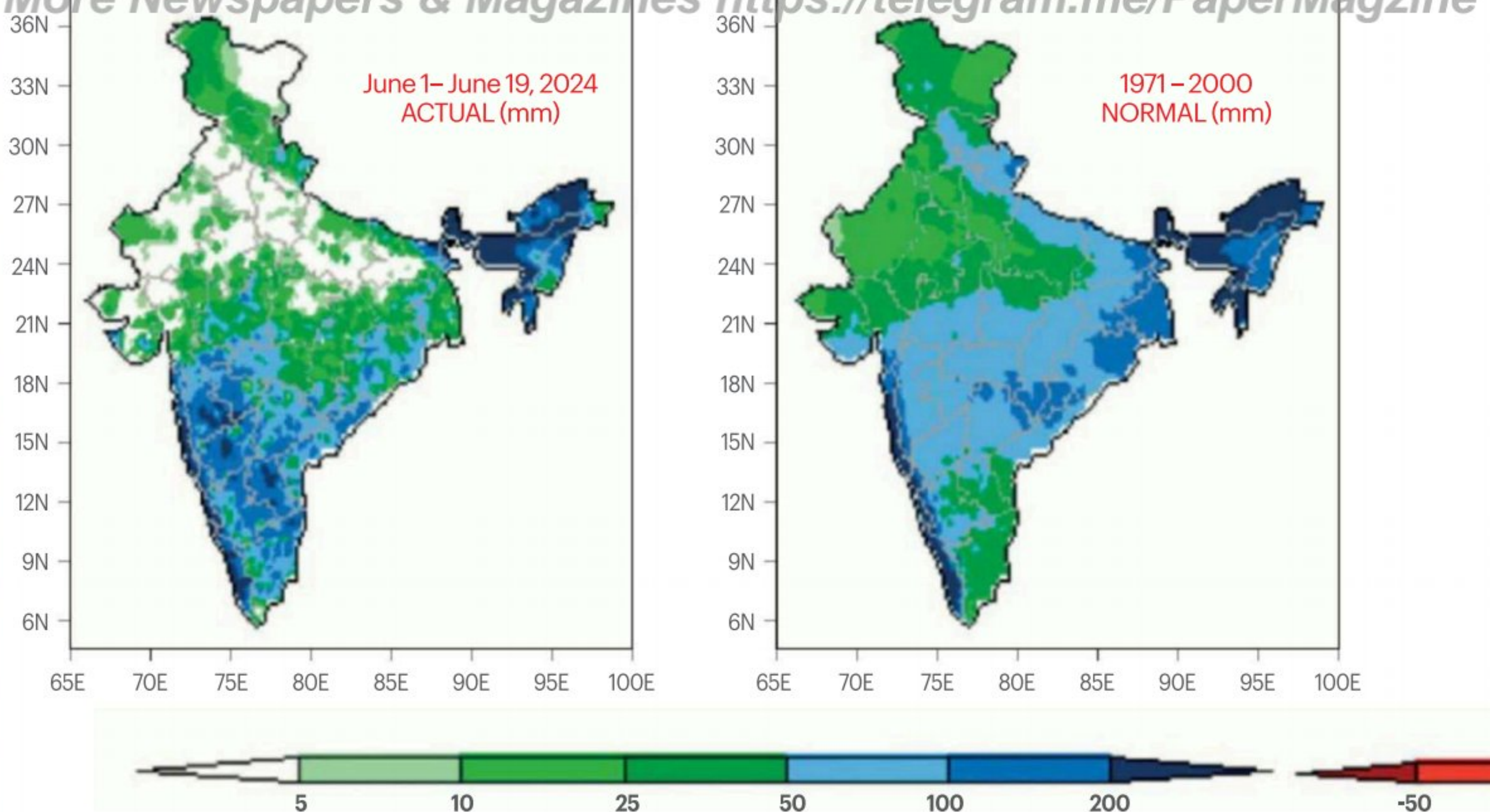
stations along with more dedicated satellite facilities. MoES is seeking satellites fully dedicated to weather and climate studies to enhance India's ability to forecast and improve modelling. "Our annual rainfall prediction of 87cm (based on 1971-2000 averages) might hold true. But what about the 20-odd days when we may witness very high rainfall or a prolonged hot spell?" asks Ravichandran.

Higher temperatures lead to increased water holding in the atmosphere. At around 30 degrees Celsius one cubic metre can hold 1 litre of water. This increases as the temperature rises and is related to overall warming, resulting in enhanced possibility of heavy rainfall. The macro physics of climate change is evolving even as nations pour in resources and funds to study its impact. "Our data and modelling leads to a certain projection of how weather conditions will develop," says Ravichandran. The lack of more information prevents accurate initial condition determination—the variance between the projection and the actual event. The uncertainties introduced by warming and climate change in general require more observation prowess.

The technology and manufacturing is available in India and the need for imports is limited, according to officials. The cost is in any

## WHERE IS THE RAIN? Seasonal rainfall and its anomaly (to date)

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**AT AROUND 30 DEGREES CELSIUS ONE CUBIC METRE CAN HOLD 1 LITRE OF WATER. TEMPERATURE RISES, RESULTING IN ENHANCED POSSIBILITY OF HEAVY RAINFALL. THE MACRO PHYSICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE IS EVOLVING EVEN AS NATIONS POUR IN RESOURCES**



case relative to the wages of neglect, says Nayak. “We need to see the costs of improving our abilities in terms of the costs that extreme weather and gaps in our understanding can impose on national life. We need to plan adaptation strategies on a bigger scale. There is a greed cost if we ignore the impact of climate change,” he says. The heat waves buffeting much of India bring home the message that the effects of warming need not be gradual. Slow changes over time can result in evolution that allows humans and other forms of life to adapt to the change. But the shock of high heat conditions throughout the 24-hour cycle is a severe test for flora and fauna. The spiking power demands that are a result of air-conditioners remaining switched on through day and night are an alarming development. “Air conditioners are being run non-stop and the irony is that while we cool some 1,000 square feet of apartment homes, hot air is being thrown out of every house further adding heat to the atmosphere,” says Gupta.

Is climate change the sole reason for the heat conditions Indian cities are labouring under? “Climate change is one cause. India’s urban development is in a very messy state. Even in cities it can be observed that conditions on the urban periphery are worse.

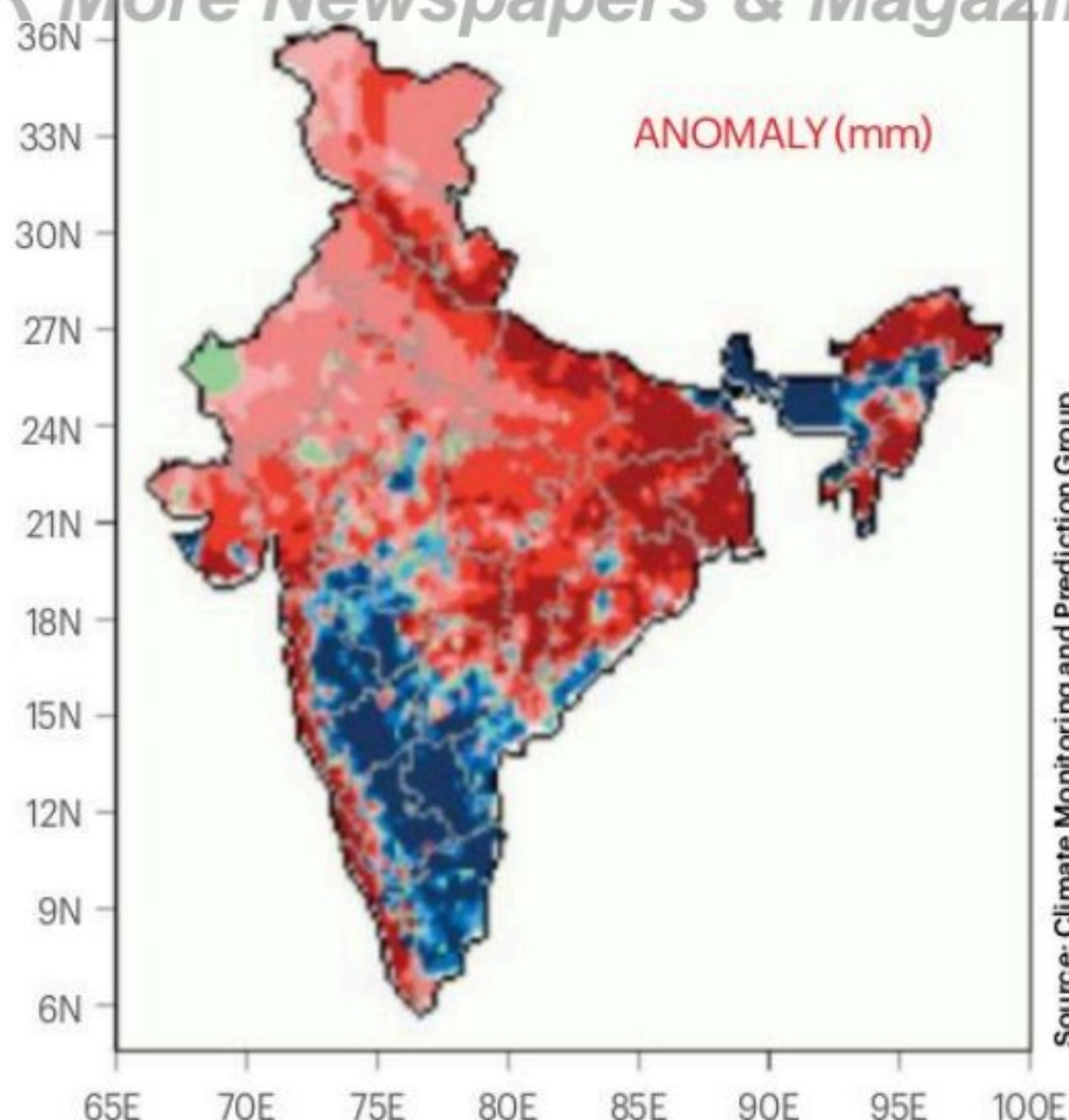
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**Our annual rainfall prediction of 87cm (based on 1971-2000 averages) might hold true. But what about the 20-odd days when we may witness very high rainfall or a prolonged hot spell?”**

**M RAVICHANDRAN** secretary,  
Ministry of Earth Sciences



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Source: Climate Monitoring and Prediction Group

Based on real time data

This is often because there is even less vegetation on the outskirts, Delhi being an example,” says Gupta. While around 35 per cent of India is recognised as urbanised, the real extent is larger with the development of semi-urban areas and rural regions seeing the rise of urban features. The high levels of concretisation have led to the heat island phenomenon in Indian cities where a car park, for example, becomes a red zone. Funds for managing cities are limited and corporations are hamstrung by sloth, corruption and capacity constraints in equal measure. It is often the case that elected councillors, who are supposed to be the legislative wing, have limited powers and executive decisions, including policy, are taken by the commissioner and other officials. The devolution of funds is not sufficient and the power to tax and raise revenues is limited. In the case of Delhi, currently in the news over water shortages, a never-ending political tussle between the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) government and the lieutenant governor has meant there is virtually no plan for the summer or even the monsoon. The AAP government has gone to court over water supplies, demanding Haryana release more water but has little accountability for theft and leakages. The AAP policy of providing ‘free’ water and electricity has driven utilities like the Delhi Jal Board (DJB) into debt without adequate capital expenditure to improve infrastructure. In neighbouring Gurugram, the civic model that has placed the development and maintenance tasks on builders has been a non-starter over the years. Builders and developers have limited interest in resolving issues beyond a few years and efforts to replace them with the municipal corporation are mired in demands that

**OF WATER. THIS INCREASES AS THE RAINFALL. THE MACRO PHYSICS AND FUNDS TO STUDY ITS IMPACT**



the private firms fulfil pending obligations—a fruitless pursuit.

Some cities like Ahmedabad have trod a different path, preparing a detailed heat action plan, a 26-page document with a checklist on preparations and implementation. The plan includes alerts and communication of heat warnings to officials and media and inspection of medical facilities along with creating capacities by way of hospitals and ambulances. There is a focus on protection of vulnerable sections who work outdoors or others like the elderly. The Ahmedabad model is easily replicable but it is a matter of surprise how few cities have followed suit. There are checklists

new construction with green standards are a must. The concerned corporations must not give permissions to builders unless norms for recycling of water, use of certain building material or design or use of solar are not adhered to,” says Nayak. On India’s energy mix, he advocates a greater role for nuclear power which the institute he heads has been studying as a non-carbon emitting power source. He points out the decisions of countries like Germany to do away with nuclear power in the wake of the Fukushima accident of 2011, which left it at the mercy of Russian oil and gas imports. “There is hypocrisy in such decisions.

Germany gets power from France where most of the capacity is nuclear,” he says.

Gupta argues that planning for summers or monsoons must be a continuous process, not a knee-jerk reaction to an emergent situation where those in authority just hope for the situation to pass. “Everyone is just waiting, hoping the monsoon will revive and become widespread in two-three weeks,” he says. Pointing to the need to provide primacy to urban planning, he says cities are centres of growth and innovation and their inhabitants are more productive. “We have to examine how to enhance productivity. If a person has to travel 30-40km by way of a daily commute in high heat, how effective would that be?” he asks. Bringing about a concentration of talent and resources, cities are indeed hubs of innovation and progress but India’s urban development is being smothered by lack of planning and visible encroachments of public land as migrants live in sub-human conditions. India’s economic planning requires a larger question to be answered. Is development and growth accounting for the depletion of natural capital which can only worsen the effects of warming? “Are we living off natural capital or ensuring it is not depleted? The conservation of mangroves and forests,

the density of forest cover is decreasing, and this is what we need to study,” Gupta says. Conservation and development need to go hand-in-hand as India cannot afford low growth with money in pocket being the best form of adaptation. Adaptation strategies might be showcased by major government programmes, such as housing and water supplies by way of design and materials, providing a lead for other sectors. India has developed significant capacities in information technology and has a growing digital infrastructure. Innovative use of these strengths as well as optimum utilisation of resources in the government, non-government and private sectors require a preparedness to think out of silos but can reduce the cost of climate change. ■

## THE RAMA BUOYS GATHER INFORMATION NEEDED TO IMPROVE MODELLING AND MEASURING OF MARINE HEAT WAVES THAT IMPACT MONSOONAL ACTIVITY. THE MAPS OF THERMAL STRUCTURES AND CURRENTS FOR MARITIME USE ARE NOT POSSIBLE WITHOUT THE BUOYS, SAYS A REPORT



A RAMA buoy being retrieved from the sea by an Indonesian research vessel

Courtesy: PATRICK BERK, NOAA/PMEL

for public health managers, health centres, media, labour department and emergency services. Experts like Gupta feel that India’s choices must keep adaptation in mind even when doing what it can to mitigate climate change. The Western stress on mitigation can mean pressure to switch to low-carbon economies and while India is committed to reducing fossil fuels, the shock of sudden shifts will be felt by the weakest sections of the population. It is clear that a 7-8 per cent growth rate is key to ensuring people move out of poverty and this means adaptation policies require more attention. “The Central and state governments have a role by way of legislation and guidelines but the job has to be done by urban local bodies. Norms for





AP

# MAKING INDIA CLIMATE SMART

The economy can sustain high growth even as new technology is adopted against extreme weather conditions

By **SIDDHARTH SINGH**

**O**N TUESDAY, JUNE 18, Delhi clocked a dubious landmark. At 3:22 PM, the national capital's peak power demand touched 8,647 Megawatts (MW), a figure higher than those of many Indian states. A day before, on Monday, June 17, the northern region of the country clocked a peak demand of 89 Gigawatts (GW). One GW equals 1,000 MW. These exceptionally high power loads are giving headaches to the managers of the national power grid. The regional load dispatchers—the managers on the spot, so to speak—always have a tough

time during summers when power demand shoots up. But this summer is particularly daunting: with such heavy demand, a single 'tripping' can lead to a system-wide failure.

It would be a mistake to consider this an unusual summer and the rising demand for electricity a result of this one-off event. The reality is that India has seen a steady rise in the number of heat waves experienced in its different parts in recent years. Data released by the Central Statistical Office this year shows that in the five years from 2019 to 2023 the number of heat-wave days has fluctuated considerably but has remained high. In 2019, 174 days of heat



wave were reported across different states and Union territories (UTs). This number fell to 42 in 2020 and even further to 29 in 2021. There was a sudden jump the next year when the figure rose to 190. In 2023, 111 days of heat wave were reported across states and UTs. There is no point searching for a statistical regularity here and there certainly is no 'mean reversion' to some defined average. The reality is that India has already entered a heat zone. The Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) reports that this year, April 1 to May 31, nearly 70 per cent of India's 741 districts reported at least one day when the temperature was above 40 degrees. There is, of course, considerable variation: Maharashtra was badly affected with 27 of its 36 districts reporting at least one day when the maximum temperature was above 40 degrees. There are other states where temperatures have not crossed dangerous thresholds.

These figures should be seen alongside another set of measures, ones that reflect the risks to India and its economy from rising temperatures. One measure that serves as a proxy for damage from climate change is the Social Cost of Carbon (SCC). SCC is an estimate of the value of damage from one additional tonne of carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) equivalent emitted at a certain point in time. A 2018 study published in the journal *Nature Climate Change* estimated values for SCC across different countries. It showed that India had the highest SCC for any country at that time: \$86 per tonne of CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent.

The contrast between India, one of the lowest carbon emitters on a per capita basis—1.8 tonnes in 2018—with industrial countries could not be more glaring. The US, with the world's largest per capita emissions, had an SCC of \$50 while India had a much higher figure. India's problems don't end here—over time, SCC goes up as later emissions lead to more damage as they only add to the existing stock of greenhouse gases (GHGs) present in the atmosphere. While the exact values of SCCs ought to be taken with a pinch of salt as they are subject to considerable uncertainties from various assumptions built into the estimates, the trend and the direction are clear—India stands to lose much more compared to other countries from climate change.

India is not only aware of the dangers ahead but has also put in place comprehensive plans to meet the challenge from climate change. At the Glasgow climate summit in 2021, Prime Minister Narendra Modi outlined a five-point plan to tackle climate change. The Indian plan is quite extensive. Among its key points are meeting 50 per cent of the country's energy requirements from renewable sources by 2030, increasing non-fossil fuel-based energy capacity to 500 GW by 2030, and reducing the carbon intensity of the Indian economy to less than 45 per cent by 2030. The action on these plans has been visible and aggressive: in the last five years, from FY20 to FY24, India's capacity addition from renewable energy sources has always outpaced the addition of capacity in thermal energy. In FY24, renewables accounted for 18,485 MW of capacity addition compared to 6,168 for thermal energy, a ratio of nearly 3:1. Other targets, too, are likely to be achieved by 2030.

India's problem, however, is not that it won't achieve long-term targets to mitigate climate change. These goals are 'global'



A blade of a power-generating windmill turbine being assembled at a green energy plant in Mundra, Gujarat

REUTERS

## WHERE INDIA FACES CHALLENGES IS IS NARROW. AND THIS WINDOW WILL COMPARED TO THE FAR MORE SEVERE

in nature—they help everyone and not just India. India's problem is that in the interregnum between stabilisation of the climate system—a goal that lies much ahead in the future, if it can be attained at all—and the present time, it faces a daunting challenge in mitigating the effects of climate change. The heat-wave statistics point to this very clearly. In peninsular India, a number of districts, many in Maharashtra, are now in the grip of a pincer of heat waves and water shortages. In the north, as the number of days with heat waves goes up, so does the use of power for cooling purposes, something that adds heat to the climate system to the point that there are multiple 'heat islands' that emerge during the summer across the northern plains. Heat stroke and death due to complications arising from it are common now. For states like Punjab, with their addiction to growing water-guzzling crops like rice, the future is bleak. Punjab's overexploitation of water and its more than 100 "dark blocks" with acute water stress is a well-known story of poor environmental choices and non-existent planning. These mitigation risk stories can be found in virtually every Indian state and UT.

**H**OW DOES ONE 'climate-proof' an economy as diverse as India's? Two immediate areas of concern are obvious: one, energy generation and consumption; and two, the nature and spread of urbanisation. Both require immediate attention. On the energy front, the necessary changes are already afoot. The move away from thermal power is well-known even if the problems associated with renewables, especially the 'intermittency problem', don't have an immediate solution. Renewable energy generation, for example in the case of solar power, takes place at a time when the sun is at its peak while the demand for power may arise later. In the absence of power storage solutions, such as high-capacity power storage systems,





The Kudankulam nuclear power plant in Tamil Nadu

GETTY IMAGES

## IN ADAPTING TO THESE CHANGES FASTER BECAUSE THE WINDOW SHRINK AS TIME PASSES. BUT INDIA'S APPROACH IS POSITIVE WHEN OPTIONS LIKE DE-GROWTH THAT ARE IN VOGUE IN THE WEST

the power generated has to be injected into the grid as soon as it is generated.

Other solutions, at the micro-level, such as roof-top solar power generation, appear to be impractical given the existing power generation and consumption pattern in India. This need not be the case when it comes to climate-friendly solutions—peninsular India has a large untapped potential for such power generation that is localised and is certainly climate-friendly. It can augment power for households where it is needed most.

The other area that requires careful attention quickly is the nature and spread of urbanisation. Construction, in economic terms constitutes around 9 per cent of the Indian economy in Gross Value Added (GVA) terms (2023-24). In the past two years (2022-23 and 2023-24), it has grown at 9.4 per cent and 9.9 per cent, respectively. This is significantly higher than the overall GVA at 6.7 per cent (2022-23) and 7.2 per cent (2023-24) for those years. A significant part of this activity takes place in large urban conglomerations like National Capital Region (NCR), the Mumbai Metropolitan Region, and other large cities. This is not conducive for climate change mitigation. These large additions to built-up areas lead to high energy consumption and, in turn, the creation of heat islands.

There is no reason why this construction activity cannot be reoriented and localised to create new urban centres. While this sounds quixotic as economic priorities and experience show that large urban agglomeration leads to higher economic activities, in this age this needs reorientation if India has to get a grip on climate change mitigation. It is no case going to be easy. India is no longer the command-and-control economy of the 1970s when the Centre could reorder economic priorities. The private sector today contributes more to the economic pie. This makes the task of coordinating any such action on climate-friendly economic change difficult. Unless, of course, India has the political will to do what is necessary.

Some things are a given even as India adapts to a much

hotter world. For one, the country cannot sacrifice high economic growth at the altar of mitigating climate change. This zero-sum thinking is prevalent in many Western countries where 'de-growth' is championed as a solution not just for climate change but also for mitigating the vast inequalities prevalent in those countries. India cannot afford such thinking. Since 2000, India has made rapid strides in reducing the number of people who live in poverty. This change has been particularly marked from 2013-14 to 2022-23 when India witnessed a reduction in multidimensional poverty from 29.17 per cent of its population living under poverty to 11.28 per cent in 2022-23, a reduction of 17.89 percentage points. This large reduction in the number of poor people took place when India experienced robust economic growth. At this stage, when India confronts the most stubborn levels of poverty—especially 'poverty traps'—it cannot afford to slow down its rate of growth. Doing that will lead to lower availability of resources for poverty reduction but will also entail the danger of throwing people who have just exited poverty back into misery. This is politically unacceptable in India.

But India has shown that another path is possible, one where higher growth can continue even as climate change mitigation by aggressive adoption of climate-change technologies is a reality. Where India faces challenges is in adapting to these changes faster because the window for adopting them effectively, by limiting the damage from climate change, is narrow. And this window will progressively shrink as time passes. In this context, India's approach is positive when compared to the far more severe options such as de-growth that are in vogue in the West.

In doing all this, India has relied largely on its own resources as the promise of climate finance and sharing of climate change mitigation technology has proved illusory. The issue for India is not resources—it has found them by re-jigging its priorities—but one of coordinating a diverse economy in a continental-scale country. So far, it is working. ■



Priyanka Gandhi at her residence in Rae Bareilly, May 18, 2024

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# SISTER ACT

**Priyanka Gandhi makes her electoral debut from Rahul's vacated seat of Wayanad. Why is the party excited?**

By ULLEKH NP and AMITA SHAH

**O**N SEPTEMBER 4, 1999, Priyanka Gandhi gave what is considered her first TV interview. In it, she resembled her late grandmother Indira Gandhi in her demeanour and communication and the late Diana, Princess of Wales, in her height, haircut and coy gaze.

She told NDTV's Nupur Basu that she would "have to wait for a long, long time" to see her entry into politics.

It did take Priyanka Gandhi another 20 years to make a formal entry into Congress' organisational politics, taking over as the party's general secretary in-charge of eastern Uttar Pradesh (UP) ahead of the Lok Sabha election of 2019. Now, it has taken five more years for her to make an electoral debut, choosing to contest from the Wayanad Lok Sabha seat in Kerala, vacated by her brother Rahul who had won from there as well as Rae Bareilly in Uttar Pradesh by huge margins.

While political opponents have called it an extension of dynastic rule to yet another family-turf-in-the-making, this time in the south, Congress is thrilled at the goodwill and charisma that Priyanka Gandhi will bring to parliamentary politics when the party has just improved its tally in Lok Sabha compared to the last two occasions. Congress is still languishing at its third-lowest tally, and yet there are anticipations within the party of a comeback.

V Muralidharan, a senior leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) from Kerala, who was a minister in the last Modi government, tells *Open*, "Like Rae Bareilly and Amethi (in Uttar Pradesh), Wayanad (in Kerala) is also being converted into a family pocket borough. Why did Congress not field a leader from Kerala there? Congress has become the property of the

Nehru-Gandhi family, with no democratic values. Rahul Gandhi did not disclose he would fight from Rae Bareilly till after the Wayanad election. This is a betrayal of the voters of Wayanad, and taking Kerala for granted."

But Priyanka Gandhi's choice to step forward assertively into the limelight has left a mark, feel some analysts. For his part, Rasheed Kidwai, journalist and author who has watched Congress closely for long, avers that the "*bhai-behen ki jodi* (brother-sister duo)" is going to provide a lot of heft to the Congress campaign in the poll-bound states of Haryana, Maharashtra, Jammu & Kashmir, and Jharkhand where Assembly elections are due this year. "In Priyanka Gandhi, Congress has a powerful campaigner, an Ahmed Patel like-crisis manager, and a listening post. The Opposition, having a credible presence in Lok Sabha, would have a double-barrel line of attack in the form of Rahul and Priyanka against the government," Kidwai asserts.

Priyanka Gandhi herself looked pleased.

"I am happy to be able to represent Wayanad, and I will not let them feel his (Rahul Gandhi's) absence. I will work hard and try my best to make everyone happy and be a good representative," she said about her forthcoming contest from Wayanad.

Some people feel Priyanka Gandhi has taken the plunge this year because it is "now or never" for Congress, which is seen as making a resurgence of sorts compared with the depths it had plunged to in the past two General Elections, winning 44 and 52 seats respectively to Lok Sabha in 2014 and 2019. This time round it won 99 seats on counting day.

Sudhir Panwar of Lucknow University, a leader of the Samajwadi Party (SP) which fought the recent elections in a tie-up with Congress and won handsomely in UP, says it was a

**PEOPLE FEEL PRIYANKA GANDHI HAS TAKEN THE PLUNGE THIS YEAR BECAUSE IT IS 'NOW OR NEVER' FOR CONGRESS, WHICH IS SEEING A RESURGENCE OF SORTS COMPARED WITH THE DEPTHS IT HAD PLUNGED TO IN 2014 AND 2019**



foregone conclusion that Priyanka Gandhi was going to make an electoral foray sooner or later. "It has taken her a long time to contest elections. I think she is being pitched from Wayanad because Congress feels the constituency stood by Rahul in a time of need and now it cannot be abandoned. Which is why Priyanka, his sister, is contesting from there. There is also a question of opportunity that works here," he says, emphasising that since 2012 Congress' poll fortunes have been on a slide and now is the time for her to make an entry. Panwar adds, "I don't think, however, that her entry is going to vastly change poll dynamics at the national level."

A SECTION OF PUNDITS, meanwhile, contends that her entry into national politics will strengthen Congress at a time when there is competition for women's votes. BJP has fiercely wooed women voters through its schemes that include the distribution of cooking gas connections and measures to ensure women's safety. The party has campaigned aggressively on Modi offering dignity to the poor, farmers and women. The saffron party continues to be at it.

It has taken Priyanka a long time to reach this decision. As she said in 1999, "along, long time".

Jad Adams, author of *The Dynasty: The Nehru-Gandhi Story* who also worked on an eponymous BBC series, had told *Open* in an interview ('Enter Priyanka: Can She Save the Day for Rahul?', February 4, 2019) that Priyanka was always tipped for a political career when she was a child. "The only surprise to me is how long this has taken. Her father Rajiv used to compare her to his mother Indira for her strong will—that trait which Indira's opponents would call her stubbornness," he had said.

Priyanka Gandhi has been a forceful campaigner for her party in the recent elections. Even in the unsuccessful campaign of 2019 and the elections to various states held later, including the 2022 UP Assembly polls, despite the reverses, Congress insiders say that Priyanka has been a quintessential behind-the-scenes strategist, assisting her mother and brother. They also talk about the tragedies her family has endured—losing her grandmother in 1984 and her father Rajiv Gandhi in 1991 to assassinations—which made her acquire nerves of steel even after her personal grief took her out of the public eye for long stretches and into Buddhism and Vipassana meditation. She displayed her inner courage in 2008 when she met Nalini, a conspirator in the Rajiv Gandhi assassination case, in Vellore Central Jail and later said that she had forgiven her father's killers.

In the 2024 polls, she was indeed a force to reckon with in UP and endeared herself to her partymen. Party workers and

ALTHOUGH PRIYANKA DID NOT CONTEST FROM EITHER RAE BARELI OR AMETHI, SHE WAS AT THE FOREFRONT OF THE CAMPAIGN IN BOTH SEATS, RELENTLESSLY TAKING ON BJP AND GALVANISING HER PARTY WORKERS. IN AMETHI, WHERE PRIYANKA CANVASSED FOR KISHORI LAL SHARMA, SHE IS CREDITED WITH TURNING THE TIDE AGAINST SMRITI IRANI



sympathisers in Rae Bareli wanted her to fight polls this time around.

Hours before the deadline for filing nominations to the Rae Bareli Lok Sabha seat in this year's election on May 3, Congress workers stood waiting, holding posters that had images of Rahul and Priyanka Gandhi. The grapevine had it till the night before that Priyanka Gandhi could make her electoral debut from the seat, a Nehru-Gandhi family pocket borough. More popular than her elder brother because of "the way she speaks" as several locals put it, and given Rahul's image being "smeared" by their opponents, enthusiasm about Priyanka contesting from the seat was palpable. The last-minute announcement that Rahul Gandhi, who had lost to BJP's Smriti Irani in Amethi in 2019, would contest from Rae Bareli came as a surprise. It was speculated then that Priyanka was disinclined to contest.

True, the two Gandhis entering the fray would give BJP more ammunition to target Congress further with its "dynasty" charge. It did, as soon as the announcement of Priyanka Gandhi being fielded from Wayanad came. Adams had always viewed this phenomenon differently. "Some people sneer at this dynastic mode in subcontinental politics as being evidence of an Asian inability to





Priyanka and Rahul Gandhi in Wayanad, April 3, 2024

AFP

take selfies with her even if they were holding up BJP flags.

In Rae Bareilly, where she started campaigning even before Rahul Gandhi hit the trail, she underscored the century-old connection of the Gandhis to the people of the constituency, recalling the 1921 Munshiganj massacre when Jawaharlal Nehru had stood by the farmers.

This time round in UP, Congress, in alliance with Akhilesh Yadav's SP, won six of the 17 seats it contested in the state, against the sole seat it won in Rae Bareilly in 2019 when Sonia Gandhi was the candidate. The party's vote share in the state, the most populous in the country, rose from 6.36 percent in 2019 to 9.46 percent in 2024. While Rahul Gandhi and Yadav held joint rallies in several places, Priyanka and Mainpuri MP and Yadav's wife Dimple Yadav held a joint rally in Varanasi. In the 2022 Assembly polls, however, when Priyanka was leading the campaign, Congress managed to win just two of the 399 seats it fought in an election that had become a face-off between BJP and SP. Faced with an existential crisis, Congress now sees a chance at consolidation.

Once Priyanka enters Lok Sabha, it will be the first time that three Congress members of the Nehru-Gandhi family—Sonia, Rahul, and Priyanka Gandhi—will be MPs. Of the three, Sonia Gandhi is a member of Rajya Sabha, while the other two will be in Lok Sabha. Besides Sonia and Rahul Gandhi, Indira Gandhi's younger daughter-in-law Maneka Gandhi and her son Varun were in the last Lok Sabha, but they were on the other side of the political aisle. This time,

Maneka Gandhi lost the election from Sultanpur while Varun Gandhi was not given a ticket by BJP.

For the Opposition, more formidable by its bigger numerical strength this time, the presence of Priyanka Gandhi, a spirited speaker, as an elected representative could prove to be invigorating. At the same time, she is also likely to become the prime target of the ruling side, which had so far been training its guns mainly on Rahul Gandhi.

To accusation of Rahul Gandhi contesting from two seats and then "betraying" the people of Wayanad, Congress' Shama Mohamed says, "The Wayanad District Congress Committee has passed a resolution welcoming her. Priyanka Gandhi has campaigned across the country." She also argues that many BJP leaders had contested from more than one seat in the past. Meanwhile, the ruling Left in Kerala continues to be miffed at the Gandhis for not investing all their energies in fighting BJP, and instead taking on I.N.D.I.A. bloc members.

Given her charm and relatability as a senior leader, Priyanka, 52, won't find it difficult to make good in electoral politics. Which also means being under greater scrutiny as a public figure. ■

achieve democracy and point not just at the Nehru-Gandhis but the Bhuttos in Pakistan and the Bandaranaiques in Sri Lanka. Are the people hankering after a royal family? I think differently. I see it as unremarkable that many members of the same family go into the same occupation. Tradesmen, farmers and doctors may go for many generations working in the same field. There is some level of nepotism but mainly it is learned behaviour," he says.

Even though Priyanka did not contest from either Rae Bareilly or Amethi, she was at the forefront of the campaign in both seats, relentlessly taking on BJP and galvanising her party workers. In Amethi, where she canvassed for the Gandhi family's close associate Kishori Lal Sharma, she is credited with managing to turn the tide against Irani who was hoping for a second term on the former Congress turf. In her speeches, she said Irani's only intention in coming to Amethi was to defeat her brother, not to ensure the welfare of the people in the constituency. On the last day of campaigning, she sat atop a vehicle, along with Sharma, waving to the crowds all through the roadshow. In several unscripted instances, she stepped off her vehicle and began interacting informally with villagers while they thronged to



MIGRATION

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A screengrab of the fire  
in Kuwait's Mangaf,  
June 12, 2024

# THE EXPEN

The Kuwait fire that  
killed 41 Indians further  
highlights the need to  
protect the rights of  
migrant workers

By **ULLEKH NP**

1 JULY 2024





Coffins of the Indian workers who died in the Kuwait fire, Kochi, June 14, 2024

# DABLES

**O**N A VISIT a few years ago to a labour camp in Ajman, United Arab Emirates (UAE), I had a long chat with one of its managers, a middle-aged Indian-origin man, who politely told me I could not go into the living quarters. He took me instead to his office where, over black tea and cream biscuits, we spoke for the next few hours about the life of low-income Indians employed in the Gulf region.

He said that most of the workers there expect what he called “a break”, an opportunity to come into money. However, only a small percentage of the migrants hit pay dirt and make enough to

live it up, while the rest of them accumulate debt. To service these debts, they end up bound to their workplaces—even though their dream is to make money and go back home.

Stories of rare success and glory offer inspiration nonetheless, although they are often far removed from the reality of their existence in the concrete jungles built on desert sands. Their jobs are usually the lifeline for their families, and all they do is save and send back money home, spending hardly anything on themselves.

“We live not exactly on food, but hope,” he summed it up, with a laugh that had a tinge of irony and sarcasm.

The Indian manager is spot-on about hopes. After all, close to 9 million Indians work in the Gulf countries (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, and Qatar), according to official government statistics. The region accounts for more than 66 per cent of Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) out of around 13.4 million in the whole world. The UAE employs more than 3.41 million Indians, Saudi Arabia 2.59 million, Kuwait 1.02 million, Qatar 740,000, Oman 770,000 and Bahrain 320,000. Most of them are blue-collar employees whose top priority is to save as much money as possible and send it back home.

The tragic deaths of 49 people, 41 of them Indians, in a fire accident at one of the accommodations offered by their company in southern Kuwait’s Mangaf on June 12 bring to the fore the precarious nature of the lives of these workers. Despite contributing immensely to their families and local economies, they live in reportedly risky or deplorable living conditions in overcrowded buildings, often with inadequate access to good sanitation and healthcare.

The specific details of what caused these devastating deaths are under investigation and a comprehensive report is yet to be out. It is a bitter reminder of reports from Qatar before the 2022 FIFA World Cup, which found that at least 6,500 migrant workers had died due to inhumane working conditions, while many more had not received compensation or faced wage theft and exploitation.

Once again, the spotlight is clearly on migrant workers’ rights and liveability of the labour camps in the Middle East, the accommodation they are offered or where they choose to live in these countries on their own.

KG Abraham, managing director of the Kuwait-based NBTC Group where workers who died in the fire were employed, was quoted in the media as saying that the building leased for the workers had 24 apartments, each of which had three bedrooms. He also said that only around 160 employees were living there. He offered to compensate the families of those who perished in the accident. Abraham, interestingly, is co-producer of a Malayalam film titled *Adujeevitham* (Goat Life), which is based on an eponymous novel by Benyamin who created the main protagonist out of the real-life story of an Indian migrant worker trapped into slavery in a Gulf nation. Abraham also owns a five-star hotel and runs several other business establishments in his home state of Kerala.

Earlier, a Reuters report quoted Kuwait’s Deputy Prime Minister Sheikh Fahad Yusuf Saud Al-Sabah—who visited the site—as saying that “the greed of real-estate owners is what leads to these matters.” The news agency also quoted a local publication who spoke to an Egyptian national who survived the fire:



he said that the fire had started on a lower floor and that those on higher levels couldn't escape. Many of those who tried to escape fell unconscious in the thick smoke that bellowed upwards and died. Sadly, many of them were about to return home after years of gruelling labour, according to reports.

People familiar with how blue-collar workers from India and elsewhere are housed in Gulf countries have backed studies from global NGO Human Rights Watch and several others. The situation gets far worse in soaring temperatures. "Despite substantial scientific evidence on the devastating health impact of exposure to extreme heat, Gulf states' protection failures are causing millions of migrant workers to face grave risks, including death," Human Rights Watch said in a recent report.

Studies by academics, too, have highlighted the plight of Indian workers in the Gulf and the discrimination they face. Saddam Khan of Aligarh Muslim University has concluded in his study titled 'Human Rights Dimensions in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Countries: A Study of Indian Migrant Workers' that although there has been some progress over the years, they continue to face systematic abuse and discrimination and that until recently, successive Indian governments have offered only "Band-Aid" responses to alleviate their struggle.

At the core of this discrimination is the Kafala (sponsorships) system, which, according to the Council on Foreign Relations, "gives private citizens and companies... almost total control over migrant workers' employment and immigration status".

**T**HIS IS WHAT an International Labour Organization (ILO) report has to say about the system: "The sponsorship system's economic objective was to provide temporary, rotating labour that could be rapidly brought into the country in an economic boom and expelled during less affluent periods. Under the Kafala system, a migrant worker's immigration status is legally bound to an individual employer or sponsor [*kafeel*] for their contract period. The migrant worker cannot enter the country, transfer employment, or leave the country for any reason without first obtaining explicit written permission from the *kafeel*."

This system, without doubt, gives contractors and labour suppliers tremendous control over the workers who are forced to be meek in the face of conditions that resemble modern slavery.

Speaking specifically about the recent situation in Kuwait, Suresh KP, a businessman based out of that country, reveals, "Workers from India or elsewhere come here with a purpose: To send money back to their families. If you earn less than 400 Kuwaiti dinars a month, you cannot afford to rent a home on your own, and unless you are given accommodation by the company that has hired you, you end up sharing it with others. That is how most workers in low-income backgrounds manage to spend as low as 15 to 25 dinars or so on rent in order to tighten their belts, and cater to their family expenses." Suresh, who has lived in the country for 28 years and is honorary joint secretary of the Indian Business and Professional Council, Kuwait, a nonprofit voluntary organisation, avers that unless the salaries of migrant workers are



**MANY MIGRANT WORKERS LIVE IN ABYSMAL CONDITIONS BECAUSE OF THEIR LARGE NUMBERS, AND 'BURSTING AT THE SEAMS'. IT IS A**

raised drastically, they have no choice but to live in a shared home. "Accidents happen because of electrical short circuits or high hot weather conditions," adds Suresh.

Some others *Open* spoke to say that the homes are often in dilapidated buildings in the worst quarters of the city, and that accidents can take place due to several reasons, including the neglect of a single person, for instance, that of the watchman of the building, who is called *haaris* in Arabic.

Kuwait-based Ajith Kumar, who has also been based out of this Gulf country for decades now and is also associated with Indian organisations there, says that in the case of the accommodation offered by employers, sometimes a large number, as high as eight people, share a room inside a building. "They often live in a dormitory system," he says, adding that even qualified engineers work in low-paid jobs with the hope that they could land a better job afterward.

Elaborating on the conditions under which many of these blue-collared workers live, he says, "Sometimes, 100 or more people share a toilet. While some employers offer decent housing, others don't. In some cases, workers rent their own space, sharing with others, and companies that hire them have no clue about where they live. Kumar points out that sometimes subcontractors are also involved, which makes it tough to track living conditions.

He added that, following the fire accident, the Kuwaiti police are now evicting migrant workers, especially bachelors, including those from India, over what they see as housing code

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An Indian labourer at a makeshift camp in Sharjah

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## LLY UNCLEAN SURROUNDINGS, PRIMARILY BECAUSE THE HOUSING PROJECTS ARE DANGEROUS AND DISMAL EXISTENCE

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violations, meaning overcrowding. Kumar says this is only going to add to their woes, especially in this scorching heat. Meanwhile, it is learnt that the Indian embassy in Kuwait has sprung into action, requesting that those evicted be allowed to stay back in their homes.

Others who spoke to *Open* on condition of anonymity say that many of these migrant workers live in abysmally unclean surroundings, primarily because of their large numbers, and because the housing projects are “bursting at the seams”, as one of them described it. It is a dangerous and dismal existence. Another person who is in the labour recruitment section of a Kuwait company said, “People don’t get used to hardship. They choose to suffer here so that their wives and children and close relatives don’t have to suffer from a shortage of funds back home... Homes leased for workers are places where accidents are waiting to happen. Kitchens are run professionally in most labour camps in the deserts but, in residential areas, danger lurks because of the lack of proper monitoring.”

Mustafa OV, a Dubai-based businessman and managing director at Gargash Insurance Group, has some insights to offer about such accidents. He attributes such mishaps typically to the neglect and efforts by employers of migrant workers to save on costs. “Most employers cut corners to save operational expenses. They cannot do that in the quality of work or deliverables. And so they cut corners in benefits to employees,” he says, suggesting that it is a routine practice engaged by many contractors to

earn a profit. As a result, says Mustafa, safety standards also get compromised. Employees seldom complain because they need their jobs to send home money. “There are, of course, employers in the Gulf region, especially in Dubai, who take good care of their employees,” says the businessman.

Going forward, to check the safety of camps and residential homes where workers live, fines and other punitive measures will have to be enforced far more strictly, he proposes. “Reliance on subcontractors also makes the situation precarious,” Mustafa adds, dwelling on the living conditions of migrant workers.

The greed of employers is one of the causes of such tragic events, although there are multiple reasons from human error to systemic issues that are responsible for the loss of lives.

Meanwhile, reports on remittances from abroad to India underline why India needs to place greater emphasis on its diaspora. Suresh KP and others are of the view that the Indian embassy in Kuwait acted promptly to handle the crisis. More efforts are however in order, especially in terms of preventing such accidents by ensuring that migrant workers’ rights are respected.

According to reports, the US remains the single highest source of remittances to India. As a bloc, though, the Gulf countries contribute much more, and the UAE tops the list.

According to the latest data available, the US accounts for remittances of \$23.4 million, the United Arab Emirates \$18 million, the UK \$6.8 million, Singapore \$5.7 million, Saudi Arabia \$5.1 million, Kuwait \$2.4 million, Oman \$1.6 million, and Qatar \$1.5 million.

More importantly, India is the recipient of the largest sum of remittances in the world, according to a report by the International Organisation for Migration’s (IOM) World Migration Report 2024.

The report said, “In 2022, India, Mexico, China, the Philippines, and Egypt were (in descending order) the top five remittance recipient countries, although India was well above the rest, with total inward remittances exceeding \$111 billion, the first country to reach and even exceed \$100 billion.”

It also said, “More than 40 per cent of all international migrants worldwide in 2020 (115 million) were born in Asia, nearly 20 per cent primarily originating from six Asian countries, including India (the largest country of origin), China, Bangladesh, Pakistan, the Philippines and Afghanistan.”

According to a report on June 18 in *Arab Times*, a local media group in Kuwait, a government source stated that, following the Kuwaiti ruler’s instructions, the families of the tragic Mangaf building fire victims would receive compensation amounting to \$15,000 each. “This financial aid aims to support bereaved families during this difficult time,” the statement reads. It added that the compensation payments will be processed and delivered to the victims’ respective embassies. “The embassies will then ensure the funds are distributed to the families of those affected by the fire. This method expedites the process and ensures the assistance reaches the victims’ families promptly and efficiently,” the report added.

Employers who hire migrant workers have a greater responsibility. Migrant workers cannot be treated as expendable. Saving lives must be their top priority. ■



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# IS PLURAL

## INSIDE THE WORLD OF INDIAN POLYCULES

By **LHENDUP G BHUTIA**

**I**T WAS ABOUT a decade ago when Neelesh was part of a few literature and philosophy clubs in Pune that he came across three individuals with whom he developed a rapport. One of them was a male, and the other two were women. The four became close friends, developed feelings for one another, and by the time two years had lapsed, they were all living together in a house.

To most individuals in the neighbourhood, the four of them are friends, perhaps even two couples minimising costs by sharing an apartment together. But in reality, all four are closer to being a single family, every one in polyamorous relationships with the other three. "We just started by hanging out, discussing philosophy, and our outlook on life matched. That's how it began," says Neelesh when asked what attracted them to each other. Neelesh, who requested to be identified by his first name, is in his early 40s and works as an engineer in Pune. "We are quite open about it [their relationships]. We are like a small family," he says.

Neelesh and his partners belong to a small subculture of individuals in India who identify themselves as polyamorous. Polyamory is defined as the practice of engaging in sexual and romantic relationships with multiple people, and many of its practitioners often also refer to it as ethical non-monogamy, to indicate how the practice has the consent of all participants and involves no secret affairs. The term however is woolly enough to incorporate a wide variety of practices and choices, so long as it involves more than two individuals. Some polyamorous individuals practice hierarchies in their relationships for instance, where they bestow higher priority on particular partners. Some of them even have "nesting partners", where they will have relationships with multiple partners, but live with a particular one. Then there are others who frown upon such notions of hierarchy, believing that a polyamorous group is one where each member is committed to every other member equally. Some will include swingers and couples in open relationships in their definitions of polyamory; others will not. The nature of polyamorous relationships also varies. Many relationships will involve sex, but sometimes it won't, the partners instead finding emotional and romantic fulfilment from some or all of their partners. And while many practitioners view polyamory as a lifestyle choice, where they feel they are not cut out for monogamy; a few identify polyamory as something deeper,

something almost like a sexual identity. They cannot but—these practitioners say—be polyamorous. In recent years, many practitioners have begun to refer to themselves as "polycules"—a portmanteau for a "polyamorous molecule"—to describe the intricate and complicated structure of their relationships.

Polyamory of course isn't new. People have carried on with multiple partners, usually discreetly, throughout history. But what has happened in recent years, with the growing acceptance of diverse sexual orientations and lifestyle choices, is many individuals coming forward to identify themselves as polyamorous. This is particularly so in the West, where surveys find a large proportion of youngsters identifying themselves as polyamorous. There is increasingly a resonance here too. The polyamorous in India, especially the youths in its big metropolitan cities, now increasingly describe themselves as such on dating apps and social media; interact with one another on social media and messaging platforms like Telegram; and hang out on polyamorous-only or alternative sexuality-only events at clubs.

"When I first came across this idea of polyamory, I thought, this is something men have come up with to have sex with everyone," says Aili Seghetti, who moved to India from the UK several years ago, and whose The Intimacy Curator provides a popular dating, intimacy and relationships coaching service. A large section of Seghetti's clientele involves people who are polyamorous or couples in open relationships. She also often hosts events for polyamorous individuals, and until recently ran a number of Telegram channels where polyamorous individuals connected with one other. "Initially, when I began doing events for polyamorous individuals and others, I didn't expect such a big crowd would show up. It's been three years since we began doing events, and their large numbers don't surprise me anymore," she says. To Seghetti, the openness about polyamory and willingness to explore other forms of relationships has something to do with the larger churn in society. "The world is changing pretty fast and relationships are changing, divorce rates are skyrocketing," she says, as she brings up how the young are more open to alternative lifestyles and how, even among older monogamous couples, women are increasingly unlikely to put up with a husband cheating on them and will look for the same sexual freedom. "Instead of divorcing, there is an option of actually opening up the relationship. Just because you're bored of the person you're with is not really a reason to leave the relationship. You can transform it into something else."



Seghetti is herself polyamorous. She has a husband, based in the UK, whom she meets every three months or so. She has three other partners with whom she has asexual relationships. One of them is a male partner in India for whom, she says, she harbours strong romantic feelings; the other two are gay, and for whom, she says, she has queer platonic feelings.

Seghetti wasn't always polyamorous. Raised as a Catholic, she says, she was suspicious when she first learnt about this concept. But this changed when she discovered that her husband was having an affair. "I was heartbroken. And it took a while for me to understand that there was something that was not quite working in the relationship and that's why this happened," she says. "I can't tell what it is, but something just shifted then. And I felt maybe this whole thing doesn't work, maybe monogamy isn't working. Maybe, there is another way of dealing with this and then I started looking at it from the point of view of my needs. So, if I have emotional needs, certain logistical needs, or I have some physical needs that might not revolve around sex, why should I end the relationship?" Practising polyamory however can come with its own set of challenges. In polyamorous circles, the term "compersion"—where an individual, instead of feeling upset or threatened when his or her partner romantically or sexually interacts with another individual, experiences happiness in the partner's joy—has come to resemble something of a relationship ideal. But, Seghetti mentions, this rarely ever takes place. Instead, there are often insecurities, pangs of jealousy and competition for a partner's affection and time.

Some of this is understandable. Just the small task of making sure your partner is free from her commitments with her other partners so you can go out for dinner can sometimes be a nightmare. Aanchal Narang, the founder of Another Light Counselling, which provides mental health and counselling services, including to polyamorous individuals, says, scheduling a date night within polyamorous individuals could resemble organising a UN summit. "If you are dating three people and these three people are dating three other people, then it [organising dates] would be a logistical challenge, right?" she asks.

According to Seghetti, the myth of polyamorous being promiscuous couldn't be further from the truth. "Polyamorous relationships are a lot of work, trust me," she says. "I have no hobbies. All my free time goes into just managing [my relationships]. In polyamory, you are constantly explaining something to someone... So that's the running joke [within polyamorous groups]. They say polyamorous people spend more time talking and communicating than having sex."

The likes of Narang and Seghetti who work with polyamorous individuals to resolve issues in their relationships insist that communication and the setting of boundaries is of utmost importance. "You're dealing with multiple human beings. It's like

being in an organisation. If you don't set your boundaries, then everybody will come and throw paper on your desk," Seghetti says.

For clients exploring polyamory, Seghetti usually hands them a detailed contract that lays down all the boundaries within the relationships and expectations from one another. "So, the contract will be very detailed. It will establish, for example, how many partners you already have. It will mention how much you want the other person to know about your partners. If there is sex, whether it is without protection? Also, how much do they want to know about your partners? What kind of communication style do you have in the relationships? Like if you go on a date [with someone else], what kind of information does your partner want to receive? What is the logistics of that date? Are you going to come back home if you live together, or are you going to spend the night out? Does your partner want to meet the other partner?" she says. "It's the sort of things people don't really think of. But it's important to have them on paper. Otherwise, you start creating a lot of resentment."

Narang admits that polyamorous relationships can be

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**AILI SEGHETTI** founder,  
The Intimacy Curator



stressful. "If you look at society, it's framed in the lens of you falling in love with one person and being with them for the rest of your life. There is pressure to adhere to societal norms. When you realise those are expectations you can't meet, it tends to put a certain level of stress and internal conflict amongst people. So, we work with resolving that and also equipping people with the adequate resources for that," Narang says.

Stress points however frequently occur. "When my partner goes out on dates with other people, sometimes, there is discomfort and jealousy. You just have to work through it," says Basit Manham, an edtech professional from Bengaluru who identifies himself as polyamorous. "Sometimes, it's also just sadness. You and your partner used to have all this time together, and now, suddenly, your partner won't have so much time for you because she will have to spend time with her other partner also. But these are feelings that can be worked upon. And over time, it gets better." Manham identifies himself as a solo polyamorous, a



term among the polyamorous that describes an individual who has intimate relationships with multiple people but who retains an independent or single lifestyle, refusing, for instance, to share a house, or not having a desire to reach traditional relationship milestones. Manham has been in multiple relationships running simultaneously over the years, some lasting for a few years and a few that fizzle out over months. But as someone who is solo polyamorous, he doesn't view relationships that lasted longer as being more committed than the others. "I wouldn't call it as like being in a primary relationship. It just happened that it lasted longer and we were spending more time together and the others weren't," he says.

Manham first began identifying himself as someone into polyamory around 2013. He was then in a committed monogamous relationship, but he couldn't help developing feelings for others too. "We were going strong and quite fairly new to it, but I felt like I could easily also like other people," he says. Manham opened up to his girlfriend, and the two broke up. But because there were no other issues in their relationship, he says, and

been a very hazy, very wondrous journey, and it's been through... a number of phases and stages," she says.

Anupama practices hierarchies in her polyamorous relationships, bestowing one partner more attention and primacy over others. This is something, she admits, that is frowned upon in polyamorous circles, because it is akin to looking at polyamory from a very monogamous lens. "But that's what works for me. And what works for you, works for you, as long as I am being transparent in my communication and not playing games with you," she says.

Over the years, Anupama has been in multiple relationships, some that have lasted for years. From a monogamous perspective, polyamorous relationships can be bewildering. She currently describes herself as not being in any active relationship, since she has been away from Delhi for some months, but, in some ways, she says, she could be categorised as being in relationships. "Do I have people whom I'm constantly in communication with, like I would be in communication with a boyfriend? Yes. Are there people who I update about my everyday life? Yes. But am I actively involved with someone? Three months I think is a sufficient time to say 'No, there's

no relationship.' But yes, there is a relationship in the sense that if your relationship has lasted you like three years, then three months is a blip, right? And then there are also people I see and who I feel very attached to, and who feel very attached to me, who take care of me, who I take care of in various different ways. Would you call that a relationship? I would because that's how I feel." Being in polyamorous relationships can also be a source of relief in unexpected ways. Anupama lost one of her partners to a disease once, but the presence of multiple partners helped each of them to process the grief better. "Having other people who love the same person and being able to communicate with them is a lot of relief," she says. "It's not like I have only the family for support. I have other lovers too."

There are complications like insecurities and jealousies, Anupama admits. However, according to her, many of these depend upon how mature the individuals in the relationship are.

Neelesh is familiar with many of these challenges. He often helps out polyamorous individuals who seek him out online for advice. Some of these challenges arise from the nature of polyamorous relationships, he says, giving the example of how a "throuple" with three might be more imbalanced and difficult to navigate than a situation like his and his partners' where it comprises two males and two females. Sometimes, the challenges might reside outside the relationship, in the form of landlords, for instance, who are unwilling to give their homes to such a set of individuals. Neelesh is lately a bit apprehensive about this himself. A few of his partners have landed jobs in Mumbai, and all of them are now considering relocating to that city soon. "We have never faced an issue [living together] so far," he says. "Perhaps, we might this time. We are keeping our fingers crossed. ■"



"When my partner goes out on dates with other people, sometimes, there is **discomfort and jealousy**. You just have to work through it

**BASIT MANHAM** edtech professional

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even though Manham got into polyamorous relationships with others, the two resumed their relationship. Over time, he met other polyamorous individuals, especially when he became part of a popular polyamorous group called Bangalore Polycules, and with those encounters with people who shared similar preferences, came relief. "I think the basis of all relationships is love. What is different with polyamorous individuals is they are able to have and express love for more than a single person," he says.

Anupama, who requested she be identified by her first name and who is both polyamorous and a member of the kink community, is fairly well-known within polyamory circles. She has written a few books on BDSM using a pseudonym and also works as an English language teacher. She was initially monogamous and, she says, judgemental about concepts such as polyamory. But over the years, as she met more individuals and became more familiar with the concept, she began to embrace this polyamory, first as a preference and gradually as an identity. "It's





# BEYOND BOUNDARIES

## HOW THE T20 WORLD CUP HAS GLOBALISED CRICKET

By ADITYA IYER

**W**orld Cups, as the title and its concept suggest, ought to be a global event. Think of the football version, which until recently saw 32 nations—drawn almost equally from the five continents (plus Oceania)—compete for the sport's greatest trophy. Although football really doesn't need an outreach programme given its popularity, what with there being more countries registered under the FIFA banner than the United Nations, the game somehow managed to go even more global when the previous edition of the World Cup (2022) was hosted for the first time by a Muslim nation, Qatar; very far, geographically and culturally, from the traditional centres of Europe and South

America. The following FIFA World Cup in 2026, incidentally, will witness a participation boost from 32 countries to 48, and will be played across three countries in North and Central America.

Now, think cricket; specifically, the ODI World Cup, still the most cherished prize in the game. When it was last held, in its spiritual home of India at the fag end of 2023, there were a total of 10 competing nations. Half of them were not only from Asia but further localised by being South Asian—India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka. The other five consisted of two nations from Oceania, Australia and New Zealand, along with a lone representative from the European Union and Africa in the Netherlands and South Africa, respectively, and of course England, the inventors of the game. With West Indies not even qualifying for the event, there wasn't a single team from the west of the Atlantic, the





Indian fans (foreground) watch their team play Pakistan in the T20 Cricket World Cup, New York, June 9, 2024

GETTY IMAGES

twin continents of the Americas then wholly ignored in a 'World' Cup. An appropriate name for the tournament could've been the Commonwealth Cup 2023, given that 80 per cent of the participating teams were from that association of nations.

Then, 2024 happened.

Just six months after the 50-over edition in India, the T20 World Cup, ongoing and in its second stage currently, changed the way the world views what was considered an Indianised game. Not only does it boast of the largest collection of countries, 20, to set off the main stage of a world event in cricket, the presence of some of the nations to have been slotted into the four groups (of five teams each) wholly puts the world in this cup. There's Uganda from Sub-Saharan Africa, Papua New Guinea from the Pacific, and Oman from the Middle East, while Ireland and

Scotland add to the Netherlands' existing European flavour. But most significantly, the 2024 T20 World Cup flexes with a strong American presence—the US, Canada, and of course, the West Indies. If all of this is a hint at the game's globalisation, the fact that the group stages were heavily hosted in three major American cities screams globalisation from the rooftops.

New York City, Dallas in Texas and Fort Lauderdale in Florida were home to as many as 16 group games and cricket had finally, sighingly arrived where it had hoped to for a long while now, the US. There were previous attempts to tap into the North American market, with a few stray India-Pakistan bilateral series in Toronto, Canada, at the turn of the century and also the odd West Indies-India fixtures in Florida, a recent phenomenon witnessed these days at the end of a lengthy tour of the Caribbean. But for there



to be a consolidated effort across multiple venues and during an event of this magnitude no less, one the string-pullers would have otherwise deemed fit to be played only in the money-spinning territories of India, England or Australia, is nothing less than a giant leap for *cricketkind*.

Bollywood, the only other worldwide consumption of Indianness bigger than cricket, has known the mantra for global success for at least two decades now: keep the fans in India happy but keep the Non-Resident Indians (NRIs), paying in dollars and pounds, happier. They always had the pounds of England's NRIs and to a certain extent, the Australian dollars from Down Under. But to see real dollarsigns, the sport always needed the US. Why? This statistic should lend a deep perspective: the Indian diaspora (people of Indian origin as well as Indian immigrants) in Australia is roughly 700,000; that number increases to 1.5 million in the UK; whereas, in the US, the diaspora balloons to close to 5 million. That number alone ensured that the bigwigs who run

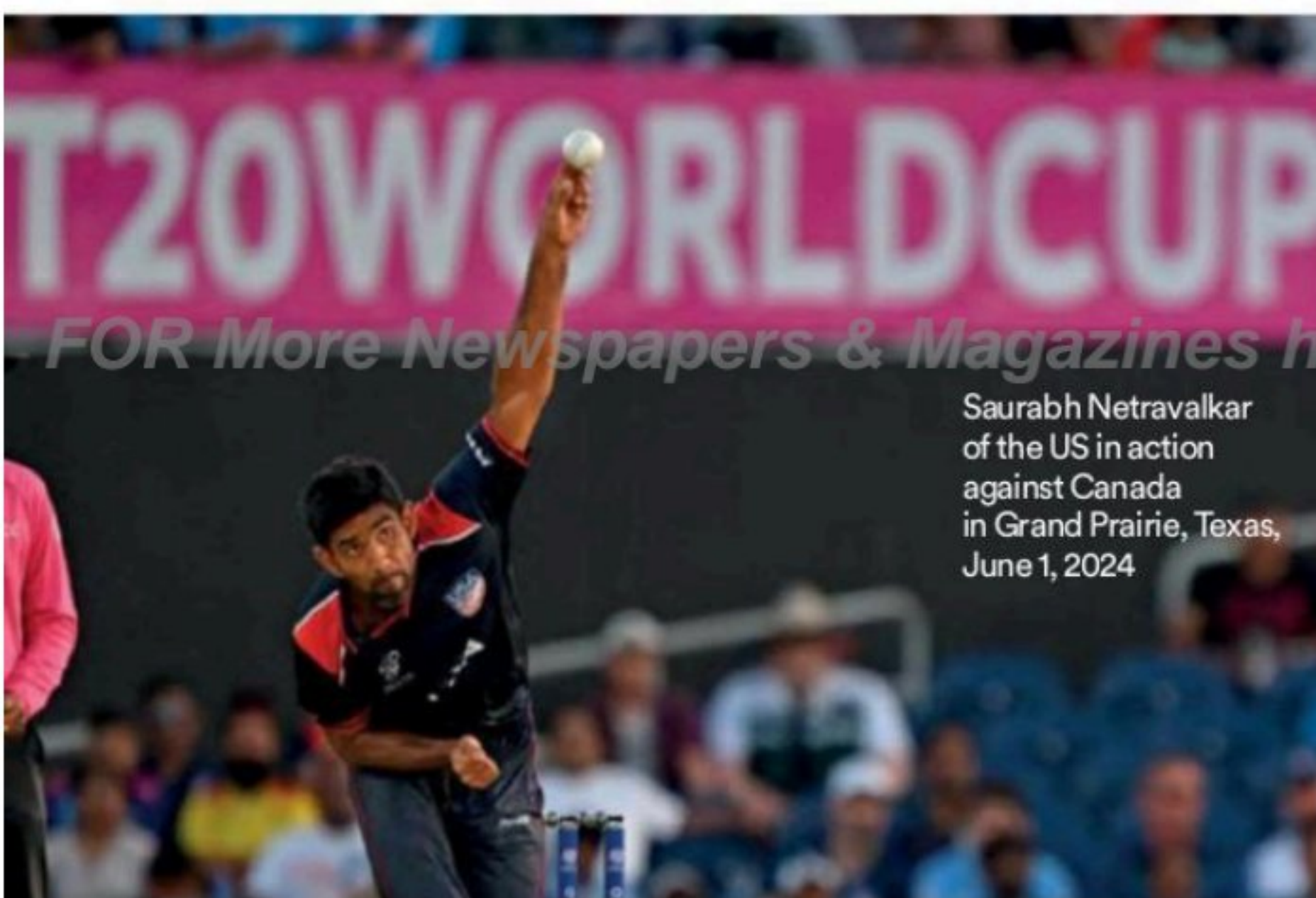
field to clutch their hearts and sing the 'Star-Spangled Banner'.

For cricket to be truly global, the sport needed to grow in the North American territories. And for the US to take a keen interest in what has remained an alien game to them, the country needed a strong team that could hold its own at a big event. Both these stars aligned miraculously at this World Cup, as Team USA made rapid strides from underdogs to giant-killers. In the tune-up to the event, the US defeated Bangladesh in a bilateral series, which sent shock waves around the cricket world. Those waves then turned seismic at the World Cup, when a team made up largely of rejects from the Indian domestic fold felled Pakistan in Dallas, holding their nerve to force a tie before winning the match in a Super Over. Their campaign is still very much alive and kicking in the second round of this edition, even as the 2009 champions Pakistan have returned home.

The US' success has a global hue. The man who bowled that Super Over at the Grand Prairie Stadium was Saurabh Netravalkar, a Mumbaikar, who not only represented India at the Under-19 World Cup in 2010, but also ended up as their top wicket-taker with nine wickets, despite that squad containing bowlers such as Jaydev Unadkat, Harshal Patel and Sandeep Sharma, all household names thanks to the IPL. Not only did Netravalkar never get to play in the IPL, the left-arm pacer played just one match for Mumbai in the Ranji Trophy, against Karnataka in 2013. The lack of opportunity forced the Malad boy to pursue further studies in America, and he received a Master's degree from Cornell University shortly after. Today, he is a full-time software engineer at Oracle.

Yet, cricket found a way to dig its claws back into a man who had famously cut off ties with the sport to such an extent that he did not even carry his bowling spikes with him when he first left for his university in New York. Perhaps he was at the right place at the right time, for the sport had begun growing internally and organically in America by the late 2010s, even if only among the immigrant population. Just as he arrived on these shores, Major League Cricket was about to be unleashed on the Americans and soon he was representing the country, albeit against other associate nations. But before he knew it, the game was desperate to establish itself in his new home and so he promptly stopped the might of Pakistan in its tracks and followed it up with the wicket of India's captain in the following game. That wicket read: Mumbaikar Rohit, caught by Mumbaikar Harmeet Singh, bowled by Mumbaikar Netravalkar.

But just when the world's eyes were on the game looking to flex its universality on the foreign fields of America, a small village in Cyprus drew its collective gaze its way on June 17. In a village called Episkopi, an Indian immigrant named Sahil Chauhan walked out to bat for Estonia and smashed the fastest-ever T20 century, registering the three-figure mark in just 27 balls. With each of his 18 sixes, also a world record, in his unbeaten essay of 144, an Indian playing for Estonia in Cyprus pushed cricket's global boundaries just that little bit further than it had ever been before. ■



Saurabh Netravalkar of the US in action against Canada in Grand Prairie, Texas, June 1, 2024

AFP

the game threw in their collective might to ensure that T20 cricket was included as a discipline for the upcoming Summer Olympics in Los Angeles in 2028. But it wasn't until this World Cup that cricket knew that it had finally hit Bollywood's motherlode. The flag had been planted.

In the leafy confines of Eisenhower Park in Nassau County, Long Island, just outside the bustle of New York City, mushroomed a gigantic cricket stadium capable of holding 34,000 fans on its temporary stands, by far the biggest premises for this bat-and-ball sport in baseball country. It filled up rather easily when Rohit Sharma's India met Babar Azam's Pakistan on June 9 despite intense security after a threat of a lone wolf attack came to light, but positively glimmered with global appeal when hosts US met India and the terraces packed in spectators of the country's three primary races: white, Black and brown. All three colours were present in the US squad as well that lined up on the playing



# The Sea Within

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Paramankeni Beach,  
Tamil Nadu, at dawn



# LIFE'S LESSONS FROM THE BEACH TO INFINITY

By Carlo Pizzati

*maggie and milly and molly and may  
went down to the beach (to play one day)  
and maggie discovered a shell that sang  
so sweetly she couldn't remember her troubles, and  
milly befriended a stranded star  
whose rays five languid fingers were;  
and molly was chased by a horrible thing  
which raced sideways while blowing bubbles: and  
may came home with a smooth round stone  
as small as a world and as large as alone.  
For whatever we lose (like a you or a me)  
it's always ourselves we find in the sea  
~ 'maggie and milly and molly and may' by EE Cummings*

**I**T'S ALWAYS Ourselves we find in the sea. Yet, there's so much more to find there. Among the panicky crabs rushing into the spray, the hasty fish dashing into the sand, the easy-going dolphins leaping in the Bay of Bengal where I've been living for almost 15 years you can discover an immense mirror steeped in history, biological wonders, myth, struggle and bliss. While I scrape the bottom of my feet walking on a beach off the Coromandel coast at first light, I breathe in the northerly winds carrying oxygen and joy into my lungs. And I think about the sea. Seasonally, the fishermen stand in a row, feet dug in the sand,

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Photos courtesy CARLO PIZZATI



hauling their nets. Some believe they are pulling out the sun from the horizon, rhythmically, one beam at a time. It is a glittering feast of gold, peach, orange and pinkish hues imbuing the morning firmament. At sundown, I pace along the same shores, as the vestiges of the day bow out through the casuarina forest, long radiant threads dancing among the branches, while the sea cloaks itself in a sombre greenish tinge.

I stare at the Bay of Bengal and wonder how my reaction to this beatific contemplation has transformed through the years, how I might have become inured to its natural charms, how my chest no longer swells as it did in awe of this maritime majesty. Has something changed? Although I'm known to stick to what I truly love, like the mountains, hazelnut and chocolate ice-cream, the Indian woman who brought me to live here, writing and walking, it is inevitable that as years ripen the perceivers and their sensorial capabilities, the perceived is altered as well.

From my first days on this isolated beach in Tamil Nadu, north of Pondicherry and south of Mahabalipuram, I've wondered how differently I experienced this reality compared to the local fishermen, the shepherds, the construction workers, the farmers, the affluent neighbours, the ashram meditators and the day-trippers who at times cross my path. "Selfie, please!"

I've grown up with the idea of the beach as a summer home, a distinct season in my European upbringing, drenched in a different history from the Indians who often plunge fully clad into the crushing waves at sunset.

What I've immediately recognised in these Indian waters is that—compared to the seas I've gazed, swam, deep dived and sailed into, in all the continents—the Bay of Bengal's murky brownness, with its un-tropical bronze seriousness and down-to-business undertow, often brings me back to youthful summers from 1970 to 1990, spent on a thin, long beach near Venice, along the Adriatic seashores of Northern Italy.

My grandmother had bought a small two-bedroom apartment on the third floor of a building with a sea view in a beach resort town called Jesolo Lido. It had a dark blue tiled swimming pool with a yellow thick border we would dive off from, a flurry of colourful beach umbrellas and wooden chaise longues crowding the private sands all the way up to a cement wall where you could walk into a narrow public beach lined with reefs inching into the sea.

Jesolo Lido was the multifarious universe of my summer growth. I'd walk into that beach in June as one person, and head out a couple of months later a different boy, baked by the sun, caked dry by the sandy dust, marinated in the Adriatic waters, a galaxy of freckles brushed across my nose and cheeks, morphed by formative experiences of friendship, enmities, celebrations

of youth and excitement. It was a cosmos constellated at first by innocently playing hide and seek at night, then strumming guitars while singing by the bonfires lighting up dark beaches. It was the times of the earliest slow-dance parties, the summer crushes, and timid kisses which at daytime turned into hours of dusty football matches, rough water polo challenges, volleyball, bocce bowling, badminton, swimming and waterskiing, but also fishing with a rod, with nets, pulling out molluscs with my bare feet from the sandbar. In those skimpy bikini and topless days of the 1970s and 1980s, the land of Speedos, it was also the discovery of bodies, the inquiry into objects of desire.

It was a sociological experiment, mixing people of different classes, regional and national origin. My summer friends came from towns I'd never visited at the time, like Mestre, Venice, Treviso, Brescia, Milan, Torino, but also from Austria, France, Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, the UK. Their parents were

truck drivers, lawyers, architects, accountants, businessmen, teachers, workers. Stripped to their Speedos from class-conscious uniforms, the brands, the worker's and farmer's t-shirts, the white-collar cotton shirts, the cheap versus the luxury, on that anonymous theatre paved with sand, our parents had to blend. And so did we.

It built cohesion, openness, dialogue, as a small-town boy from a remote valley of the Veneto, like me, could discover young people from other parts of Italy, but, more importantly, from Europe. It made us get over what at first felt alien and foreign. It was the beachy foundation of cosmopolitanism, in its own way. The phenomenon of the post-industrial Italian beach pried open our provincial doors to show us what existed outside.

Working as a cashier in my grandfather's pharmacy in August during middle school (yes, voluntary child labour), I'd saved enough money to buy a small sailboat which I parked in the Jesolo Lido garage. Having understood I'd better become financially independent fast, I earned some cash giving sailing lessons to younger children.

My 4.7 meters 1978 lateen-rigged Sunfish sailboat made me discover a different sea from the crowded shores filled with well-oiled sun-bathers. As the wind rose, I would set the mainsail and the jib, and head out all alone toward the horizon until I could no longer see the shoreline. A shudder of adrenaline would fill my teenage arms, legs and stomach rushing fast to my head which had to stay focused on keeping the sails in optimal tension in order to exploit the breeze, and not to get hit by the boom while turning around the boat to head back to safety.

I can still evoke the calming sound of seawater splashing against the hull when I smiled up to the sky, in a solitary bliss, free, surrounded only by the mysteries of the fauna below, the milky emptiness of the space around me, the salty foam flying up

JESOLO LIDO WAS THE  
MULTIFARIOUS  
UNIVERSE OF MY  
SUMMER GROWTH.  
I'D WALK INTO THAT  
BEACH IN JUNE AS ONE  
PERSON, AND HEAD  
OUT A COUPLE OF  
MONTHS LATER A  
DIFFERENT BOY,  
BAKED BY THE SUN,  
CAKED DRY BY THE  
SANDY DUST,  
MARINATED IN THE  
ADRIATIC WATERS





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to my lips, as I leaned out of the boat to steady it. It was the discovery of sea as mystic adventure. It was a solitary and esoteric glee that mixed the salt of my joyful young tears with those of the sea.

*"It's nasty weather like this here  
that turns heads grey before their time"*  
~ *The Sea Wolf* by Jack London

At the risk of sounding macho, I have to confess I've had my share of thrills in the oceans. While reporting on Greenpeace's anti-nuclear protests in the mid-1990s, I sailed for two weeks on the Pacific Ocean from the capital of Tahiti, Papeete, to the French atoll of Mururoa aboard the *Machias*. It was an old schooner whose captain, a Burt Lancaster look alike called Bill Austin, would do sit ups on deck under the tropical rain while the cook caught fresh tuna which he quickly chopped into sushi.

As we reached the French Navy nuclear base along with several European, Japanese, Australian and New Zealander parliamentarians, I climbed on a motorless sailboat which was boarded in rough waters by French marines who detained us. We were jailed overnight under the watch of the French Foreign Legion, after kindly being served hot coffee and delicious cookies, my very own adventurous madeleines...

A few months later, aboard the *MV Greenpeace*, I sailed from Manila to Hong Kong, through the Philippines Sea, the

East China Sea, the Taiwan Strait into the South China Sea, entering first the Shanghai harbour in yet another anti-nuclear test protest, risking 10 years in jail for counter-revolutionary activities, as I documented the Chinese coast guard detaining the environmentalists.

A few years earlier, I'd spent a night trying to sleep on a tilted 14 meters sailboat captained by the descendent of Ralph Waldo Emerson, a friend who ran his *Yrka* into the sandbanks on a stormy night in Sag Harbor, Long Island. I've briefly paralysed my legs, as I got slammed by a nasty wave while body surfing in Pensacola beach in the Gulf of Mexico. I hurt my back diving from Capri's Faraglioni cliffs. I've deep dived into a school of sharks in the Maldives. To say all this might appear as testosterone boasting, but I'm sharing it to explain a first-person investigation into the lure of dangers in the sea. What self was I irresponsibly trying to find in those risky waters?

When I now ask myself why I got caught in such predicaments I blame literature. Like many of my generation, I've grown up on a healthy diet of Jack London, Joseph Conrad, Herman Melville. But, also, on the comic book stories of Corto Maltese by Hugo Pratt, the novels of Colombian Alvaro Mutis, along with the prolific bibliography of my fellow Veneto author, Emilio Salgari, who hailed from a town an hour away from where I grew up.

Salgari is considered the father of Italian adventure fiction,



the forefather of Spaghetti Westerns, the author of the famous 'Sandokan' series, 'The Black Corsair' series, 'The Queen of the Caribbean,' 'Captain Tempest' and many more. Gabriel Garcia Márquez, Isabel Allende, Jorge Luis Borges and Pablo Neruda all attested to reading him when young. Che Guevara devoured 62 of his books, finding an anti-imperialist soul in his plots. And look where that led him: getting killed in an ambush in the Bolivian mountains.

Funnily enough, Salgari made a single sailing trip up and down the same Adriatic Sea of my Jesolo summer sailing. His last wishes were: "Bury me at sea." He wasn't. His remains are resting in Verona. Maybe because of this tortured relationship with the sea, fed by a deep nostalgia, he was able to transform the unromantic, grey Italian seas into the infinite tropical oceans that were the set of the most amazing adventures of his imaginary heroes, as if the sea were an archetypal dimension that lives within us all.

The earliest discovery of the seductive call of the dangers in high waters is to be found in Homer's *Odyssey*. I recently travelled to Scylla, which the Greek bard describes as a rock of barking dogs, crossing the Messina Strait on a ferry into Sicily through the "swallowing sea" of Charybdis. It was inevitable to evoke Ulysses asking his sailors to fill his ears with wax in order to resist the treacherous call of the mermaids.

The sea is the liquid thread stitching the adventures of this Hellenic literary prototype of acumen and wit, but it also guides his destiny, out of human control. That is why, when I contemplate the Greek seas, from a beach in Amorgos, or Rhodes, or on a ferry along the Aegean Sea, I can't help but conjure swift Aeolus, the god of the winds, fickle peek-a-booing among the clouds, ready to send more sailors into scary waves.

I thought about this Olympian divinity when writing this, as I was tensely following on a screen the solo traverse of the Atlantic Ocean of a childhood friend, Giorgio, who aboard his sailboat ran into a storm, slipped on deck, broke a couple of ribs, and had to face 35 kts gale winds and 6 meters high waves. Thanks to the god of communication, Mercury, we are now all joined by social media, where Giorgio broadcast every step of this nautical hazard in a regular video-log on his Instagram feed. The mysteries of voyage are now delivered almost live. Although you may feel connectivity will bring faster rescue, the storytelling in streaming feels just as scary to me.

I've sailed from the Roman coastline to Sardinia, down the Croatian coast to Marco Polo's birthplace, around the Turkish bays, across the Bali Sea, along the Californian shores, through the Abu Dhabi lagoons... yet, following me at every turn of the rudder, at every gust of breeze, was the memory of my youthful readings of the *Odyssey*, ruined as I am by the over-structure of literature.

Greek mythology reeks with the anxiety caused by the wrath of the seas presided by the god of the oceans, Poseidon, whose beard and grey locks I sometimes imagine rising through the rowdy waves of the Bay of Bengal. Although Neptune (his Roman name) wields a trident just like Shiva,



ALL IS PLAYED OUT IN THIS POSTCARD WHICH TRULY BECOMES A DOUBLE-LIMINAL CONTROL AND NATURE'S TSUNAMIC AND BUT ALSO WHERE THE ANCIENT

his Hindu avatar is Varuna or Mitra. I imagine, as I swim in the Bay's waters, Poseidon/Neptune blending into Varuna/Mitra in my tendency to join East and West.

It is, this sea of ancient mythologies and gods, a place inhabited by threatening Leviathans, by the menacing Kraken of the Norse tradition. No wonder Dante's third circle of hell is lined with sand.

*"Water, water, every where,  
And all the boards did shrink;  
Water, water, every where  
Nor any drop to drink.*

*The very deep did rot: O Christ!  
That ever this should be!  
Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs  
Upon the slimy sea"*

~ 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' by

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

For centuries the land-besieging waters have been an entity to be feared and worshipped, quite far from the over-crowded industrialised Jesolo Lido beach of my early years of discovery, a product, as we will see later, of Roman baths and the





Goats graze at  
Paramankeni Beach

ON THE SHORES OF TAMIL NADU,  
LOCATION: WHERE THE BYRONIC HUMAN  
CYCLONIC WRATH FACE EACH OTHER,  
FACES THE FORTHCOMING

British industrial revolution cum imperialism. It was the sea as perceived before Romanticism, a literary and philosophical construct which transformed how we experience natural elements, democratically repackaged as they now are as mass tourism products for discount tours.

It was the threatening sea sailed by *Nostromo*, the waters that turn into menacing rivers crawling up a *Heart of Darkness* in the pages of Polish-born Conrad. Sure, it was also the colonialist waters of Rudyard Kipling. Yet the Bombay-born English author's adventures, flaunted as they are by his British groupies, never reach the depth of Jack London's quests, whose waters are so cold they bite the marrow, making you feel the grip of death, the anguish, the shock, as the acrid stuff in throat and lungs strangle the drowning, as described in the sinking of a ship in *The Sea Wolf*.

Jack London's oceans are constant existential metaphors where even seasickness becomes a mirror of sensibility: "The earth is as full of brutality as the sea is full of motion. And some men are made sick by the one, and some by the other." Facing the cruelty of the sea means facing reality, "its relentless and awfulness."

The natural inhabitants of the sea are there to remind us of the animal destiny we share. The contemplation of nature,

embodied by the sea, provides us with a key to understand our own existence, as London tells us in *The Sea Wolf*: "There is only so much water, so much earth, so much air; but the life that is demanding to be born is limitless. Nature is a spendthrift. Look at the fish and their millions of eggs. For that matter, look at you and me. In our loins are the possibilities of millions of lives. Could we but find time and opportunity and utilize the last bit and every bit of the unborn life that is in us, we could become the fathers of nations and populate continents."

In Herman Melville's pen, this ancient mare monstrum becomes a powerful allegory of the primordial conflict between humans and the mysterious forces of nature. *Moby Dick*, a tragic epic of blood and death, is a metaphor of human destiny investigating the ambiguity of life. Its characters are torn without a real possibility of definitive choices—his Homeric and Biblical ocean is again the kingdom of monsters, the stuff of terror, of depths escaping human comprehension.

Yet the sea, once it enters your heart, tows you back, relentlessly. It happens to the most rugged of pirates, corsairs, and sailors of literature. It is also the case of *Amirbar*, Alvaro Mutis' novel, the tale of a young sailor joining an Icelandic whaling ship in Cardiff, where all the crew falls ill from food poisoning: "The lesson of the sea, the long hours that I spent climbing on the highest part of the cage scanning the horizon, all of this meant such fullness for me, it filled me so intensely that nothing, since then, has come back to give me a similar sensation of freedom without borders, of absolute availability."

The vastness of the ocean is a place where one can investigate the dark recesses of what lies inside, while contemplating the outside. The sailor tries to find this on land. But gives up: "Now I know it was useless and that I was wasting my time. I didn't know it then. Bad luck. Don't think I'm glorifying life on the sea. Working on a ship can be an exhausting ordeal, in fact, it almost always is." Ultimately, for the eternal Ulysses, it is worth it.

YET DO NOT think the horrors and the ethical challenges are only relegated to the imagination of great writers. Life at sea has its rules. And they are different from land. The most famous legal case, an example studied in international maritime law, involves a ship named—too cutely for its destiny—the *Mignonette*, which sailed from Southampton to Sidney in 1884. After sinking, four survivors huddled on a raft. When they finished the leftovers, they devoured a captured turtle to the bones. On the brink of death, they allegedly drew lots: the captain slit the throat of the 17-year-old cabin boy who was eaten by the three survivors, who were rescued only five days later. One survivor turned witness against the captain and the other sailor who were sentenced to death, but were released after six months.

In Western maritime tradition, as long as lots have been properly drawn, it is not considered a crime to practice "survival cannibalism", an accepted social practice in the high seas. All that's left of this gruesome horror story on water is the wax



effigy of captain Tom Dudley, which you can find in the Chamber of Horrors at Madame Tussaud's museum in London; a testament that when you read all those stereotypical descriptions about brown savages roasting prisoners on a skewer, you should remember that Anglo-Saxon cutlery has been known to dig into flesh as well.

*The day we went to the sea  
mothers in Madras were mining  
the Marina for missing children.  
Thatch flew in the sky, prisoners  
ran free, houses danced like danger  
in the wind. I saw a woman hold  
the tattered edge of the world  
in her hand, look past the temple  
which was still standing, as she was—  
miraculously whole in the debris of gaudy*

*South Indian sun. When she moved  
her other hand across her brow,  
in a single arcing sweep of grace,  
it was as if she alone could alter things,  
bring us to the wordless safety of our beds.*  
~ 'The day we went to the sea' by Tishani Doshi

The day my father died on February 17, 2017, I went for a walk on the beach along the Coromandel coast. I recollect noticing a grave-like mound of sand with a cross on top of it—a finger had written the word “Lily” on it. Then I saw a dead turtle belly up. The rotting carcass of a seagull. Another turtle corpse was staring at me through empty eye sockets already eaten by the crows, as a wild dog growled in my direction. I remember it well, but I also double checked this recollection on an old post I made on that occasion on Instagram, that social media diary that now helps us escape oblivion.

Tishani and a  
Light Bulb



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OLIVION IS THE familiar face of death, Milan Kundera wrote in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. The emptiness of the sea reminds us of death born of amnesia. We will forget. We will be forgotten. This is what's scary about the beach, that liminal space, that terrace on the infinite.

"Man marks the earth with ruin—his control/Stops with the shore..." wrote Byron as he incited the sea to "Roll on, thou deep and dark blue ocean-roll!" Beaches are boundaries. The edge of the unknown, the quintessential liminal space, the symbol of our limits. Yet so much has changed since Walter Benjamin waxed on about how "Nothing is more epic than the sea," praising the appeal of its timeless, universal qualities in an era of pristine emptiness where the traveller could plunge into a feeling of lack of history and sense of place on the shores.

When I gaze at the emptiness of the beach in Paramankeni, I think Byron would not have written the same poem today. "Man" marks the sea with ruin as well as earth. His control no longer stops at the shore, strewn as it is with the artifacts of contemporary mass production madness: the glowing reflections of the hundreds of empty plastic bottles, cough medicine, flip-flops—or rather chappals, in this case—the light bulbs, the abandoned doll heads and all the stories hidden in those consumed objects that end up at my feet, when I wonder how differently the beach is perceived here, in this corner of India, compared to my old Jesolo Lido beach memories, the industrialisation of the shore now emulated in thousands of touristic spots in the globe, starting with Goa and on into Thiruvananthapuram.

Here, on this beach in Southern India, I see the co-habitation of the past and the future. It manifests itself clearly, as in a postcard, when I walk back towards the house one evening. Along a wall on top of the dune, I see the blue tarpaulin of improvised tents set up by the Adivasi families who visit here for a few weeks every year. They leave large red, yellow and blue plastic water jugs lying about. The children are playing on the shore, chasing crabs and each other, laughing in all their innocent vibrant beauty, the men and women stunning in the sunset glow. They exude freedom, as only nomads can.

Beyond their make-shift camp, I see the stringy iron rods emerging from cement columns, like creepy fingers reaching for the sky as if it was the future. Yet another villa is popping up alongside the house I live in, populating the sand with workers defecating at dawn. Covid seems to have convinced the affluent to buy land with a sea view and build up their three-floor private resorts with well-tended gardens, swimming pools and watchpersons' families waiting for the owners to come and visit, sometimes only twice a year.

The India of forever, the India of the people who were here before the Aryans and the Dravidians, those who can exploit

everything nature has to offer, even the most degrading prey in the modernised eyes, and the India of the future, the economic power rising and taking over the world... All is played out in this postcard on the shores of Tamil Nadu, which truly becomes a double-liminal location: where the Byronic human control and nature's tsunamic and cyclonic wrath face each other, but also where the ancient faces the forthcoming.

It is still, somewhat, the archaic shore which used to be scary, where the invaders landed, where pirates attacked, where the downtrodden of society would get pushed into, the beach-bums, the clandestine lovers in the bushes outside the gate, an ultimate periphery of forbidden sex, wreckages and destruction, cohabitating with what this Indian beach could soon become, industrialised, modernised, transformed from a place of liminality to an industrialised and sterile fun factory, dedicated to lucrative water-sports and rented beach chairs and umbrellas. The Westernisation of Asian shores has been crawling from Bali to Phuket. It is coming. It is a future I dread, willing Robinson Crusoe that I am, but that I can see lurking ahead in India as well. It is Jesolo Lido catching up with me when I no longer yearn it.

*"He began, in a tone of great taste and feeling,*

*to talk of the sea and the sea shore;  
and ran with energy through all the usual phrases  
employed in praise of their sublimity and descriptive of the undescribable emotions they excite in the mind of sensibility.  
The terrific grandeur of the ocean in a storm,  
its glass surface in a calm, its gulls and its samphire  
and the deep fathoms of its abysses, its quick vicissitudes,  
its direful deceptions, its mariners tempting it in sunshine  
and overwhelmed by the sudden tempest  
—all were eagerly and fluently touched;  
rather commonplace perhaps, but doing very well  
from the lips of a handsome Sir Edward,  
and she could not but think him a man of feeling,  
till he began to stagger her by the number of his quotations  
and the bewilderment of some of his sentences."*

*~ Sandition by Jane Austen*

TODAY, ONE-HALF of the world's population lives within 60 km of an ocean. Ignoring calls of rising tides and global warming, coastal population has increased by 30 per cent in the last 30 years, and it's expected to soar. Beachside properties are among the most valuable in the world. They are also those with the most vulnerable habitats. How did this happen? Blame the Italians, or rather their ancestors, the Romans.

The first beach resorts for the rich sprouted on the charming

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Italian shores. Baie, today known as Bacoli, is an enchanting promontory along the Neapolitan coastline, overlooking the Gulf and the Vesuvius. Barcola, near Trieste, was covered with Roman luxury villas, planting the seeds of ancient leisure culture by the waters.

After that, for centuries beaches had become only frightening places to be avoided. Not many people knew how to swim, including most sailors. Shark attacks would also keep fishermen from plunging into the waves. Until the 18th-century aristocrats would say that only peasants sought refuge from the heat in the cool seawater.

Then, industrialisation changed society. The germination of factories in the United Kingdom dragged labour away from the country and the shores into the cities. While rural landscapes became abandoned, cities became overcrowded and unhealthy. Diseases of modernisation started to plague the sprawling urban crowds, reaching the upper class.

In 1750, Doctor Richard Russell began recommending bathing in the sea and drinking a pint of seawater daily. It was prescribed against all the evils of overcrowded industrial life: melancholy, rickets, gout, impotence, tubercular infections, menstrual problems and “hysteria.” Russell claimed to have cured leprosy with his sea water cures. Theories emerged about more oxygen found in the air by the sea. Soon, long residencies with a sea view became a popular treatment for tuberculosis. As aristocrats and intellectuals became more preoccupied with their own health and hygiene, the beach resort provided a useful escape and

a solution. The idea of the restorative sea that infused vigour into fragile and effete ruling class became common.

The first beach resort of modern times is considered to be Scarborough, near York, but soon other British coastal cities followed, the most famous being Brighton Beach. Women were dragged fully clad into wagons that drove into the water as they plunged into healthy baths, while men dived in the nude. In those first season of health tourism, people shielded from the sun, most bathers kept completely covered. Well-being came from the water not the sky. This era reaches its acme when Gustav von Aschenbach falls for the young Tadzio at the Venice Lido in Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice* (1912). And when Mann’s *Buddenbrooks* spend their vacation on the Baltic shores. The term “vacation,” which used to mean “involuntary absence from work,” takes the connotation of “a desired interlude from regular life.”

Shortly afterwards, in the 1920s, Coco Chanel accidentally got sunburnt in the French Riviera which made tans trendy, as the first sun tanning oil was invented in France in 1927. Swimsuits got smaller all the way to the 1946 invention of the bikini. As beach resorts turned into a global phenomenon, in America, of course, all kinds of tricks were used to keep them segregated, so Black Americans had to develop their own beaches catering to people of colour.

Meanwhile, the trend was expanding, as British tourists in their health craze rented rooms in Normandy and Southern France, Northern Germany and Scandinavia. In their Grand

Tours, they finally reached the beaches of Italy, where tourism now comprises 13 per cent of directly generated GNP.

Beach tourism had meanwhile broken the constraints of class. Better road infrastructure and railway networks made it possible to reach the shores at affordable rates. Going to the beach became something the middle class aspired to, something that made the parvenu feel like they conquered a higher place in the social ladder. This eventually exploded into low-cost travel which has filled the beaches with tourists from all classes and from all over the world, seeking a moment of bliss, rest and magic. From being a place that cured physical diseases, it soon became a place that, with its promises of fun and relaxation, would cure from urban stress, as it is seen today.

The arrival of the masses redesigned the landscape into a non-place. New beach resort towns like Jesolo Lido sprung up, with night clubs and water rides. The seashore transformed from a source of seafood to a

FROM MY FIRST DAYS ON THIS ISOLATED BEACH IN TAMIL NADU, NORTH OF PONDICHERRY AND SOUTH OF MAHABALIPURAM, I’VE WONDERED HOW DIFFERENTLY I EXPERIENCED THIS REALITY COMPARED TO THE LOCAL FISHERMEN, THE SHEPHERDS, THE CONSTRUCTION WORKERS, THE AFFLUENT NEIGHBOURS, THE ASHRAM MEDITATORS



Fishermen coiling the net on the beach







*Don't Be Afraid - Man and woman in bathing suits with bathing machine, circa 1910*

**THE FIRST BEACH RESORT OF MODERN TIMES IS CONSIDERED TO BE SCARBOROUGH, NEAR YORK, BUT SOON OTHER BRITISH COASTAL CITIES FOLLOWED, THE MOST FAMOUS BEING BRIGHTON BEACH. WOMEN WERE DRAGGED FULLY CLAD INTO WAGONS THAT DROVE INTO THE WATER AS THEY PLUNGED INTO HEALTHY BATHS, WHILE MEN DIVED IN THE NUDE**



repackaged what actually has been a collective exodus from rural land and shores to urban realities by offering the enriched descendants of displaced farmers and fishermen the glory of a seaside vacation turned into an industrialised pleasure. Mass tourists are unaware they are, in a way, simply returning to a place they came from, as writer Chris Christou analysed in his essay, 'How We Got to the Beach/How We became Tourists.'

"Romanticism," Christou writes, "became a way for Europeans to view at a distance the rupture of having lost the village to the city [...] peasants became workers, the farm became the factory, and everything ancestral was either lost or commodified." What we left behind in the rural abandoned landscape has transformed into an industry workers can come back to, but must pay in order to visit and experience what they lost.

The beach has become a simulation, "a fleeting taste of liminal revelry and old-time kinship." It is a ritual we devotedly practice thanks to our amnesia.

The good news is, it turns out that the sea is actually good for your skin and lungs. So, while we unconsciously rediscover our roots, dangerously sunbathing and surfing, we're preventing or curing dermatitis and psoriasis. Sea water is indeed rich in magnesium, chloride, sodium, potassium, iodine and sulphur which all contribute to respiratory health, reducing allergies, sinus infections and asthma symptoms. It is good to bathe in the sea and breathe in the ocean air. And, according to a 2019 study published in *Health and Place* journal, people who live closer to the ocean have less mental stress. Those who live less than 2 km from the coast are 22 per cent less likely to suffer from mental health issues than those who live 50 km from the coast. I shouldn't have said this. Now you'll all want to come here, and turn this beach into another Coney Island.

For now, this strip of land where I buried a very missed adopted stray black Pi dog named Bagheera, where I walked in silence after my father passed away, these footprints that bring me back to my early Jesolo days, and fill me with glee in the golden first sun, as I gaze at a Bay that feels like an epic ocean when I image maritime divinities rising among the dolphins, this shore remains a liminal strip of sand where past and future cross in front and behind my feet, like scuttling crabs diving into the waves. ■



*Carlo Pizzati is an award-winning multilingual author of often books of fiction and non-fiction. He has worked as a foreign correspondent in several continents since 1987. He lives with his spouse and four dogs near a fishing village in Tamil Nadu*

site of amusement and recreation, perfectly represented by the decadent abomination of Coney Island's amusement park with an oceanic view. Sea sports like kite and surfing now feed the almost neurotic need for escapism of the privileged. Touristic beaches have become denatured and reconstructed as the purest expression of nature, just like the well-tended gardens of my affluent beach neighbours.

**A** LONGSIDE ECONOMIC and anthropological examinations, it is unavoidable to consider how literature, art and philosophy changed how we look at beaches. Painters like JMW Turner and Caspar David Friedrich began to depict rugged vistas by the sea with expressive intensity. The seascape became a central subject. Romantic writers added emotion and wonder to the act of strolling along the beach and watching the tide turn, much like I did at the beginning of this text. The beach was no longer an omen of disaster, it became a transformative experience hiding the promise of self-discovery, all the way to Ian McEwan's Chesil Beach.

This eventually cordoned off the beach for escapism, sterilising it from reality. It became a blank slate, an abstraction, a place of constant new beginnings, at every season. Which is what ultimately might spell its end, since as Professor Jean-Didier Urbain, an expert on tourism culture at the University of Paris-Descartes, writes that "due partly to rising sea levels and increased storm action, but also to massive erosion caused by the human development of the shores 75 to 90 per cent of the world's natural sand beaches are disappearing."

Romanticism transformed how we look at nature. It





FOOL BAHADUR

Jayanath Pati

Translated by Abhay K

Penguin Modern Classics

112 Pages | ₹250

# Classic Power Play

A vintage satirical gem from Bihar

By Arshia Sattar

**F**OOL BAHADUR is the first extant novel we have in Magahi, a language spoken in the eastern regions of India, notably, Bihar, Odisha and Jharkhand. Magadhi, one of the more dominant Prakrits that flourished from the third century BCE onwards, generated many modern Indian languages, including Axomiya, Bhojpuri, Odia and the language we now call Magahi. Magahi always had a rich oral tradition of tales, sagas and folk songs but it was only in the twentieth century that written literatures began to develop. Jayanath Pati, who was a scholar, newspaper editor and writer, was one of the foremost figures of this transition, writing at the same time as Munshi Premchand. In fact, *Fool Bahadur* was published in the same year, 1928, as Premchand's *Gaban*. Pati was also a lawyer and a committed nationalist, using his newspaper as a medium to spread ideas of Swaraj and self-determination.

Although *Fool Bahadur* is set in the tumultuous decade of the 1920s, the action takes place not on the national stage but in a district administration headquarters in Bihar, in the complex corridors of the Raj's colonial administration, among lawyers and collectors and their deputies and assistants and all manner of high- and low-ranking policemen. Everyone is jockeying for position, each wants to be promoted to more power, more pelf, to the next professional designation and the next civic title, to the chance of getting larger bribes and wielding a bigger stick, as it were. Some part of the pleasure in reading *Fool Bahadur*

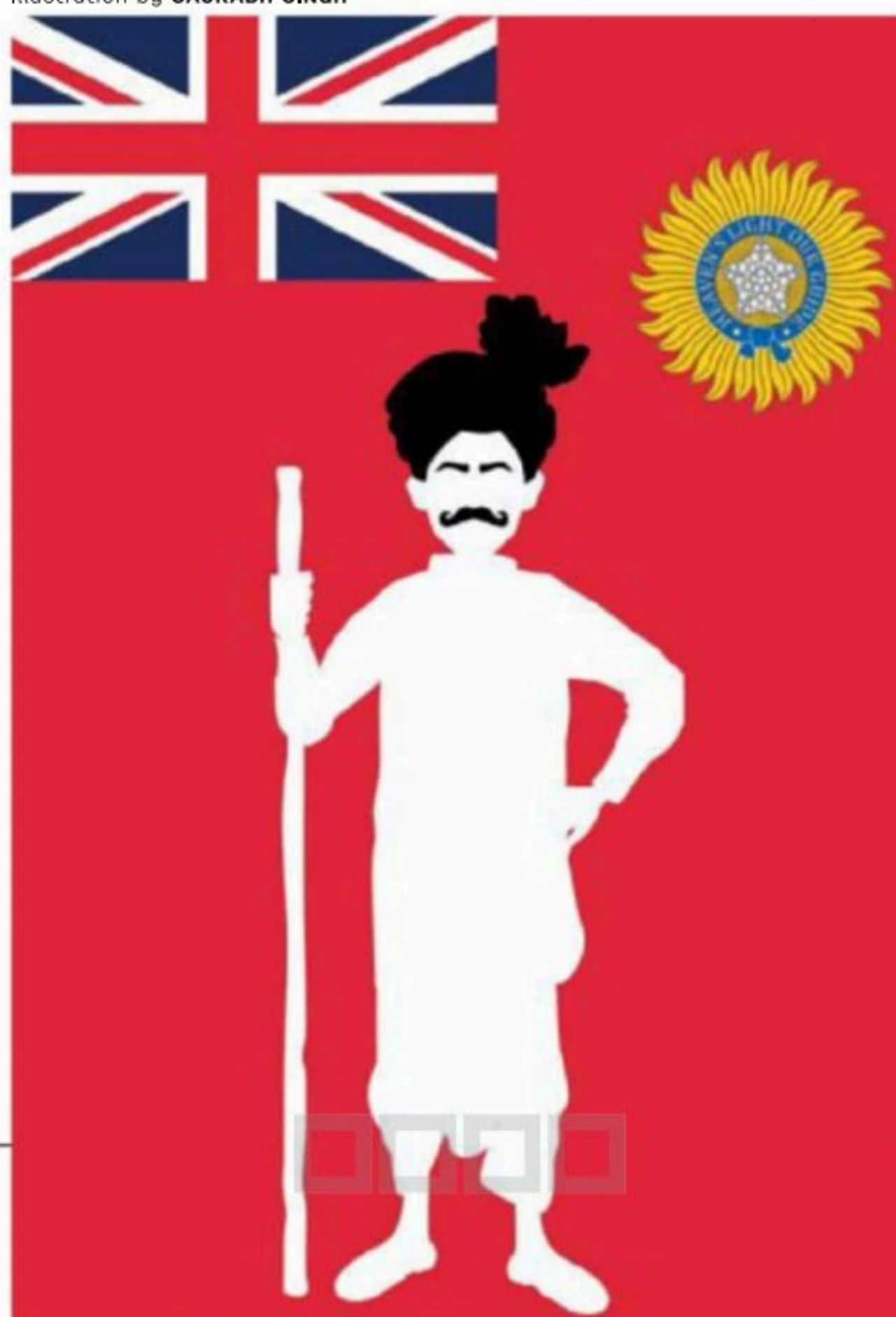
lies in the recognition that even one hundred years later, the now fully Indian bureaucracy has lost none of its somnolence and remains the primary arena for petty corruption as well as full-blown malfeasance.

*Fool Bahadur* may purport to be a 'novel' in the large landscape of people and places that it suggests, but it is, in fact, a short story, numbering barely fifty pages in English translation. The plot is simple so I will not describe it at any length—suffice it to say that it involves nawabs and babus and mukhtars and bahadurs, there are tawaifs, those glorious perfumed creatures of intoxicating beauty and whimsical behaviour, for without them, every story from that period and that region would be dull and lifeless. There is even a twist at the end of the tale, a joke that perhaps meant more at the time of its writing than it does now.

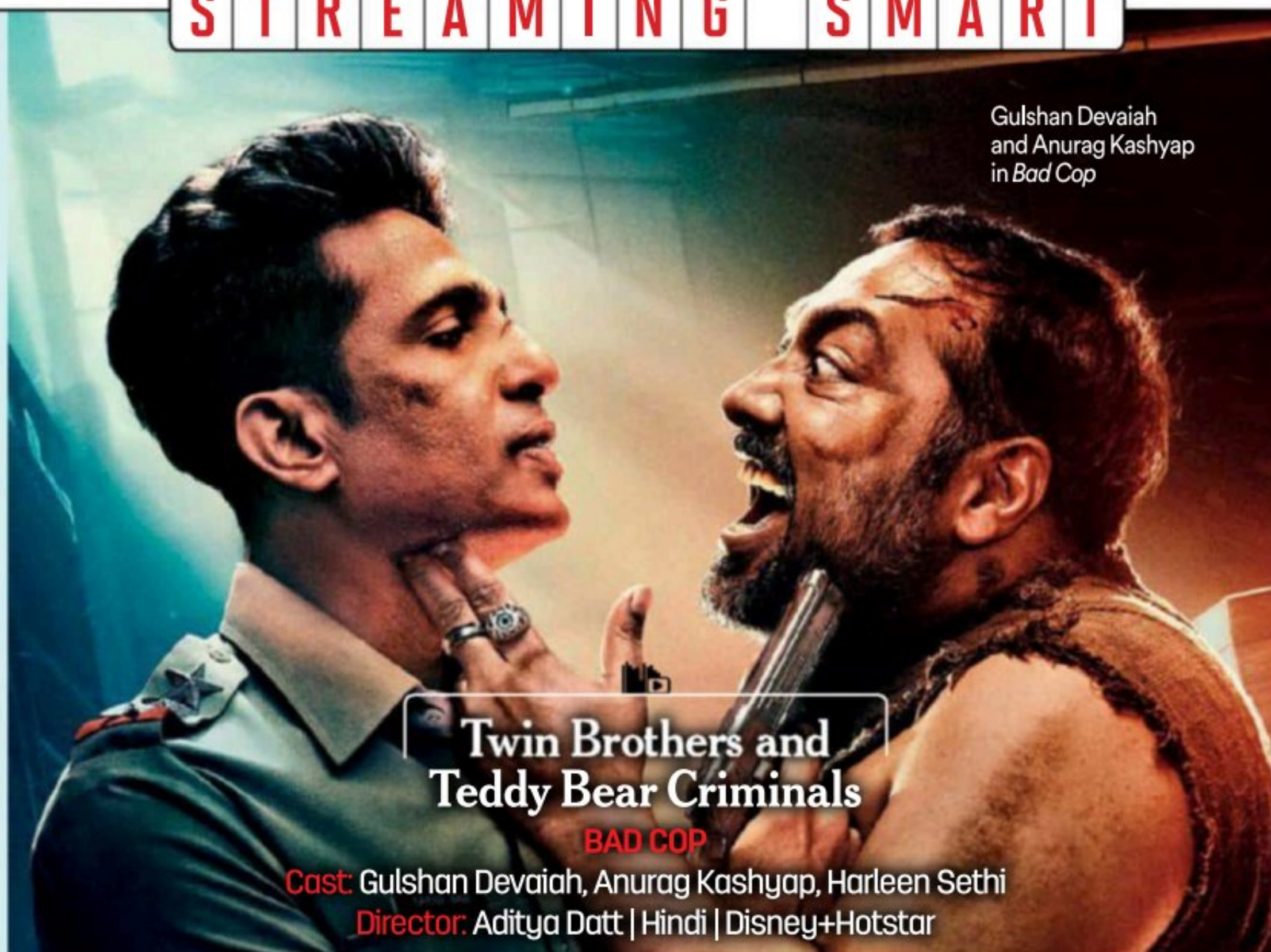
Abhay K's translation is breezy and confident, he is clearly enjoying the story anew as he moves it into another language. For my taste, there are rather too many footnotes. However, most of them explain bureaucratic ranks and designations and since the story is predicated on precisely these positions within the power structure, I suppose the translator had little choice. Abhay K also provides us with a detailed and enthusiastic account of Magahi's linguistic history in his Introduction.

The 1920s and 1930s in the South Asian subcontinent were also a time of great and varied literary output—nationalist, realist, didactic, romantic. In Hindi, this period of vibrancy, political awareness and experimentation was supported by literary magazines and small presses. No doubt Pati felt a part of this ferment as a writer—his lost first novel, *Sunita*, resonates with Premchand's *Nirmala*, in which a young girl is forced to marry a much older man, resulting in a painful tragedy. Pati was also consciously creating progressive literature in Magahi. *Fool Bahadur* is clearly meant to expose corruption as well as human greed and vanity. However, it seems to fall between satire and realism, giving us the full pleasures of neither. What it does do, nonetheless, is remind us, yet again, that much has been happening for at least a century in Indian languages that are not hegemonic or dominant, that we were always as multi-vocal as we are multivalent in our many cultures and civilisations. ■

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH







Gulshan Devaiah and Anurag Kashyap in *Bad Cop*

## Twin Brothers and Teddy Bear Criminals

**BAD COP**

**Cast:** Gulshan Devaiah, Anurag Kashyap, Harleen Sethi

**Director:** Aditya Datt | Hindi | Disney+Hotstar

**A**DAPTED FROM A German show of the same name, *Bad Cop*, this Hindi series is a riff on twin brothers and the idea of swapping places. So the thief becomes a police officer. So far so good. He insinuates himself into his twin's life for reasons too complex to be told. It so happens that his wife is his boss, and a very suspicious one. The thief is accused of murder and the brother he replaces seems to be involved in a battle with Mumbai's biggest gangster, who in a meta reference is played by Anurag Kashyap. Kashyap even has a scene straight out of *Gangs of Wasseypur*, chopping mutton legs. Naturally the twins are named Karan and Arjun who were separated by adoption agencies because of one brother being particularly prone to trouble. Gulshan Devaiah is an actor who is finally getting his due and here he performs action and drama scenes with some flair. Harleen Sethi, as the police station's SHO, is all aggression and fire, and seems quite capable of taking on a powerful goon.

**Why watch it?** It's easy viewing, well acted, and tightly paced. Kashyap is a hoot as a criminal mastermind operating from jail, even if it sits quite queasily with his teddy bear vibe

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chic Misdeeds in Suburban Chicago

**PRESUMED INNOCENT**

**Cast:** Jake Gyllenhaal, Ruth Negga

**Writer:** David E Kelley

English | Apple TV+



Jake Gyllenhaal in *Presumed Innocent*

**I**T'S THE BACKYARD of a suburban American home, the father is playing baseball with his son, his wife and daughter are watching, the sun shining on their curls. It's a David E Kelley show, so you know something terrible is going to disturb the idyllic calm. It does, as it did in *Big Little Lies* (2017) and *The Undoing* (2020). The husband, an attorney on the fast track, is accused of murder. The wife, chilled by an adulterous betrayal, grieves in designer despair. The children, beautiful, ethnically ambiguous, are united in their pain. Gorgeously shot, Chicago at nighttime looks splendid, but the crime is heinous. Our hero, the attorney, is accused of murdering his colleague, with the affair established in flashbacks which suggest an obsessive relationship. The series is a remix of the 1990 movie starring Harrison Ford, based on Scott Turow's 1987 legal thriller novel

**Why watch it?** Shot in available light, with a mix of claustrophobic courtroom scenes and airy suburban villa, it is as much a family drama as it is a mystery

\*\*\*\*\*

*Presumed Innocent*. This is Jake Gyllenhaal's first streaming series and it couldn't be more perfect, with his puppy dog eyes just begging forgiveness at every step. If it feels a little mechanical it is only because we have seen too many of these series, with posh people doing vile things of late, usually starring Nicole Kidman. But there is an urgency to the proceedings, with reveals happening at just the right moments.



## STARGAZER

KAVEREE BAMZAI

KARTIK AARYAN

CHRISTO TOMY

SUNITA RAJWAR

### ➤ Christo Tomy's *Undercurrent*

In Netflix's true crime movie, *Curry & Cyanide: The Jolly Joseph Case*, Christo Tomy chronicled the life of Jolly Joseph, a woman who poisoned several members of her family who happened to get in her way. In his debut feature film, *Ullozhukku* (*Undercurrent*), he returns to family dynamics—lies, secrets and lack of conversation—and its often corrosive impact on relationships. Trained at the Satyajit Ray Film & Television Institute, Kolkata, Tomy started work on the script in 2016, but only finalised it before the lockdown. After failing to find the perfect location for his film, he went back to the original inspiration, his mother's home in Kuttanad, with a river in front and a paddy field at the back. It meant his grandmother and his uncle's family had to live away from their home on rent for 18 months but they did so happily for Tomy. His story is set during the floods, a common occurrence in Kottayam, and involves a young newly married woman, her mother-in-law and the local village. There is a corpse that needs to be buried but the waters are not receding, there is a lover who is waiting for his woman to come to him, there are the young woman's parents, and an aunt who has become a nun. What does a woman with limited choices make of her situation? Does she settle for a life of uncertain freedom or a life of certain but circumscribed love? The film will be shown at the Indian Film Festival of Los Angeles, from June 27 to June 30, and will also release commercially in Malayalam with

subtitles. For Tomy, half the battle was won when Parvathy Thiruvothu came on board. Says Tomy, "If you're able to excite an actor, the producer follows, and then the struggle is to get the audience to see it. And the bigger your box office, the more people will come to see your next movie." Tomy's film comes in a particularly good year for relevant and innovative commercial cinema in Malayalam, from the emotional *Manjummel Boys*, the world-building of *Premalu* and the atypical humour of *Aqvesham*.

### ➤ Kartik Aaryan's New Goal

"I am not running anymore with no finish line," says Kartik Aaryan of the transformative 18 months he devoted to Kabir Khan's *Chandu Champion*. Continuing with the introspection that began with his character Sattu, in *Satyaprem ki Katha* (2023), he worked on himself emotionally, psychologically and physically. Apart from a diet of tofu and soup for two years, he had to change his sleep patterns, and live the life of an athlete. "We also did several workshops and readings, deconstructing Kartik and constructing the image of the subject of the biopic, Murlikant Petkar," he says. "It came at the right time in my career," he says. "I no longer crave validation," he says. He says he has manifested many things, including the body he wanted—that of Brad Pitt in *The Fight Club* (1999). "It was the opportunity of a lifetime," says the actor.

### ➤ Sunita Rajwar's Pain

"Comedy is all about pain and suffering," says Sunita Rajwar, who

has had more than her share of pain in life. "It's just a way of hiding pain," she adds, and surely Bittu ki Mummy in *Gullak* and Kranti Devi in *Panchayat* embody this. Two disenfranchised and disempowered women who are trying to do the best they can with a smile on their faces. A graduate of the National School of Drama in Delhi, Rajwar nearly didn't get the role of a policewoman in Sandhya Suri's *Santosh* which premiered at the Cannes Film Festival. "Mine was a last-minute casting," she says, adding that when directors from abroad have auditions, they sit in on them. "They want to meet and understand the artist," she says. Rajwar is doing well as an actor now but there was a time she threw away her union card because she was being offered only maids' roles in television. "It was a humiliating time and we would get paid per day," she says. That is when she started working with Chandran Arora as an assistant director and learnt editing. Her career saw an upswing with *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* (2020), *Stree* (2018) and *Kedarnath* (2018). "I had to make a union card again and my life changed again," she says. She remembers the first time she got to stay where the main cast was staying. "I remember calling up my husband and telling him I was in a single room in a nice hotel. I didn't have to share the make-up room. I started getting respect, also because I was ageing. I was not the timid girl of 23 who had come to Mumbai from Delhi." Rajwar is originally from Haldwani, and is proud to call herself the daughter of a truck driver who always wanted the best for his family. ■